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## **Y. Stories to Save Lives**

Interview Y-0014

Brian Cornell

28 June 2018

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**ABSTRACT – BRIAN CORNELL**

Narrator: Brian Cornell  
Interviewer: Nicholas Allen  
Date: June 28, 2018  
Location: Mr. Vernon United Methodist Church, Trinity, NC  
Length: Approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes

Brian Cornell is a Methodist minister educated at Duke Divinity School. He is characterized by thoughts and theologies that do not conform to the status quo, rather he stands behind principles that he can reason through and defend in today's ever-shifting cultural climate. He begins by discussing his roots in Kingsport, Tennessee and healthcare moment he grew up in. Next, he breaks down the three institutions that influenced his life the most: public education, the Boy Scouts of America, and the church. He discusses international affairs and political science studies at George Washington University, reflections on medicine in D.C., and working for Congressman Jimmy Quillen. He tells about visiting New York in 1987 to learn about AIDS and how medicine was addressing it at the time. He discusses transferring to Wake Forest University, fraternities, homosexuality, and becoming involved with Egbert Davis. He discusses chaplaincy and the lasting effects of medical needs. He talks more about Wake culture as well as a trip to India where he hoped to see Mother Teresa, but instead ended up working in one of her hospices. He discusses coming back to the U.S. to sell life insurance and his broadening conception of racial inequity. He expands upon the influence of Abraham Verghese on the AIDS movement and his experience at Duke Divinity School as a chaplain of infectious disease patients in Durham. He discusses hospice and the dying experience from a chaplaincy perspective and how hospitals make money at the end of life. He talks about the "Me Too" movement. He segues into new frameworks for Christian expression based on the Boy Scout model and comments on politics, Trump, the Christian right, marriage, and his stances on religious involvement with these things. Much of the rest of the interview involves Brian's predictions and prescriptions for the modern church to survive change in society. He comments on Black Lives Matter, on local poverty, education, the opioid crisis, and issues with helping in the church. He discusses how he sees spiritual issues and medical problems overlapping and more on how chaplaincy can help, as well as how local churches can be involved in community care. He expresses a wish for metrics in chaplaincy and in the church.

## **FIELD NOTES – BRIAN CORNELL**

Narrator: Brian Cornell  
 Interviewer: Nicholas Allen  
 Date: 06.28.2018  
 Location: Mr. Vernon United Methodist Church, Trinity, NC

NARRATOR Brian Cornell is a native of East Tennessee who has lived in North Carolina since transferring to Wake Forest University as a Junior. Although a clergyperson since earning his master's in divinity from Duke Divinity School, he is deeply invested in politics and served Congressman Jimmy Quillen during his first two years of college in Washington D.C. Besides the normal duties of a Methodist minister, Brian has also volunteered in hospitals as a chaplain and in hospices. His views are atypical of a southern minister and his animated nature couple with a boldness for discussing his beliefs in a very open manner to create a fascinating study in what the future of southern religion may look like. Brian is deeply invested in faith predicated on action rather than fruitless discussion and debate. Additionally, he has taken it upon himself to challenge doctrines on homosexuality and death.

THE INTERVIEWER Nicholas Allen is a graduate student in the department of English at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently earning an M.A. in Literature, Medicine, and Culture. His research focuses on late life and end of life.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW The interview took place in Brian's office in Trinity, NC. Although we sat in two chairs in the corner, the interview was a physical process. Brian's energy and enthusiasm for the subject matter were unprecedented. Although the interview followed the life history format, we quickly arrived at stories and musings of a more cumulative nature.

NOTE ON RECORDING I used the SOHP's Zoom H5 #4 for this recording. We were interrupted once by a phone call during which I paused the recording, and once by one of the church's logistical coordinators. Besides that, the recording went well and allows Brian's animated nature to translate into audio.

HIGHLIGHTS OR POSSIBLE EXCERPTS Brian's views on homosexuality and the current medical culture of death are of particular interest, as well as his discussion of encountering the early-AIDS epidemic as a high school student. In general, his propensity for challenging unsatisfactory status quos and subverting the system at whatever level are worth examination and emulation.

**TRANSCRIPT: Brian Cornell**

Interviewee: Brian Cornell  
Interviewer: Nicholas Allen  
Interview Date: June 28, 2018  
Location: Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church, Trinity, NC  
Length: Approximately 2 hours and 25 minutes

**START OF INTERVIEW**

Nicholas Allen: This is Nick Allen interviewing Brian Cornell on June 28<sup>th</sup> [2018]. I guess let's go back to the beginning, Brian.

[0:00:12.5]

Brian Cornell: All right. Let's do it.

[0:00:13.3]

NA: Tell me a little bit about your childhood, your parents, your grandparents, wherever you want to go.

[0:00:17.2]

BC: All right. Perfect. So I am a first-generation East Tennessean. I was born and raised in Kingsport, Tennessee, which is where Eastman Kodak had settled an industrial center to develop photographs back in the day of film. They needed chemicals to develop that. So they had good, cheap power through Tennessee Valley Authority and an educated populace that needed jobs in East Tennessee and found a place to settle there, but they were still importing much of their brain power in the late sixties, early seventies.

So my father, who was educated at Indiana University for his undergrad and grad, had gone to work for Kodak, a large industrial program, and it moved him to East Tennessee. Then my mother, who grew up in Jersey and Pennsylvania and Ohio, was also hired separately.

They come there, and that's where they met, married, and had me and my two sisters, each of who are younger. I was born in 1972 to one of two hospitals that existed in the area. The hospital environment in East Tennessee was strong because it had an industrial base, and so wherever you have that many jobs that are creating, then you have healthcare comes up right underneath, and this was a big enough town to have two. It also became the regional center for healthcare for most of Southwest Virginia, as well as East Tennessee. So folks affected with black lung near the coalmines and those type things would come to East Tennessee for lung doctors and pulmonary specialists. So we had really good healthcare in that environment. I didn't grow up actually thinking much about healthcare although many of my parents' friends were doctors or professionals in medicine.

I grew up in very well-supported elementary, middle school, high school area, although at the time I didn't know it. There's only what you know as a child. But it was a very good public school system, and there were almost no private schools in the area, so the city schools were even better supported than the county schools because of the tax base, and we tended to be the best at everything in the state. It was a really strong tax base and a lot of brainpower. We rivaled Oak Ridge, Tennessee, for the number of higher-education people working in the town, and they tended to be our intellectual equals down the street, so when we needed to go to fairs or college bowls or whatever,

“Those dang kids from Oak Ridge,” you know, plus, of course, the other cities, Nashville, Knoxville, and all the way down the other side of the state, Memphis.

So that was growing up, upper-middle-class, I was happily oblivious to probably the majority of the world, although I liked politics. I remember being afraid of the bomb and that maybe thinking our politicians were idiots, but that was a large-scale thing. I was very interested in international affairs and poli sci, and then it was time for me to make decisions about that, I went with my passion, which was international affairs, poli sci. So I went to George Washington University up in Washington, D.C., in 1991 after graduating high school.

Up to then I would say [there were] three major institutions that kind of shaped my life that I was aware of. My church, which was United Methodist Church I’d grown up in, worked in middle school and high school going on mission trips, and having some pretty amazing events with that. I also had worked heavily with Boy Scouts of America and so had come all through the ranks to become an Eagle Scout and was very passionate about that. Then I think the municipal city schools had been there, so I had a sense the government was there behind me, but I didn’t recognize many places, even though I enjoyed participating what I thought were governmental events. So I went to Washington, D.C., to pursue a job in—

[0:04:31.5]

[telephone interruption]

[0:04:37.3]

NA: No problem at all. All right, we’re back.

[0:04:38.2]

BC: All right. So I think I was talking about the institutions. So I was supported by those three institutions, some of which I knew cognitively and some I just felt.

So when I went to GW, I pursued international affairs and political science partially by going to work for my Congressman Quillen, who'd been a Republican congressman there for almost thirty years. I mean, he was heavily entrenched. It was interesting.

So I experienced healthcare at GW, because I at one time hurt myself pretty good and, I think, dehydrated, and got admitted onto the floor of GW, which is also a teaching hospital, making doctors, and went through our emergency room environment as a student there.

Made some friends, kind of like the way I met you. [laughs] I realized medicine wasn't all it was cracked up to be, I guess, and doing it in a heavily metropolitan environment was just almost a shock to the system. Some of those medical portrayals that later came with programs *ER* and everything, I was like, "That's strikingly reminiscent." [laughs] I know this is dramatized a bit to make more adrenaline go up and watch, and they're going for viewer ratings, but other than the long periods of incredible wait and feeling ignored, then it was things that you couldn't expect might walk through the door and require a whole 'nother system. That was also back when Washington, D.C. had an unidentified shooter rolling through the streets. I mean, D.C. felt different in terms of the threat of violence and how it was policed. So that was interesting.

I also realized my congressman just felt like some sort of level of crook. That's maybe too strong a word, but he was a manipulator and took credit for things he had not done. If anything, he was an obstacle to be overcome by certain people. I remember

Dolly Parton especially working very hard to get Dollywood off the ground, because that was in his political orb, to make it look like he could make the deal go through or not, and it felt like he was pressuring her for press pictures of her kissing him, all aboveboard, right? But I also remember he had also goosed my science teacher in sixth grade when we went for our school photograph up there. So he'd been kind of a leech for a long time, and so the idea that he might do something gross with a woman who has never been gross and works hard to care about our state really pissed me off.

He helped me go from a person who wanted to pursue poli sci to not wanting to, and even to the point where I started reconsidering my Republican support and thinking, "I don't think you're a good guy," and I became apolitical, which is tough when your major is highly political and you're in a school that's highly political. And I just felt my heartstrings all being jiggled at the same time.

So go back to the other two institutions I know and love. Scouts didn't have anything to offer except do your best, be a person of honor. Then my religious stuff, which had always suggested that maybe politics might be a pursuit for Christ, but it was challenging, and I decided out of that that I was pursuing something out of pride, that I wanted to be recognized. So maybe it was time to give myself over to English and religion, my two other passion points, and I transferred to Wake Forest University.

So I want to back up a little bit.

[0:08:19.5]

NA: Okay. No problem.

[0:08:21.2]



BC: All right. So one year in my sophomore year of high school, a spring break trip came up that I didn't know much about but my mom thought would be a good idea. So in 1987, I was sent with the Southeastern Jurisdiction Youth Program to New York to go to the United Nations Building and the World Methodist Building and learn about this thing called AIDS and what we were doing as a medical crisis for it. That was my first experience with these topics at all, and, of course, back then it was a "gay disease," so I went in thinking, you know, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," and that's always been my modality in United Methodism. That's, I think, a pretty broad reflection of those of us who have gone through this system, and it may have been also an attitude of the late eighties. It was high tolerance, from what I remember as a young white person from East Tennessee, right, which there's a lot to go through there. We can afford to, because we're no threats. We were 97 percent white in our community, and a variety of other things. Gayness didn't exist. At that point, might have been a city issue, the type of things that big cities deal with, and we don't have that here.

So that was an eye-opener, because I went from "Hate the sin, love the sinner," to "This is disease of epidemic proportions and needs to be dealt with." I started learning what epidemics are and how healthcare models itself for that, and what type of place a heart has to have for providing care. And here they were educating youth, which was in some ways the church as a group sent a bunch of youth to learn about this. In some ways, it's funny because there was such a small group of us, right, East Tennessee kids going to New York City to learn about AIDS. This was back before I think even Ronald Reagan was willing to talk about it. That's pretty amazing. What an amazing expression of faith. I didn't even know how amazing it was. I think I was amazed I was in this youth group and

maybe thinking—I know it was [unclear] with hormones, right, girls and boys all together without enough parents supporting. [laughs] But I do remember that being a profound trip in the sense that the exposure was happening, and it may have also given me a posture for reevaluating how I saw gender later. But those conversations weren't happening at all then. It was just straight people learning about how this disease that was killing people maybe needed to be considered and addressed. So that's '87.

So all the way back, I'm in college in '91 at Wake, did meet some folks who would probably have been considered gay, but I was so slow on it, I might even have been a target of their affections and wouldn't have known it. My gaydar was not developed at all, even to the point that my—I was a fraternity guy, which is kind of funny, but I was a fraternity—okay, so my scouting at George Washington came in, “a sense of high need of fraternal love,” and so while I was very anti-fraternity by general expression, the idea of a group of men coming together to produce social and ethical constructs was *incredibly* attractive to me, especially when I didn't find many southern Protestant churches that really hit my bill in Washington, D.C. The only Methodist church I went to nearby spoke German unapologetically. I'm like, “Okay, well, you're Methodist, maybe, you have no place for me to be here, even though you're within walking distance of my school. You're obviously telling me you don't want me in this service.”

So I was looking for other social constructs to join, and this crazy one came up that my roommate actually got into, called Lambda Chi. The guy who came to the door with him a few times was obviously a South Indian, named Tushar Shah, and this next guy came, who was a slick Italian named Nick Nesta. [laughs] I'd love to make a movie

of these two guys, because they sound like who they are, right, Nick Nesta and Tushar Shah. But the crazy difference of personality between them was so extraordinary, I wanted to be a part of it.

They were launching a new group. There were what was called trying to become a colony, and I was caught up in that energy. I loved it. I loved their level of acceptance. There was one guy there who was gay, unapologetically. For the first time, I met someone who was like—they even took me aside because they were so worried because I wore my religious nuances out on my sleeve. [laughs] They were like, “Brian’s really religious. Someone needs to tell him that Jeremy is gay and make sure he’s okay and, like, talk to him about how it’s going to be okay.”

So I remember them telling me, and I’m like, “He is? Okay.” I mean, somehow I think we both were surprised how easy that wasn’t a problem. What was, was actually some other constructs—like when you’re a colony you don’t get hazed, you haze yourself with how hard it is to bring about an institution that hasn’t existed and differentiating yourself from everyone else, like we were going out of our way to be received on a committee that was more political than it was Greek, but that didn’t mean that the Greek ethos didn’t exist in a certain space for certain people of privilege and other things, and all of those attitudes were worn on the sleeves too. So for those that cared enough to be Greek, there was a certain amount of entitlement that came with that, and they didn’t want another group coming, certainly not one looking like it was high diversity.

The university wasn’t very happy about having us, but we went. The new president was trying to build some traction with the students and had open office hours. People could sign up and talk to him. So I had been voted president, and Nick Nesta had

become the vice president. We went and signed up for the first and second times, so we consolidated two fifteen-minutes to go see him. He's like, "Whoa, whoa! You're ganging up on me."

We're like, "It's okay. We're here to ask you what you need and then to do it." It's a butt-kiss sort of one-spot reaction, but it was also where we wanted to be with talking about, "What do you care about? Because we don't want you as a threat. We want to be your inside men for bringing about some easy wins." And that was a good posture. It actually put me in a position—two things happened. One is, Trachtenberg started giving me things he did care about, and so we started thinking, "How can we as a fraternity model doing the things that they want?" And one of the things was some hospital care. He had realized he had some problems with parking and everything, and could we volunteer to help with directions. He'd save some money, and we'd get some goodwill and we wore our letters. So we did that.

Also I met the academic dean, who could look at my terrible, terrible score at learning French, and she just dropped that sucker. When she'd heard I'd had mono, she's like, "Ah, medical excuse! Gone! It doesn't exist." So suddenly some of the problems I was having also with moving from international affairs/poli sci back to English/religion disappeared. I had to work harder to get some more credits later, but I moved from one internal school to another and started putting out applications to other colleges to find where they were doing a little more of what I wanted now that things had shifted. And I was probably trying to get back to traditional southern religious sociopolitical environments, because I was so out of my head from East Tennessee, population of around 30,000, to Washington, D.C. metropolitan environment that could have given a

fig for who I was. I missed trees and mountains, which is just a geographic problem. But I was having some trouble, homesick for two years.

So I transferred to Wake, found out that my next vice president back at Lambda Chi, having learned that he was not Mormon, but gay and not Mormon. [laughs] And it was yet another one of kind of the penny dropping, realizing that this was all around me, and I don't know that I had realized I was going to become gay-friendly. But so many people were comfortable letting me know that they were gay or were coming out to me, even to the point that I had an ex-girlfriend at Wake, a girl I had grown up with the youth group, had known well. Her mom had been a youth group leader. I mean, we were more like brother, sister at this point. So when I came to Wake, she was my friend. I found out that the young man who was dating her, who was a recent grad of Wake, at some point suspected he was gay, and he was dating Lynn [phonetic] to decide or try to figure it out. And I liked Lynn enough as a person that I felt like, "Doesn't she deserve better than that? I mean, she can make her own decisions, but I kind of care a lot too."

Kevin was his name. He became more and more friendly, went to the point that I went to visit my family that had moved to Wales in England, and I took Kevin along. Somewhere in a bar far away in England, came to the face-to-face conversation you can't have in the States, you're too close to everything. I'm like, "Kevin, do you think you're gay?"

He goes, "I'm pretty sure I am."

We had to go all the way over there. And I was like, "You can't keep holding Lynn along like that."

He goes, "I know, I know. Right."

So Kevin continued to be my friend. I don't remember ever there being a decision of how do I feel about this, because it became "This is my friend, and this is just something else to carry with him," and I had a dog in the fight. I wanted the best for Kevin, I wanted the best for Lynn, and I wasn't romantically entangled with either, but I definitely cared about them both, and I was grateful, even as tough as that might have been, that it finally came to a point where Kevin could talk about who he was.

All right. So that's where I was doing religion and English in the religion department at Wake. We had people coming out of the Clinical Pastoral Education Program at the hospital come and talk to us. Sometimes the religion programs about some of the chaplaincy overlaps, so I got to start being informed medically about how religion and medicine overlapped and what processes we came in. Again, I can only look back now and decide how profound that was, but I didn't know at the time.

[0:18:47.3]

NA: What were some of the overlaps that you noticed?

[0:18:51.6]

BC: Right. So, first off, what the heck is chaplaincy, and how can someone working in the hospital come and teach in the religion department an undergrad related program? Like, why would we do that? What does William James and the varieties of religious experience have to do for me? But suddenly that absolutely is bedrock stuff for chaplaincy, because when you're a chaplain, you don't know whose door you're walking into. It would be appropriate for a chaplain who has got an M.Div. in another program to start talking about the ecumenicism that is necessary, more of the philosophy of thought

that one needs to carry with you for why we do what we do, because motivations matter for us all of us in the healing industries.

We call that in religion “tell offs.” What is your goal, what is your outcome that you’re wanting. But if you don’t know where you’re coming from, you certainly probably don’t know where you’re going, and if you don’t have that chance to look in and consider your own motivations, then you’re in a place to do harm, and especially for those of us who the medicine is harder to follow and that it might have much longer effects sometimes than just the medical wound for an event, which got reinforced later. But, again, that time, William James, what, huh?

The other kind of funny overlap that I had is I had transferred there as a junior, and Wake was really good at that time of letting transfer students know they were second-class citizens. “You didn’t choose us the first time. You’re lucky you’re here.” One of the first ways they did that was to discount all of your credits that you brought from your other institution to be maybe two-thirds or whatever, and they really made it hard. So, suddenly, a lot of credits I carried with me were now discounted, and I had to do more.

The other thing they did to help you know that you should have done this the first time is turning you into a day student. So you got to be a student with full privileges, but you didn’t get to live on campus. That was up to you. So I had nowhere to live, and I went quickly to the chaplain of the school, Ed Christman, and said, “Here’s my sad story. I don’t even know you, but help me,” and he did. He said, “I might know an alum. I know a situation that didn’t work out. He was going to take a foreign student. I think you might be into it. Let me call.”

A call came back within thirty minutes, said, "Are you and your mom in the house? I want to interview you both."

We went and interviewed at this man's house. His name was Egbert Davis, and he interviewed to see if we would be a fit for living for free in his house over the garage if I took on three jobs and kept myself morally straight, so to speak. I would be in charge of taking the banana trees outside of his basement and planting them around the pool in the spring, and in the fall, undigging them and taking them back inside. So for me essentially, what do we know about banana trees? I don't even know what that is. [laughs]

I was also in charge of keeping the pool clean, which, by the way, meant there was a pool, and I'd had some experience cleaning a pool, so this is all right. Then taking him to the airport anytime he needed to go, in his personal car. So this is service-sector stuff. I could do service. I had a paper route all my life. Yeah, sure, why not?

So that's how I met Egbert Davis, who I later learned his brother had been Tom Davis, the creator of Piedmont Airlines. His family had been Davis Department Stores, which at one point covered the South kind of like Roses does, you know. His sister Penny Davis Hanes had married into the Hanes hosiery family. I'd married into the target area of Winston-Salem wealth, all right? [laughs] I came in as the poor white boy over the garage. And my pecking order was about that, as was the black custodial personality on campus, and the black cleaning lady, and we were support staff for one another and we understand each other. Mr. Davis was the kind, benevolent white man who lived in a palatial estate in the money district downtown, what's called Five Points Winston-Salem, and was the reason that there's a chapel at the hospital called Davis Chapel, reason



there's a whole dormitory of the four main ones called Davis Dorms, and the reason that the chapel off of Wake Chapel is called Davis Chapel, the smaller worship.

So this man was a mover and shaker in the Winston-Salem environment and had dedicated his life to support faith and health, because his emphasis and investments were in the hospital in the university. So it made sense there is that other overlap point that, again, made sense later, like I was like, "Oh, look at these strands all tied together." But other people had those strands, and my knowing them is what pulled me into those things, a beautiful side story, because it enriched my Wake life there.

I mean, I'm more of a Wake Forest student in some ways because I got into the history of why did they bring it. I'd come home from school and he'd go, "Well, boy, what did they teach you over there today?" And so I'd tell him. He goes, "Now let me tell you why." So why did Wake Forest University move from Wake Forest near Raleigh to Winston-Salem? What was the motivation of the Southern Baptist Convention, or where were they in all of this? What was the intention of the families behind giving the money? What did they hope would happen? Why did he care? School? You got to hear a healthy alumni's perspective, who had had a lot to do with why something had changed or happened, and what they thought about it and what happens when you build institutions that grow beyond you. What about when they do things you wish they didn't? You know. That was better than transferring. I loved Wake and its classes, and I loved the English and I loved the religion stuff that I got, but contact with Mr. Davis was like a whole 'nother [demonstrates]. It was cool. When his Christmas cards came, there were pictures both from the President Bush original, and President Clinton. They both sent him personalized Christmas cards, and they were on his wall.

I'm like, "They can't figure you out, can they?"

He goes, "That's us southern Democrats. You're not sure what—." You know. But he represented an age and an era that had existed here in North Carolina, doesn't anymore, but wow, wow, I loved it.

[0:25:10.2]

NA: That's cool.

[0:25:11.7]

BC: I loved that ethos, yeah.

[0:25:12.6]

NA: So you lived with him the whole time?

[0:25:14.3]

BC: A year, a year, and then I got an RA job on campus the next year so I could live on campus. But, again, I was pushed to the satellites, which is where all the non—all social deviates lived in satellites. So if you were black, you're at the Nia House, which is African for "life." If you're black, it also probably meant you might be an athlete, so you were in the athlete housing. But these were not core housings on the main part of campus. It was an inadvertent racist event, but the black students knew it.

Also if you spoke a foreign language, you were probably in one of the language houses. It was just some accidents the school had allowed to accrete, but they called it satellites. So it, again, tells you that, yes, you're in the orbit of the university, but you're in an outer perspective, right?

So I got one of the dormitories that was given over to two sororities, and I realized that Greek life there was a different function than it had been at GW, and being

an RA for sororities or any Greek establishment of which you do not belong is probably a mistake anyway. So that was terrible. It was so terrible. [laughs] I didn't like my people very much, but I learned a lot. Being an RA is interesting, because you're an emotional care provider and trying to keep people from hurting themselves.

So I went from that to graduating. I took a month to go to India because I hadn't done anything of any value that I thought internationally. I never did do that international affairs, and I went to India for a month and hung out like a hippie. I just kind of went to New Delhi and then went almost straight east, made it to Mother Teresa's house, hoping I'd run into her. It was the one time she'd visited the States, so I missed her. But I met this really cute French girl and wanted to go with her to the School of Children, because there were three schools that Mother Teresa ran. One is the school for orphans, one was a house for folks who were older, and then there was a house for those that were dying. It was kind of the Catholic version of hospice care. I was going to the cute one with the cute French girl, yes, yes, yes.

So, after worship, we went to where they were sending us. Somehow, I lost her and I went to the wrong house. I thought I was going to the right one. I went to the house of the dying. Dude, that is a massive reframing. [laughter] At some point, I had been tasked with shaving a man's face, who had had maybe a year of—I mean, I would have loved to have shaved your face with the type of just barely what we have here. He had like a year's growth, maybe. They gave me a rusty razor. I can't use my left hand because that's the one you wipe with. It's a sign of disrespect. So there's no support point that I can't—you know, so I'm shaving his head with a razor that I could barely work, on really long growth, which, you know, you really need a straight blade for something like that, or

at least an electrical trimmer, but I didn't have those choices. So eventually the man took my left hand and put it on his face as a permission, and I shaved him.

Then when that was done, I noticed that there was a man whose internal organs were hanging out, and somebody was taking tweezers and taking what looked either like poop or burrs out of them, and it was probably the most upfront in-my-face medical event I'd ever seen. They were taking volunteers for this extraordinary point of caring, and that they were really needing us if they were allowing us—when I think about the cleanliness or maybe lack thereof, it wasn't a City of Joy-type drop down, and I bet even now I'd probably go back and they may not let us do that. That was twenty years ago, right? But the type of compassion being expressed for people who we might see in society as unvaluable because they could no longer contribute were instead being given a compassion that was coming out of Christianity that was just worth noting. That was Mother Teresa's sense of, "You are a valued child of God, and even if you don't have my faith, I will treat you with value till you are no longer here."

I probably should have known I was dead on arrival coming back to East Tennessee for my next job, but it took me another year and a half to figure it out. I mean, you don't go to India and have these types of experiences.

There was one other that I want to tell you about. So, you know, I've got all the naiveté that you probably still see. [laughs] It's like East Tennessee is really a place to not learn a lot of things. Don't get me wrong. You learn a lot of micro things, it's not like you waste your time, but socially and other things you could miss out on a lot, even though my best friend was a guy named Mashish Patel [phonetic], whose family had also come from India. I had that multicultural piece to me. Thank God I did. But I just didn't

know a lot. But be-bopping around India not knowing a lot and having an open, honest face is also a passport. People realize there's not much guile in you, and they almost want to protect you, if that makes sense. Like for an Indian person, they would say, "You still look like a dumb American, but you're a sweet one," right? I mean, they treated me better than I deserved.

So one of my dumb American things that happened was after Calcutta, which was definitely a shock to the system, it was time for me to go back to Delhi, got on the train, and I got off where I thought I was supposed to. I'd gotten off at the wrong place. It's a place called Hyderabad, which was a large industrial city, and at this point has developed also its infrastructure for tourism. But at that point when I got off the train, people were like, "There's a white person here." And though they'd seen me on TV, they had not seen me much in person, and I was a celebrity when I walked off that train. I had some very unusual experiences there that I'm not even going to go into. [laughs]

But the next day when I got out of my room where I felt like I'd maybe been watched like a zoo animal through the night, every person, every person, every tout in the square that was selling something wanted me to be their new best friend, kind of like I was the attraction point. And, finally, one person on the side who was selling the street food invited me to come and almost gave me food without charging me, which is an amazing act of hospitality, and, hopefully, I knew enough at that point if you get hospitality, you receive it with grace.

They gave me local water, and even when I was getting it, I was like, "How much do I push?" This is a membrane I've kept so far. I've always bought water and known where it came from. This is 1995. We had been told, everything I'd read, *The Lonely*

*Backpacker's Planet Guide* had told me, "Do not drink the water." [laughs] It's just going to be my deal, and I decided instead of faulting towards misrepresenting his attitude, that I would take it. So I took the water and drank it, and the effects were not immediate, but they did come. [laughs]

So I got back on the train, because I'd given the poor train people a tough time, because they are very serious about their trains in India. They run on time, they go where they need to, and I had screwed things up by getting off. So they reprinted my ticket without charging me, let me get on the next day. I just had to pay for a room somewhere else. I got on the train, and that's where the temperature that day hit an unusual 116 degrees. Montezuma's Revenge started, so I was losing my fluids top and down, and I just couldn't keep water in, but I also was losing it. It was so hot and dry, and I was in an un-air-conditioned car, that I didn't realize how bad I was dehydrating. I mean, I was going out at a super rapid pace.

A young boy, who was Hindu, got on and realized at some point in talking to me—he was very friendly, and we talked about his ninth-, tenth-grade experiences, but he realized I was in trouble. So at some point, he asked for my wallet, which I gave him, and he went off the train. [laughs] But he came back with a ton of water and basically almost nursed me all the way to Delhi with water, which I don't think is where he was going. He was either headed through there or he had changed his itinerary to keep me alive with all the water. And then he made sure I made it all the way to the front stairs of the East-West Hospital, which is the best hospital in Delhi and possibly in northern India. I got in, got to a berth, where they immediately hooked me to IVs, and I had medicine to save my life. They were as good as any Western standards.

But a young Indian boy is the one that saved my life, which is the story of the Good Samaritan, and I'm the one on the side of the road. I mean, you just cannot look past that. That is a high-level Christian story that tells the most profound to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Okay, Lord, who's my neighbor? He told the story, right, the Good Samaritan. So if I ever needed a framing device to figure something out, Jesus had just shocked me, or the God the Eternal had said, "Let me make sure you're really getting the gospel message, and now I'm going to play it out for you. Who is the neighbor? The one who cared for him." And he says, "Go and do likewise." That's it, period, flat out, the one who showed mercy. So he kept me alive, got me there, and then I finished my journey.

So I came back to sell life insurance in East Tennessee, which has got to be the grossest job. English, religion, here I am going out selling end-of-life care in a whole different way, right? "Don't you when you die want to leave something of yourself back behind other people, for other people? Don't look at this just life insurance. I want you to look at permanent life insurance because it's a pretty cool financial vehicle." And it was at that time, but the people I wanted to sell it to cared so little about it, like young husbands would be like, "Well, if I die, she'll just marry someone else," which is a really terrible consideration of one's self, but I heard that a lot. Other people would say—I mean, it was a very hard thing for them to look at. What do you want to do when you die? How do you want your death to be? People don't like to have that discussion at all. They really hate having it, so they hated me for making them have it, and then they hated me for trying to sell them a product. And I don't blame them for that, because none of us like to have a problem that looks like it's suddenly created, and then you have the solution.

But welcome to advertising. That's everything, all the way from toothbrush all the way on down.

But it made me for the first time realize what it must be like to be a black person, with the amount of hatred I was getting, and then thinking about that they can't dodge it. Suddenly I called on people who didn't want to talk, people that should have been friends with me or friendly all the time were treating me differently, and I did not cope with it well. People would be like, "Oh, Brian, glad to hear."

"I'm selling life insurance. I was wondering if I could come by and talk to you sometime."

"Dude, don't ever call me again." Or, "Okay," but then they'd never meet you, which is almost worst treatment.

That lasted a year and a half, and, thank God, Jesus saved me and said, "I've got an easier job for you. How about you just share me and we'll go into ministry."

I was like, "Thank you. Thank you!" [laughs]

I learned a lot. I learned that selling life insurance, what I really liked to do is hang out at my church. The other thing is I learned at that time that there was a guy who had written a book named Andrew—no, I'm getting it wrong. Yeah. His name is Abraham Verghese, and he was an East Indian doctor who had settled in the same town that I was selling life insurance in, one town over from where I'd grown up, and was talking about he specialized in infectious disease and was starting to learn what AIDS was. He was the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. It happened right there. He had written this book and published it in 19—I want to say—[19]97 maybe. No, he published in [19]94, but the movie came out in [19]98.



But this was all around my childhood, my high school, and college. I'd started learning about, but I had no idea we were an epicenter, that there was a major gay community just a street up from us. I'd been so isolated that I'd missed all of it. Here I am now selling life insurance in Johnson City in the same place where some people probably had to go through medical screening and either found out, "No, we won't take you because you have something that might kill you fast." I mean, I just hadn't put it all together, but I was in an epicenter point and missing it completely. I don't know if that makes sense.

[0:38:08.6]

NA: Yeah.

[0:38:09.3]

BC: It feels like the giantest [*sic*] blind spot, just gigantic, that this guy was taking raw data and making assessments and talking about how he was getting patients, where they're coming from. The book is still transcendent. And he was an Indian! [laughs] My best friend is Indian growing up in East Tennessee. I had to go all the way to India to learn some things about hospice and end-of-life care, but here's this Indian right here in my own backyard observing all the things and having to tell us our story.

[0:38:36.0]

NA: Hmm. Wow.

[0:38:38.7]

BC: And I just wasn't picking up what he was laying down at the time. So that's my shape in 1997 when I go to Duke Divinity School to begin the process of getting my master's in divinity. I had a terrible time at Duke Divinity School. Like within my first

days there, I had an interaction that changed the nature of how I felt about faculty and staff. I felt like I had become—I think the word I used for someone was “radioactive, toxic.” Later on, I learned, “No, dude, it’s not you. It’s just the way this all worked out,” you know. But I was basically punished by not given a field education location. Instead, was asked to do clinical pastoral education, which at that time within the divinity school was supposed to be a teaching device/punishment for people that didn’t seem to have enough introspection or self—you know, kind of watching themselves. So instead of being offered a chance to go and work as a grad student for \$10,000 in the summer in the field to be able to pay for divinity school, I was instead asked during my summer to go pay \$500 and go work in the hospital.

By the luck of the draw, I was placed in what was called the Infectious Diseases Clinic. That was the euphemism for the AIDS clinic. Now, there were other infectious diseases that might have rolled in there, but they were usually also diseases or ailments caused by other autoimmune disorders. I mean, that’s really what we were, is the giant catchall for autoimmune disorders, and at that point in [19]97, they were still diagnosing a whole wealth of other things that caused thrush to grow in your mouth or any of the other things that happened when the body’s immune system can’t operate.

It also was a place that medicine was only finally starting to catch up with the need to care. Now, here I am, I’ve learned about this since [19]87, right, that there’s an epidemic and then later to find out that there are people doing treatments, but the cocktail, I want to say, was still fairly new, and it didn’t work for everyone the same way, and it never meant that you weren’t dying. It was just changing speeds. And, plus, like anybody dealing with long-term illness and people who were in poverty situations or

people who were pushed to the edge of society, which a lot of homosexual population had been pushed, they did not have regular things that they could count on, like refrigeration for the medicines or access to other healthcare that you needed to back you up or transportation. And they had the stigma of, “I have AIDS,” so we had a private door for people to come into.

And here I am, placed as a student. I don't think anyone knew anything about me, but I had come as a destruction or a disappointment of the Duke Divinity School, which meant I was reassessing what my religion meant to me and everything else, and I wasn't there to tell anybody their truth. I was still trying to figure out my truth.

[0:41:36.8]

NA: What city was this in?

[0:41:37.8]

BC: Durham.

[0:41:38.6]

NA: Okay. It was right in Durham.

[0:41:40.0]

BC: It's the old—there are two wings to the hospital, but this is back when the original wing of the hospital is where all the clinics were. I think they've since changed.

[0:41:48.8]

NA: So you're figuring out your truth.

[0:41:50.6]

BC: I am figuring out my truth here in the basement of, I want to say—it wasn't east campus, but maybe the east wing of the hospital. Maybe it's north-south, I don't

remember. The old wing. I'll call it old wing. I liked it. I liked it, better than liked it. Like somehow I found I had been Br'er Rabbit tossed in the briar patch. I didn't have to convince anyone of anything, but I was willing to listen, sympathize, bear with them. I didn't have anything that I needed to push or pull, but I didn't have to flinch when people came in with faces that were eaten with diseases that couldn't be controlled by other medicines. Autoimmune disorders or tumors are the last stages of an AIDS epidemic that had not been caught in time. I didn't care. I did not care.

I was kind of burnt out, and what a great posture. That is apparently the sweet spot for a good beginning chaplaincy model, right? I started rebuilding. I remember going to a couple fundraisers for the hospital and for supporting research or medicine that was going to the AIDS clinic, and the gay community supported me like anything. Not because I was cute. And, by the way, you can see where I am now, so just imagine it might have been true at one point. [laughs] But they weren't hitting on me, they weren't asking anything of me, and when I said I'm with the chaplain or a religious person, they didn't flinch. If anything, they stuck around saying, "Well, you're here. This is unusual. Let's talk. Like, how did you get here?"

I'm like, "Holy accidents!" But I love them all, right?

When people offer you care and support, I have not found in my life that I can afford to ever say, "No, I don't need it." What a privilege, but I don't think I've ever been there. And if a community stands up for you or says, "You're part of us," then, that's somewhere I've looked back and said, "I will always get your back."

So it was there at that time in [19]97, [19]98, that I went from a learner about not just AIDS, because it was at that point nowhere limited to the homosexual community,

but it's still predominantly known within. So at that point I went from a gentle receiver of those who were gay to an advocate. That's where my crossover occurred, and I don't know that it could have happened any other way. But, again, it's one of those, if people give you advocacy, why would you not share that gift all the way back around? That was my best learning at Duke Divinity School and in the hospital system. And, oh, by the way, I kind of liked chaplaincy, not enough to want to pursue it, but I found that when I worked here at High Point and at the Christ United Methodist Church, I volunteered every night that I could, that they would let me, over at High Point Regional Hospital to be an on-call chaplain.

So I kept all my credentials up and I supported the community, and when weird stuff happened and some come running into the ER, like a child that was lost in a house fire set accidentally by an uncle's misplaced act of cigarette butt, African American community, I was ready—not because I had gifts, but because I didn't flinch, because maybe I knew how much I didn't know, and so I didn't come in to know anything but just to bear witness, to support, pray, act out of my emptiness, to ask the questions what are the different possibilities for religious experience, the William James stuff, to take all the chaplaincy stuff that had been taught to me accidentally by the undergrad teaching at Wake Forest or the intentional teachings in chaplaincy at Duke University.

So I've volunteered as a chaplain now for almost twenty years, and then even most recently gotten paid the last six years up in Watauga because they won't let you volunteer. They want to be able to fire you. But I would have stayed there full-time on staff if that position would have been open. I loved working in that. And yet I like working in an institution where the institution doesn't own you. You leave at night, check

your stuff in, and then you have another life. Or you have hopefully a life that's congruent with what you do but not held by all the values of that environment. And I like usually what a hospital means to do, do no harm. In essence, it's a reiteration of my Boy Scout "Leave somewhere a better place than you found it." Same with healing and humanity. Yeah, I like checking in with all that. I like the possible expression of universality, that the way that I love God and Jesus means I can love you whatever crazy way you're coming at today, even if you're feeling unlovely. Right?

[0:46:35.7]

NA: Yeah.

[0:46:36.7]

BC: I've experienced that grace. Why would I not? It doesn't challenge my experience of Christ the Savior to care for other people.

And the other piece that's been in there, interestingly, is watching a lot of dying. So this is going to sound weird. I think it sounds weird at first. I like dying. There's the sense that someone else's passing allows us to die to our self, and I'm reminded of that. I like the fact that there are clear times where we say goodbye and we're given the privilege to say goodbye.

I've done funerals now for most of my grandparents, because I'm clergy. My grandmother was so amazing, I buried her twice. She got buried once, or we did a funeral for her in Florida, and then did it again in Ohio, her hometown, and so I did the funeral twice. So what I didn't like in the first one, I got to do it again, you know. But Grandma was cool enough. She deserved that. Not many people can say that.

My grieving processes with my own family have been really minimal, I think in part because I feel so content with the process that is death, and I'm not sure I believe in all the afterlife stuff. Like, so much of what we put out in Christianity sounds like Christian fiction. I think we've attached a whole bunch to it that I'm really not sure about. I'm not sure what part of us is eternal and what that eternal passing into eternity looks like. Like, what about our personalities? I know we don't get married. Our marriages don't last. What type of perfect love suddenly makes marriage no longer a value? I mean, I love my marriage. I'm not looking for an out. I'm not looking for, "Well, at least when I'm dead, one of us will have a perfect body, and I'm going to be a sexual monster, right, or are you?" Whatever.

Whatever happens, whatever testament we have in our own gospels is that our change is so profound that marriage no longer makes a notch on it. That's pretty cool. I mean, it's nothing to be afraid about, but I don't think it's this homecoming warm, good—. Whatever it is, it's probably exceeding that at such a level that even familial relationships drop away, like the familial love drops into the agape love, a love that is not limited. I mean, that's a whole reception of you, even to the places where I go. I don't think I want to share that. God says, "I've already received it." I'm not running towards it, but I'm not afraid of it, but I have loved the sense of completeness that endings bring, and I think that's part of why I like the chaplaincy. Initially, I think it helped me grieve a loss of myself that I hadn't understood had to die first. Later, I've been privileged with the highest emotional capacities that we will go through in this life, I'm allowed to be nearby. There aren't a lot of places in this world that we can say I think the eternal was near. I think doctors who deliver babies probably have a sense of that, at least from taking

a deep breath to emerging of, "I'm going to use my lungs with the real oxygen." That seems like a God moment. Baptisms seems like God moments in the sense of we don't always see what happened [snaps fingers] or it's not an instantaneous change, but we are announcing that it has happened.

Communion is another one of those where, actually, I believe something does happen, because I used to watch these faces that would go down a long line in my growing up, and when they came back, they all looked glassy-eyed and kind of like maybe been hit by a baseball bat, looked a little unsteady. Communion always struck me as one of those places where we can't count on how, but God shows up.

I've had some places where I've felt like God showed up that I wouldn't have picked, like the story on the train, a few other places. But death is one of those places where the life that we take that last breath here, we believe or articulate that some form of us takes some form of another breath somewhere else, that there is a place of value that we're going on to or that we do not need to fear death, and I like being there at the bridge. I love that. What an incredible close privilege that I'm as close as I can be to a birth. It might mean leaving all the pain and mortal coil behind and something that's much lighter is waiting, and I don't even think I know what it is. I'm okay with that. I mean, I have a high curiosity. I want to know. I mean, if someone could send a message back, other than the epistles we've gotten, whenever Jesus came back and said, "Oh, don't touch me. Something weird's going on," right? Or whatever we know about Lazarus, who seems like he might have had a strange existence having been brought back? Even Jesus seemed to maybe be reluctant to do it. He cried. We're not sure why, not sure why. Yeah, I'm not



sure that coming back is necessarily good, but a part of me is absolutely curious to peer over the edge.

And the other piece that's happened. So I've been a minister now for almost twenty years, and in that almost always had hospital experiences, and I tend to embrace those rather than not want them. Hospice has gotten a lot stronger. I mean, that has come up out of—I don't even remember it, and then suddenly it's this whole movement. I remember Dr. Kevorkian being the one that we said, "That guy's bad. Let's arrest him. Being able to choose to die is terrible, it's immoral," to where hospice is—whew, come awfully close in some cases to what Kevorkian was already pioneering. And I wasn't upset by Kevorkian, but I am absolutely sometimes on the edge about versions of hospice. I know that some of the drugs they use take the body's will to thrive away. I think opium is one of those. And it may not even be done the same way it used to be. Like, I may just have more questions and need a lot more education. But there have been places where I feel like we're faked a happy-ever ending that we need as the survivors that may or may not have been part of the people who are passing's desires. I worried, especially early on, at some of the "Oh, this is what she or he would have wanted."

I'm like, "No, I think you're the one that needs to have the death rattle go away." Does that make sense? Like it's haunting and it's hard to be in a room. I haven't had to be in a room with my own parents yet doing the death rattle, and I have talked to them to the point they're like, "We wish you would stop having this conversation with us about what we want to do, our end of life." [laughs] Like I've made them go through so many Power of Attorneys and look at it again, "Is it still what you want?"

They're like, "We are sick of this with you," right? But it's such dear concern to me that the living tell what they can, like maybe it's another version of life insurance. What are your intentions? What do you want? How are you going to carry them out? I have seen terrible tragedies.

And the other thing is when angst and fear and grief all come together in an unholy allegiance, the most normal of families can look bizarre when making medical decisions, especially if there's multiple siblings and they all have a different interpretation. I mean, even where the beautiful level—okay, so I trust nurses a ton with what they see and what they kind of feel and know. When the nurses and doctors will come in and say, "Do you think you can convince them to do *x, y, z*?" you can see them kind of keeping a family lingering on some of the most exceptional levels of medical care, and the staff who's there is interpreting it as possible suffering, suffering without a voice. They think they're being faithful, and I'm saying, you know, our expression of faith is that we're not afraid of death, that they're not. But what I really realize we're talking about is this person is leaving and you're the survivor. That's almost always what the conversation is and how will you process beyond them.

So one of the things I think I acknowledge at least—I haven't heard any other of the clergy to do this, but maybe, we've read in our gospels, at least the Christian gospels, that God is a jealous god. What a gift, because if we're built in the image of God that we have that jealousy, why wouldn't we be jealous of their leaving? If we have tasted and touched great love, why would we ever want to have that leave us? So to maybe name that part of the elephant in the room, to say God's as jealous as you and I are, maybe more so, it's not wrong to be jealous, but to know that the great drive that is claiming this

soul is going on to be perpetuated at some level and that there is hope that that is being renewed, that creation never stops create, right, recreation.

But that's a hard—you know. It's funny. They've learned a lot of the false beliefs of perpetuity, of eternity, and yet we haven't gotten over some of the basics. I keep finding that another problem that comes up sometimes is forgiveness issues. They've said it, they given the mouth sign for it, but not the heart, maybe haven't practiced forgiveness, don't know how to do that. So much is packed into the short time. So there is my own anxiety still sometimes that we end lives, not prematurely but in a fashion that would not be fitting to them because of the angst of the living, those making decisions.

Then there's another part, and this is old church, this is history and medievalism. The old angst-y Christians, the originals, wanted to make their lives lived out as long as they could but cognitive as they could so that they could make amends with as many people as they could so forgiveness would be offered. If it's not true, I've learned that myth as truth. But that's the history I was taught of our Christian church, that in the olden days, that those who were ill would almost wallow in their illness and say, "Bring my people to me so I can make—." And they also had that extra edge of, "I'm dying, we should get forgiven," right? I mean, there's a pretty good dog in the fight there. Maybe that is what we need sometimes.

So I think about that sometimes with how we use drugs and how it deals with cognitive events and uncognitive events, a person's conscious and communicable ability levels. Then there's the other piece, and this is a moral piece, the way that medicine draws every last dollar out of a person and then can draw extra dollars out of the other survivors to perpetuate a life that probably is not worth living statistically. Now so by

“worth living,” I mean are these extraordinary investments making their potential longer life better or able to be lived longer in a way that they would wish, they themselves would wish, since there’s not a magic switch that we can push anymore. That’s kind of the Kevorkian edge that we all play with. I’ve watched doctors unintentionally in trying to do what they’ve been told to do is care for the extraordinary ends of life. But you or God make this go longer, make it go better, make it go stronger. But they don’t have an evaluative point, or maybe the points get washed past so fast you make unintentional decisions. You make decisions with unintentional consequences. But only trained nurses and doctors know where that line is, the, “Here you go.”

Then it’s a slippery slope. “Oh, I think I’m just going to have breathing but only if it’s breathing assisted, but not an iron lung event,” or where the machine is breathing for you. But something happened, said, “Well, we only need to do the breathing for you for a little bit. I’m sure they won’t get on the machine.” Well, dude, there’s not any one person with any one same lungs. But those lines get crossed all the time, and then the bill[s] are getting stacked, where it’s not just on the patient when they die those bills die with them. They pass on longer than the life of the patient. So now I have an economic piece that’s the opposite of weddings. Okay?

So a wedding, I’ll watch a couple say, “I want to get married. We think the two of us together are better for Christ,” and that’s work to get them to say that, right? What they really mean is either, “Morally I feel like we can’t have public sex, we can’t have sex and tell people we are having sex publicly unless we’re married.” Or they say, “We think this is the one. We believe in the romantic version of marriage.” Those are okay. But then they do equally stupid stuff, which is throw most of the money they need as

young adults into a wedding, and there's an industry built there to suck up every cent and convince them they need to send more instead of just saying, "Pastor, will you do the duties, and, oh, by the way, we've been having sex for years and we're going to be open with you about that. This is actually a covenant because we feel like the covenant that we're living is good for God's kingdom." I'm weird that I just said all that openly. There's a few couples that have that discussion, but they get a huge bill for having gone through the marriage rites.

Here's the other rites, the medical rites at the end. You get to the point where you're dissolving, your body is atrophying, which is a natural process in nature and one of the reasons we have rebirth. If you don't have atrophy, you don't have new life. It's gorgeous, built into our ecosystem. It's built into our human system. It's meant to happen. It's a natural process. So they come in and something happens to challenge their health in such a way that they don't know it yet but they're not going to leave. But because they don't know it yet, they start stacking the financial things, because, first off, they want to live. We're all trained to thrive. Then maybe they stop, but someone else usually cares enough about them to say, "Well, we could do a little more. We could do a little more."

The show *Breaking Bad* is a terrible depiction of why someone might sell meth, and yet the idea that they have, "Well, you have cancer. We will do anything to beat the cancer." If there's a two percent chance, isn't someone's life worth any value that we can throw at it? Yeah, we've been trained to do that. How do you ever put a financial line up against it?

So before you know it, and with healthcare being what it is, it's a crapshoot. You don't know what they'll pay for necessarily ahead of time or not. You don't really want your healthcare saying, "Well, you say that's ordinary. We say it's extraordinary." So we've built a healthcare—you know. You know. [laughs] So the system doesn't even work with you, so you're throwing on things that say, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this, because this is the person I care for the most. Why won't you live for me?" Or, "I need you to live, and now I'm tied in." They die and the debts need to be paid, and they're ankle-breaking debts. They are numbing debts. There's nothing left for the family to receive as a blessing. Or instead they might be given points for things they would have like to have preserved that are valuable, are sold to liquidate to care for the last bits of the family. I mean, that's insane. That is stealing from not just a generation, but the next. That is ungodly, is immoral, is un-Christian.

So now I'm in the place of looking when I get really far out there. So I'm really far down the mental rabbit hole, and I'd love to have a discussion with you later to—like if there's qualifications. But I've wondered sometimes if there ought not be a designated community Archangel of Death, and go around and say, "Just as a favor to some of you sometimes, I'm the new Kevorkian." We give them the whatever you used to do for those that cast out ghosts or demons and let them be the ones that cast out the demon of medical over-involvement in a person's life because the people can't, and save them. What's more crippling, a disease that kills you or a disease that kills you and your family? Economic binds, that's systemic, and it's a disease that's gone through every piece of the American medical system. I watch it, and I go, "Dude, this is not something I want to participate in."

So I don't know. That's the questions I'm left with, is how do we go into end-of-life scenarios, both with moral behaviors that are cultivated and no longer generationally turning us into slaves of our own machinations, but at the same time treats death with the dignity it deserves and the gift that it can be. It's such a gift if you—but that's actually not usually training the person dying, but training those that are going to receive the death, which is usually one generation beyond where I've got a privilege to talk. I have to do it all in twenty-four hours.

The person who's called me in, they're a church member. They might even be pretty well prepared. They say, "Pastor, my heart is ready to see my Lord and Savior." They even say it that way, "My heart is ready to see my Lord and Savior. My heart is ready to see my Lord and Savior." But the children who are not churched, and the church has accidentally or intentionally said to them so many times, "You don't belong here. The things you think, we don't think. The values you have, we don't have." They come in and I have to say, "There is an eternal place that they're going, and it's going to be okay. Trust and release them."

They're like, "I don't know if I'm buying what you're selling, and, by the way, once they're gone, they're gone to me." Even if, let's say, they buy some of it. They say, "They're gone, they're going to heaven, how do I know I am?" [laughs] Like, wow, would a loving God hate your parents so much that they wouldn't let them have access to that which is eternal of you?

I mean, let's say you say they are good and you're not. If they're that good and going to eternity, what type of god that you think that they love would not let the pieces they care about with you also be with them? It's kind of like their goodness might vouch

for you too now. One more generation, I don't know. [laughs] I've gone beyond my thinking skills, right? But it's kind of like, "Does my dog go to heaven?"

"Well, did you love him with the nature and experience of God's love? Did he carry with him a stamp of the eternal?"

If they did, well, why not? I don't know. That's my theological leap. That's how I get over those things.

Any questions right off?

[1:04:44.4]

NA: No.

[1:04:45.5]

BC: I can talk a blue streak. I can talk a blue streak.

[1:04:45.5]

NA: I think it's great. I'm following your line of thought. It's given me a lot to process.

[1:04:55.3]

BC: I bet.

[1:04:56.2]

NA: But I'm not going to process it right now. It's not going to all set in right now.

[1:04:59.9]

BC: Well, and I've gotten to the point where I'm starting to blog, because all these things, I've been trying to think about myself within a couple of the big experiential movements going on right now, #MeToo Movement, because I have some stories I didn't



share here that come throughout that, both as a—I think, of me as the bad guy, and also me in images that resemble those going through the #MeToo, but I'm not a #MeToo-er. I mean, gender does dictate some things and should. But I might say #MeAlso, which would be given an allied point and place, but I have to figure out how to articulate that.

Before doing that, I've had to think about how I'm talking to women I've known in the past and maybe even men and say, "How do you see me in this story and are you comfortable telling me?" Because I don't want to tell my story to make me out to be hero or boogiemán, without having the privilege of knowing someone else has had a very—I need to seek permission, if that makes sense.

Some of the writing that you've done, I've sent my first poor attempt of an email to ask someone, "This is my experience. What was your experience?"

And they said, "Dude, I have no grief over you. As far as I'm concerned, you're a friend and I'm thankful for you," which is a real relief, meant that we'd experienced something very differently, and it was more how I had seen something. But it also means now I have permission to ask the next piece, which is, "I want to talk about this publicly without your name. Is that okay?" I'm hoping to self-publish on a blog and then tap into other resources, but I feel like I want to tell my story. So that's one thing.

Then the other place where I'm starting to break it down is trying to build out discipleship resources so that—I'm tired of Christianity being an evaluative tool of mind state. I don't really care what you believe anymore. I mean, I kind of do, but it's a terrible way for you and I to interact. What I really want to do is go back to the Boy Scout motto and say, "Will you practice the beliefs that bring you to a good character point but in Christianity?"

So instead of saying, “I don’t think that homosexuals should be in the church,” what I really want to do is say, “Okay, love the Lord your God comes heart, soul, strength, mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. What five curriculum practices could you do over six months that show that you’re growing in those [four] areas: heart, soul, strength, mind?” I mean, it kind of gives you a bodily event of Christianity, rather than a mind state and takes it out of Greek thinking into holistic thinking, because I don’t care what you think. I care what you practice. But if you and I practice the same things, we can have wildly different thoughts and still find the communicable way to interact with each other.

[1:07:40.8]

NA: Yeah, yeah, I somehow think that taking that framework here where you are using your own life to flesh out these, let’s call them abstract ideals, rather than standing on this hard line you’ve drawn, “Homosexuals shouldn’t be in church,” will force you to confront things in a new way. So your belief doesn’t get to be bigotry anymore.

[1:08:12.9]

BC: Right, right. Plus I don’t think we all are experts at everything, so when someone comes to me and says, “Well, I want to talk to you about homosexuality,” I want to be able to say, “Have you completed steps one, two, and three of the Christian Growth Model?” which is really crazy. But in my dream of dreams, I want to develop something like the Boy Scout motto that I can put online and that my church would eventually all—to be a member or to be a participant. I don’t really care about membership—a participant, you’re going through the process. Like if you’re Boy Scouts, if you’re a Webelo, the goal is at any point that you come out the other end as an Eagle

Scout. We don't expect you all to, but you're in process or eventually you'll stop participating. Does that make sense?

[1:08:52.7]

NA: Mm-hmm.

[1:08:53.0]

BC: The end result is always Eagle Scout. And this is interesting to me. No matter what you think of Boy Scouts as a prejudiced institution or not, if you meet someone who says they're an Eagle Scout, you still have a certain persona you carry with them for most of the times. When I tell someone I'm an Eagle Scout, even if you think Boy Scouts is the biggest bullshit idea there ever was about moral development, you still kind of treat them with a sense of honor, and I have never been mistreated for saying I'm an Eagle Scout. Because someone at least says, "Damn, you put seven years of your life into something," right? So it's as close as we've got to a military expression for civilians.

I want to build that for Christianity, so that even if you've got someone who is hedonistic and knows exactly why there's no reason they want to touch a moral behavior, a code of their life, they would still bump into someone say, "Dude, respect." Like I do that with Mormons, especially when they're on their two-year mission. I ain't them, I don't even think like they do, but if you do two years of life to do something, that kind of commands a certain mad respect because you've done it. And it also means you've got a certain amount of majority that you—I actually can get down with Mormons a lot faster sometimes than I can Methodists, because a Mormon has a track record that you know and start talking about, and even though they have a modality of how they evaluate things, they still have at least touched a little more society or culture than the normal

standard American maybe that I'll run into. Because of that, their viewpoint doesn't deviate from why they're right per se, but they're also willing to hear another person's truth from another angle. That's a great discussion.

So imagine if I had seven years, especially young years potentially, of messing with people's psyche through behavior, I mean in a good way, right? Like, how are we shaped by the behaviors we carry with us? Just something simple. "Did you brush your teeth today? Did you wash your hands after you pooped? Did you make your bed?" That shapes my kids. It's turning them into certain creatures, some which are moral expressions. Seven years in a determined Christian ethos which is built on practices, not beliefs, maybe at level six I can say, "Now you know enough to talk about homosexuality with some value, but you can't do it before then."

Like, what about the Trinitarian nature of God? You have to be an Eagle Scout with one palm in this Christian development, right? You want to go and start gnawing on the truths that we say are core beliefs, great. You have achieved the status to be able to talk about that. Down here, you can talk about what flavor of communion bread is okay. [laughs] I mean, you want to have a low-level discussion, that's what you've achieved. I'm very tired of philosophical discussions that are usually clothed in bigotry and prejudices, and I so often feel like I'm in them in the church. I'm wasting my energy here.

[1:11:43.4]

NA: I think people's investment in being right can be crippling—

[1:11:47.6]

BC: No kidding.

[1:11:48.6]

NA: —when it comes to that. Yeah, that's exactly what you mean [unclear].

[1:11:50.7]

BC: I feel pretty right about this. [laughter] I mean, I do, but it's maybe hopefully a twenty-year process. What I'm talking about is turning my practice program back to things I know. I mean, you can find shades of my three greatest institutions right back in there, right? Boy Scouts. There's some governmental expressions probably there, either against or for. My faith is also tied in there. I think I'm always going to be a creature of those things, and apparently India has a high resonance for me. Thank you, Mashish Patel [phonetic]. I love you. I'm so glad you're my childhood friend. I'm glad you're my adult friend.

But those things are somehow synthesizing for me a need for us to find a new way to practice Christianity in America that is based out of behavior, not based out of belief, and maybe one day it would get back to where we are politically involved again, but I'd like for it to go AWOL for a while, my version of it. I know it sounds crazy. I secretly hope they'll vote Democrat as long as Republicans hold power, and then if Democrats get power and go crazy, I hope they'll go Libertarian, Green Party. I mean, I love some diversity of thought and all that, and money to be out of politics. But in the meantime, I think I just want to develop ten little kids who will do the early Christian Scout program with me and then maybe it'll grow.

[1:13:03.6]

NA: Hmm. Yeah, that's cool.

[1:13:08.6]

BC: We'll see. I'll try not to get fired from here first, because obviously I said I think gay people aren't the fight that the church needs to be having, that we should be talking about issues of poverty, since Jesus had said the poor would always be us. He didn't say the gays would always be with us. So we should leave them alone. We should deal with the poor, anyways.

I wrote something very loud about that on Facebook, you can go read it, but because I did, even though it's my personal pulpit for a different community, because Facebook is a lot of my old friends or people who have gone purposely out of church or are gay, and I just want them to know that I'm sorry that we act like whack jobs as a denomination or gently as, "My gosh, I think I'm still an evangelical Christian," but they've been hijacked by name, by a political process that just should be flushed down the tube, and they have the heights of hypocrisy going on at this point now. I mean, [demonstrates] that we would morally give a green light to some of the things we're seeing here, a man who has slept with how many people and fighting about whether a hooker—or, excuse me, a woman who is paid professionally, a paid prostitute or maybe a—what is she? Let's call her a sex therapist. Maybe that's what she is. But he has a wife that starred in a pornographic magazine, and yet the Christian Right says, "That's our guy." And they have talked about the sanctity of marriage. I'm like, "If you want to talk about anybody's marriage, talk about that one, because it's the biggest one you put on stage." Why would we care if gay people are getting married when that's out there? I mean, you've left the barnyard door open. Anything can go through.

So I've been trying to continue to advocate loudly for the same community that advocated for me, which is also predominantly gay or certainly people who live on the

edge of boundaries of society. And in doing so, I've pissed off the right, red center in this community to the point that they may stop tithing and coming.

So my job is not really in peril. I mean, the hardest threshold I have is that my children and family might be hated on temporarily and that I'll be moved to a church where my income drops as much as maybe 25 percent, and moving sucks. But that's a lot of insurance. I should be loud as I can while I've got a job. Instead of taking that as a putdown, I should say, "I bet you can't fire me." And, instead, I've decided to go the other way. I want to be a witness. Later on, when people look back at this time, they will probably discover that the gay rights and gender wars were the greatest civil rights issues of our time. History is going to look at me with a lot more love. I would love to have been the white minister at the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., and said, "You know what he's advocating, the War on Poverty, it's worthy. Civil rights, human rights, those are bigger than just black people acting uppity."

I'm pretty sure that this is ours, and I want my children to read back in the funny pages, if anything, that their dad was not an asshole during this time. Yeah, that's the inheritance I want them to have. They can pull the plug as quick or as small as they want, and I'll make it easy for them. I haven't gotten the tattoo yet, but somewhere on me I've said I want words of posterity that they will remember forever. I'm going to probably put something that's meant a lot between us and that we've shared a lot, and it's going to be "Did you remember to brush your teeth?" See, the habits that make us.

And they'll be like, "Oh, Dad, that is so you." What they say will be like, "It will be easier to pull the plug. Let's see his right shoulder. Oh, yeah. I'm tired of that voice in

my head.” [laughter] In case of fire, pull plug from wall, or in case of danger. My poor kids. They’re going to be awesome.

[1:17:12.9]

NA: That’s cool.

[1:17:16.0]

BC: Yeah. I’m writing a lot to try and figure out my internal stuff, some of which is getting me in trouble, but I’m glad to be writing, and I think at some point it might be the nature of my expression trying to come—see, everything comes to the bias, but I want to tell my story so that people can come in to me and say, “Okay, we know Brian. If he ever thought it, he published it.” Or like I did to you, talked it, so that then they can come in and say, “Do we want the practice that this person is advocating?” Because at some point, I see maybe as I talk myself out of jobs, it might be valuable to build what I think is actually faithful Christian practice, and then if it is an opportunity, to maybe to hang my hat on that for longevity. I’m not sure I want to stop working at any time. I didn’t find that signing up for the Gospel of Christ actually came with a time limit or a salary or a retirement, and I didn’t think it did, so why should I start implementing that since my job looks normal?

So I kind of want to get caught doing this, like I want to be a pain in the ass for Jesus. But with you, it doesn’t play the same. You know what? I mean, there’s a generational edge. Like, it’s not bothering you a bit. I’m watching your face. But I could pull twenty people from outside the door who are two to three decades older than you, and they would just be growling at me right now.

[1:18:37.2]



NA: I think articulating it and talking about it is an important thing to do, and I think that for me a big thing is connecting the generations, because it's not productive to have these massive gaps in the way that people believe.

[1:19:03.4]

BC: Mm-hmm. It's not productive, but it has sure happened.

[1:19:06.9]

NA: Right. And maybe generational gaps have always happened, but they feel profound now.

[1:19:12.6]

BC: Now they do.

[1:19:13.4]

NA: They feel important.

[1:19:14.1]

BC: Right. And it's amazing to me how much it *is* generationally profound. I mean, I don't know if that makes sense. Like, that tells me just how stuck our church is generationally, that this is still our problem. But we're still a predominantly 65-ish denomination. We keep aging per year by year. Whatever the external age is, we age as a group. I was young clergy when I came in twenty years ago. By a 10 percent average, I'm still young clergy. So in twenty years, the percentages have all moved up almost twenty years. There's so few people coming in on the young point that I still represent what youth looks like in our church.

[1:19:55.7]

NA: Wow. Yeah.

[1:19:58.2]

BC: There's a part of me when I'm training young people, I kind of want to say, "Let me give you the life preserver that will help you survive church. I hope you're a believer, but I don't think the Christian church is going be around, American Christian church will be around to make sense of all this later." Part of me wants to push it over the edge, wants to end the hospice care.

[1:20:16.4]

NA: Hmm. Wow. What do you think, when you say, like, the American Christian church, what does that expression of religion look like?

[1:20:32.3]

BC: I think it's national. I mean, if we went into our congregation right now, I'm not sure where I left the flags, but you'll see the American flag and the Christian flag both up. Jesus didn't have a flag. His closest thing was a palm branch that got lifted on Good Friday—no, on Palm Sunday, we're saying, the Palm Sunday, Passion. So that's his flag, and it would have been the flag of the people of Israel, would not have been the flag of Rome. At that time, the Roman centurions and all were coming in on the other gate. He created a countercultural event. So we should never have the flag of the imperialists in the house.

[1:21:11.2]

NA: Right, right.

[1:21:12.0]

BC: Or if we're required to, to put it wherever it needed to be required, but, I mean, if we have the choice or the chance, we are not a religion of state, and we don't want to be, or rather other terrible things happen and are happening

So some of the people who signed the U.S. Constitution also signed the Methodist Papers of Incorporation. We're as close as it might be to a national church. At times we have helped this nation have some of our morality. The time of tee-totaling was a Methodist movement, was part of our social gospel, and we saw the problems that alcohol was having in American communities, so we voted and moved the issue of temperance. Other denominations might have gone along with it, but it was absolutely a central Methodist tenet, even to the point of saying you're Methodist, you should say, "I don't drink." It used to mean the same thing. Yet we had all these accidental side effects that happened with the gang warfare and other—I mean, to the point where temperance didn't exist anymore. It was probably around there that the Methodist Church lost the majority of its grip in political events, although we still feel like we have a moral dog in the fight, and we should, but instead of being able to muscularly advocate that out of Christendom, we're now beggars, not choosers, and yet we don't carry ourselves with that attitude of "Let me influence myself but without the posture of influence, without the posture of I ought to be here." We're still bullies, but we don't have the power to be. What a great opportunity for humility, but we don't seem to use it at all.

[1:22:55.7]

NA: It's the tradition of bullying that carries on. What do you think expressions of Christianity look like, post-American church?

[1:23:06.4]

BC: Right. Well, we don't have to go very far, because you can go to Europe and find out what Christianity in any form looks like post Holy Roman Empire or post the Protestant Reformation. I mean, go to a German Protestant church and figure out how they exist, because not only do they have to figure out what it meant not to be Catholic anymore, but then they have to figure out what it meant not to be Lutheran or a Lutheran that supported Hitler, and they did it. Hitler wouldn't have been who he was without the support, overt and covert, of the Christian majority at that time. I mean, World War II is the biggest war this world has ever faced, and it was a Christian war, Christian against Christian.

So you want to know how to rebuild a faith after that, go see what they have talked about after they said, "We've exterminated a whole group of people and almost got one-tenth of all people in an expression of belief and practice." It needs to be a repentant church. I think we live off of—our currency should be forgiveness, both forgiving others who harm us, which is real, but then asking forgiveness of those we've harmed, whether intentional or otherwise, that that is our growth point. So I think our only currency is forgiveness, but I don't see a lot of people using it. So it's still a currency that seems the opportunity is flourishing and multiple.

It would be an attitude of humility or advocacy, and I'm big into that. Like, I think we ought to be saying, "If the poor are always with us, let's figure out how to be really good with the poor." Like, let's develop those structures. Like, I'd love to see a Methodist movement. Forget church just for a moment. No incorporation. A group of people, maybe ten, that say, "All right, we're going to pick our thing, something that falls within the realm of poverty, and say we're going to get really smart about this and then

find our other allies.” I don’t care if they’re the church or not. They might be the church of devil worshipers down the street, and as long as they’re not doing child sacrifice, because most devil worshipers I’ve met actually tend to be pretty nice people, then we say, “How can we care?” If we find out they can be allies for caring for drug use, then we figure out how do we implement a structure that either supports people who are addicted or prevents other addictions or helps caring for families who are facing with addiction and trying to survive to not become a statistic themselves. That would be cool. So instead of wasting our time in these quarter-a-million building that need—this place eats a quarter of a million dollars a year.

[1:25:44.7]

NA: Wow.

[1:25:45.9]

BC: Some of that’s my salary. Some of it’s other staff salary. The majority of it is not going to progressive programs to change the world outside. But what if I flipped all that? What if there was no building? What if I didn’t have to pay for your air conditioning, the lights we’ve got, the Internet that we’re using, and what if, instead, that became capital to start influencing the structural change in the community? Be cool. So I’m not sure the abolishment of the national church as it’s expressed now, or the church du jour is necessarily so bad. I’m almost cheering for it, which is a strange thing to be when you’re the leader.

[1:26:27.1]

NA: You kind of identify where the institution becomes a hindrance rather than an enabler, as it were.

[1:26:35.9]

BC: Yeah, yeah. Enabling can be fun. I mean, you know, enabling someone to be their best self, enabling someone to shirk off guilt and sin, instead to become a person who practices things that bring joy and vitality. I mean, I'm a large lover of Brené Brown. Do you know any of her work?

[1:26:54.2]

NA: Nuh-uh.

[1:26:55.1]

BC: So this—I think it developed out of TED Talk. She's not overtly necessarily religious immediately, but she is doing all the work that talks about shame and guilt and how the majority of it prevents us from doing good behaviors instead of allowing us to be places who are being renewed.

[1:27:16.3]

NA: Yeah, shame and guilt are like the puritan ethic, aren't they?

[1:27:20.2]

BC: Well, when named. It matches some of the older theology of the church, but seems to have been lost, and it could look too much like a prosperity gospel, but I think it's okay in the sense that it's saying own up for what you are. Move on past shame and guilt. Use them as indicators. But if you're sitting with guilt for a long time, that means that's sin or the issue that you have not dealt with and you've just shoved under. Psychologically you've just buried that sucker so it can gnaw on you from the inside. Then we do terrible things when we're being gnawed on from the inside out of the pain. So then we have actions that don't match up with who we are, who we want to be, and

we get some of this dualism that's coming certainly out of our faith these days. I want to be a whole person and I want to be a Christly whole person.

[1:28:09.7]

NA: So how does her work on shame and guilt gesture back towards joy, which I think you mentioned?

[1:28:15.5]

BC: Right, right, right. So I think it comes back to the currency of forgiveness. I mean, you interrupt shame and guilt by recognizing when it's happening and so giving yourself, as she calls it, a shame storm.

Let me give you an example. A church member calls and says, "Pastor, I haven't seen you recently." Well, I am supposed to see everyone, and I'm supposed to read their minds and know when they're sick and hurting, and I should be there. So they might be exactly right, or they might not, or they're triggering for me all the other times I've been less than the pastor that I think that they want or that they want me to be or that I've quietly told myself I should be. So the shame storm is triggered, and it eats me up and tells me I'm not who I'm supposed to be. Forgiveness is "Huh, that may or may not be right, Brian. God has created you to be a child of delight. Accept thyself. Forgive thyself. If I'm going to love you, I've got to love here."

So, dude, this is not that "You're good enough, you're smart enough, gosh darn it, people like you." This is more of a correction that God has created something that is of value, of worth. Then you have the forgiveness piece that not only if you forgive yourself but maybe forgive the things in the institutions or the behaviors and habits of other people that have told you you're not enough or that you're of no consequence or that

you're over-consequented, right? I think that she is helping give us a new narrative for how we might move around in this world instead of over power to practice humility and practice forgiveness, which actually is not humility, but it's appropriate assertiveness.

Does that make sense?

[1:30:02.0]

NA: Mm-hmm.

[1:30:02.6]

BC: I mean, it's sort of about who I am and where I'm supposed to be, and I can be assertive about who you are and if I need to, to say, "I need less from you." "I need more," and not be ashamed for you either. I like that practice.

[1:30:18.5]

NA: Yeah. There's a certain—I hate to use this word, but like self-actualization that goes on.

[1:30:23.3]

BC: I would even say nobility of the character, nobility of the spirit, better than self-actualization. "Self-actualization" sounds like I can make it out of myself. In Christianity, I offer that it says we recognize that we are built as structures and copies of a royal event, you know, of the ultimate creation, and I think that's just a change of narrative a little bit, but it matches better where I'm coming from.

[1:30:46.2]

NA: Yeah. You've got to get the right viewpoint.

[1:30:48.4]



BC: Yeah. If I'm in California, I could say self-actualization, and then I'd say where are you on the Enneagram, and even people of faith would be like, "Yeah, I'm rolling with that," right? But that's two different languages here. That's a vocabulary that's just not reachable, a lot of which I've used with you today would be hard to reach, and I've realized I've violated the vocabulary realm of the recent church by saying just because you have a penis and use it to copulate doesn't make you an expert on homosexuality, [whispers] which is what I said on Facebook. They're used to biblical arguments, and, instead, what I did was take an argument probably off of more Dave Chappell, and I need to give that guy credit because I've been listening to black comedians, because they are reading our situations well and reeducating through humor, which is the softest way, that they know what they know they know. And he was talking about that he's not always given much credit for transgender appreciation. He said, "No, dude, I appreciate you tons. If you say—if you cut off your penis, throw it in the street, say, 'Don't need it,' I not only admire you, but I'm afraid of you." And it was a funny way of saying, "No, you got my attention. I'm there for you," but he's also saying the reason we're talking about transgender issues these days is because most of it is being done by white people who are becoming transgender, like Bruce Jenner. That's different. Let's treat white Bruce nicely, whereas blacks have been here for a long time and disrespected.

So there's a sense among the black community that we have jumped the shark on Black Lives Matter and done what we did—"well, who cares, it's the Methodist Church." Back when the original posture to help our nation grow into racial reconciliation, early 1900s, it instead got usurped by the Women's Suffrage Movement. So, in the Methodist

Church, we are aware at some level, depending at where you go into your history, that we let white women take over the conversation about equal rights as an absolute across races and gender. Instead, it was easier to give white women voting privileges than it was to allow black people to be the same as white. So in our current day and age, the new movement of that is Black Lives Matter, but #MeToo is coming over it, along with gay rights, and the blacks are saying, "Oh, again we have a chance to talk about the fact that we are treated as second-class citizens, but instead the conversation went along white gays and white women is going to take over our conversation." Now, some are very smart and they're saying all of these track back to the same point, that there is a problem that we have with our moral course, how we treat one another, human rights, and poverty, and there's a co-weaving of it. But not everyone is that smart, and everyone is just arguing for their own piece of the pie.

So the Methodist Church is not as robust this year to weigh in, nor do they understand. We're really almost out of all those movements. But the last time we touched it, we pushed hard for suffrage and dropped back civil rights until MLK, which still kind of got eaten by ERA.

[1:33:58.6]

NA: Hmm. Interesting.

[1:34:03.3]

BC: Yeah. White women matter more than black lives. They're still white. I'm not sure I'm all the way there, but I've watched enough black comedians keep honing in on this that I think they probably are hearing something I haven't been hearing. I don't want to be copacetic with it either. So I'm trying to bring my conversational tone to an

awareness of what's going on in our African American brothers and sisters, and then try to use that some to push back towards let's not just focus on gay rights, although I think there's great value to treat people wonderfully wherever you find them. But they keep going back, what are we doing in terms of economics, which will bring race right on up. You can't do economics for any period of time and [not] figure out, oh, wait, it's connected really heavily too. Those are my passions these days.

[1:34:57.8]

NA: Could we talk about the poverty piece a little more, especially as it relates to your community? Like, how does this church reach into those sectors?

[1:35:06.4]

BC: They're naïve. Not all of them. Some are woke. [laughs] The school where my child goes is John Lawrence Elementary. It's one of the newer elementary schools on this end of Trinity. When it started, they told me that about 2 percent of the student population received free or reduced lunch, which is part of how the federal and state measure the economic needs of a school community. It's how they decide whether you're entitled to school or not, what type of financial investment is also required. So while it's not great to have free and reduced lunches, there's certain scale that if you got 'em, you want to report 'em because then you can get more money to do more services that are needed. So this community—and I don't have the period of time; I want to say it's under two decades, it might be fifteen years—has gone from a 2 percent free and reduced lunch program to 48 percent.

[1:36:03.9]

NA: Wow.

[1:36:05.1]

BC: Now, if I was talking about 2 percent of the community had the flu to 48 percent had the flu, that's epidemic. It's way beyond epidemic, and World Health Organizations would be flying in here with copters and people in white suits and other things. But that's poverty, so we don't do it the same way. First off, very few members of my church have heard that. Secondly, when they do, I keep hearing them offer tired platitudes about what they can or can't do. But there's no new ways or recourses being offered to say, "How do we influence this?". It's certainly not—when you're in episodic behavior, you need systemic change, not individual change. You need something that's much more muscular and broader and reaches further, right? But we don't have any of that. There's no infrastructure or even diagnosis happening at that level, other than what the teachers know.

Then last year in North Carolina, or not last year, but since the new legislature's been voted in, they've gone to persona non grata. I mean, we haven't given them raises. We gave the new teachers some money by taking the money out of the educational retirements of the older teachers and made it look like "We're helping you." So we're burning out the people who know the truth of what's happening in our schools and making them feel more and more jaded to where they go to other school environments. But that's the first place to do an assessment. If I've heard right, and I think I have, you decide how many prisons you're going to need in the future based on how many kids graduate third grade in the local school. Apparently those two statistics are perfect corollaries. However many graduate third grade will tell you the remaining population

will be in prison later in their adult life. So that gives you a forecast of what you need for prison building.

[1:37:55.0]

NA: Wow.

[1:37:56.1]

BC: I know, right? So those expressions are there to a point where not only do sociologists believe it, but they've changed the way that governmental structures work. It's a measurable event. These are not accidents or events that are unpredictable. They are statistical events that are not anomalies. So we know that the outcomes are there, and we need to start figuring out what a large-scale platform is to either prevent or fix the social ills that are going to happen when that many people who are economically strapped come through. And yet there is no conversation at that at all, almost un-acknowledgement, like you're making up the numbers. Like, there's this push certainly within the large community to discount at every level just even the initial values, let alone strategies to try and fix it.

Okay. So another one of the indicators that I would think is just—you know how some people say, "Oh, you do statistics, but I use the eye test." So here's my eye test. I live in a parsonage four doors up the street on the right, and almost every night, and sometimes multiple times a night, I hear a fire engine going by. So I've talked to the local law enforcement and fire folks, because there are—I'll tell you why in a minute. I ask them why you're going up and down. They say most of the time it's because of a drug overdose. So I'll ask these professionals that work in this environment why, and they say because of poverty. I'm like, "Poverty? How do you have money to buy drugs?"

They say, “Because then when you go into the brain changes that happen with drug abuse, it gives you the two things you want. One is release from whatever mental or physical pain you’re avoiding, and the privilege to no longer act in a moral way to get your drugs.” So you can sell or steal whatever you need to be able to liquidate to get your next drugs. So it unhinges you. It culturally provides the opium necessary for the correct way for the human to thrive the right way in a society in a cultural event.

So I know through my eye test, or maybe ear test, to say there is another thing going on. I’ve seen advertisements of people learning how to get Methadone [possibly Naloxone, not Methadone]. And they are now advertising on pages, which somebody is making money selling Methadone [or Naloxone] or getting it out, or otherwise it wouldn’t be telling me on an overhead that I should talk to my community about making sure I have a backup of Methadone [or Naloxone]. But they are advertising all the way from New York to where I am that we should have Methadone [or Naloxone] to help inhibit drug overdoses, because they’re apparently happening often. There’s an episode. These are measurable events on a geographic scale, on a social scale. I mean, it’s real data, it’s fabulous data of terrible things that are happen.

So let’s talk about cops and police for a minute. We idolize them and have made them new civic heroes. Even this last week when we were doing a retreat here for the program with all the kids here working in the community, we’ve been theming it off the vows of discipleship and Methodism, which is to use all your gifts, your graces, your—hang on—prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, five things, as a part of serving the church through the Methodist system. When we got to service, the things that got lifted up and actually were deposited on my altar were an American flag and a fire truck

and a police car, and immediately it looked idolatrous to me, because it's supposed to be the table where Jesus dies and nothing's supposed to be there. Maybe the candles representing the life of Jesus as man and eternal. But I saw the American flag there and the two other things. I'm like, "Oh, great, we've rebuilt the altar now to worship these people." But by doing so, we don't have to say they're real people or treat them in the humanity that they deserve either, so that I'm just not down with that. I'm not ready to let them be the next idols. Instead, I want to be a partner with them and also hold them to the same criticisms that you and I are held to and how we treat others.

But if they are saying that there's an episode or an event happening and that it's akin to poverty issues, then that would tell me, hey, that's real. But right now, if someone comes to my church and says, "Brian, I'm having a poverty-related issue," and the code language is, "I need help with gas," I have a written statement somewhere in one of my many forms that you see over there that says the limit to where I can help someone is to give \$10 for gas. Now, here's the funny part. If they drive here and their car dies here, how's my giving them \$10 for gas going to do anything? I mean, say their car ran out of gas. Here's \$10. If you wad it up short, drop it in your gas tank, maybe it'll give you enough fuel to—you know. This isn't *Back to the Future* where you can throw anything in the food processor and it'll turn it into gas. I mean, that's our church's general economic expression of disconnect, and it's still we are spending a quarter of a million dollars here and I can't give out \$10 unknown.

What if a guy goes, "Dude, I'm having a drug event and I need more to make me feel better," or says nothing, "I don't care. I just need ten bucks"? I should be able to give that stuff out like it was fallen leaves, because it would take a lot for me to lose, to make

any part of hurt. But we're so tightfisted to our position of the poor, people that we think are taking advantage of us, that we don't look at the \$250,000 I spend a year.

That tells me that my community is emotionally impoverished, that our hearts have gotten too tight. So there's another form of poverty going on. Their souls have gotten the same thing that causes a heart attack. I think they've gotten so caught in the plaque of being who they are and unflexible, that we're on life support here.

[1:44:31.3]

NA: In this community in particular?

[1:44:34.5]

BC: Especially in this church dealing with community. I mean, there are signs of poverty everywhere, but I've given you two of them, drug use and abuse, to the point that we hear sirens and make—I mean, the sirens are actually screaming. This is Simon and Garfunkel's song, "Hello darkness, my old friend." It's happening! And then food shortages, I mean everything that we know tells us that we're in the system of down and yet we don't seem to be reaching out very hard or very well, or we seem to be very almost intentionally ignorant about it or pretending it's not happening.

[1:45:08.3]

NA: Right. It's more convenient that way.

[1:45:12.5]

BC: It is overwhelming. I mean, part of my ability in talking to you in this just torrent of words is the fact that I'm unloading too. I mean, I've been absorbing and thinking about it. None of this is new to me. I do worry about how much am I then later going to move from here and look back and a South Indian doctor is going to have



looked, or someone, a specialist from another world, has seen my world so nakedly and said, “This is what’s happening. This is what needs to be done.” I mean, you don’t want to be that type of oblivious in your own native country. But it’s so hard to live here and feel like I’m being duplicitous about the event but yet sustaining a community that, to me, is living in a different current from the one that the world—Jesus didn’t stay inside temples. He was outside all the time.

Did I answer your question?

[1:46:07.4]

NA: Yeah, that was—I’m still processing it all. I’m particularly thinking about I heard a message once about how man as this being with many facets, spiritual, emotional, physical, and when one gets out of tune, it throws the others out of tune. And I think that expression is explicit in drug overdoses, how that happens. But I guess I’m also curious about how—like, what other faces that might take in terms of physical breakdown, because if we’re thinking about widespread medical issues and we take on this view of man as multidimensional, and it’s all interrelated, so if we’re going to solve health issues, then you have to solve spirit issues as well.

[1:47:23.7]

BC: I’ve been watching the medical community have a tough time with that, because I think what you just said is very true. Spiritual, but so often spiritual gets hidden as religious, or the words look like they’re interchangeable when I don’t think they are. I actually value both of them. I love my religious behavior. I love washing my hands when I go potty, of brushing my teeth at the end or beginning of the day. Those are religious behaviors because they’re based in the belief that that will make my life better, and if

they're done over periods of time progressively. That's all religion really is, is a structured practice over time. The spirituality is the fluid that goes within it, right? It's the what am I practicing, how do I effect my beliefs in growing who I am internally? And I love the idea that spirituality comes in alongside medicine to help with the healing process, that they cooperate.

But sometimes medicine hears the stupidest things from religion, an expression of religion, like "We don't believe in science." [laughs] That's a real quick way to really piss medicine off, because like it or not, but they've really worked hard on the scientific principle, and I'm kind of down with it too. There is something to be said about observation and measuring and having—I mean, I like to have evidence. I like evidence. I'm big on evidence, especially evidence and measurable equations.

So we've done some things to make us look a little unworthy of sharing in medical healing, but good spirituality is not just a partner but it's co-sympathetic. They help each other. Each makes the other stronger. I've watched the double-blind studies of what happens when we pray for someone enough. Maybe they know about, maybe not, and that was their version of healing. Like, there is maybe some suggestion that being prayed for whether you know it or not might actually improve your healing. Well, that's kind of cool all by itself, but especially if you're a person of faith that you live longer. I mean, there's some things that suggest scientifically that there are values of faith or spirit in practice and acknowledging as a wholeness that if you're—I'm trying to think of—do you ever watch any TV?

[1:49:45.4]

NA: Yeah.

[1:49:46.5]

BC: Okay. So right now *Luke Cage* season two is out. It's awesome. Misty is the main detective in this story, and she lost an arm last season, and she's talking to one of the karate masters about the fact that physically her arm may be gone, but spiritually it's still there, that she's still a whole person. And they have to acknowledge that she lost a physical member, but she can still honor it or it can still be a part of her practice. Now, they're probably going to give her a synthetic arm that probably kicks ass, right? [laughs] I mean, I haven't gotten to that part in the series. But it helps her to remember that she's thinking of herself as a whole person, even though something is gone, that the limb represented something else, and the something else has not left. It changes some of her capabilities, but if she could think of herself as a whole person in that environment, she's going to do a whole lot better than being a victim. The spirit has still got to be a part of the assessment and that you are giving someone a wholeness out of that. That's good medicine. You're not going to regrow the arm, maybe one day we will, but the psyche can also be healed from that, the sense of self and ability and being loved and being lovely.

Sorry. Maybe I went a little too far with my *Luke Cage* stuff, but—

[1:51:00.8]

NA: No, I like the analogy.

[1:51:02.5]

BC: —it's cool. I mean, heart, yeah.

[1:51:06.0]

NA: So with your experience in chaplaincy, do spirituality and medicine, do they cooperate well right now? What would you do to put chaplaincy—

[1:51:18.8]

BC: So healthcare is having a tough time, right? I mean, first off, every day you wake up there's a new plan for the overall national health of the people. In the middle of all that, then our state legislation is doing loopholes and trying to break one system or choose for it not to be invested. In the middle of all this, there are some very wealthy healthcare systems that are doing well or at least have created places where lots of money goes lots of places. But they're still having to say, "How do we get the most resources out of what we get?" We are an unmeasurable group. Let's say I fill in my chaplaincy report after seeing you. All right. So you're a great patient sitting in there, and I've gone in and said, "Did my interaction with them make a noticeable difference?" How am I measuring that? Did they look happier?

[1:52:06.0]

NA: Is that the first question?

[1:52:07.3]

BC: It can be.

[1:52:07.6]

NA: Is that part of it?

[1:52:09.4]

BC: It can be. There's a whole series. There's like ten or twelve.

[1:52:11.6]

NA: That seems blatantly asinine.

[1:52:12.9]

BC: Well, they're trying to quantify something that I even advocate may not be quantifiable.

[1:52:19.3]

NA: Right. That's what I'm saying.

[1:52:20.4]

BC: But there are some possible resolutions. First off, if you have asked for a chaplain and I come, I've already met the very first level of care. You wanted it. It came. That's like saying, "I want a Coke," and it came. I mean, that's terrible. I'm not a Coke, right? But it means that a patient's needs have started being addressed, and when your needs are addressed, you're being cared for.

Okay. So you want a chaplain. Now, the chaplain may find that you want to talk about end-of-life care, which means you've come to place of talking about something that's going to help the healthcare industry a ton. So I can either have that conversation or channel it into the right directions. Or you're having other big issues come up in your mind that you want resolved.

Now, if you have someone come near you and talk about those things, as you unknot those, we will find that you also will get less belligerent about taking your meds, agreeing to sleep when you need to be asleep, or you will probably not will have pestered a nurse one more time. One less time the button's pushed means the nurse is on the floor longer for another patient that needs the care. So those are all measurable outcomes, no matter how slight, over a period of time that enhance the medical experience and hopefully that of the patient.

But, yeah, we get down in the weeds about some of them. Like, one of the things I say, “Did I address the patient, the family, both, neither?” What would coming into a room and addressing neither be? Well, I’ve done that. It’s called staff. When a staff member is in crisis because of the way someone died, a lot of times I’ll come in the room with the decedent. See, I’m adopting the medical words. I just shifted, right, [demonstrates]. I’m a chaplain. I go into the room with the decedent, and for my own value, I don’t always know their faith background, but I’ll say a prayer, almost always for the nurses and the environment they did not get into because they’re uncaring individuals, but their giant bleeding hearts have had to learn how to protect themselves and their tenderness. But I’ll say to them, “Do you want to pray with me?”

And if they give me enough kind of head nods of what type tradition they are, I can speak in whatever tongue they need. I can speak good Southern Baptist, pray for their soul and mention Jesus a lot. I can go Catholic and use more of an Almighty Father and kind of a distance language. I can be Methodist, hold hands. [laughs] I mean, I’m okay with being sincere and yet that also being another dialect that I use. But ideally, if I’m praying with a nurse, it means they have suddenly gotten personhood in that space. Instead of being an extension of healthcare medicine like a tool, they get to be a person, which doesn’t always get acknowledged. It means I’m caring for their soul, too, and helping them find a healthy way to grieve, that they’ve cared for someone and, however they diagnose what they did, that there is a job that is completed so they can move on to what’s next.

So, again, that’s a point of long-distance measurement, like how long does our staff stay here? What are the relationships between one another? Do we feel whole and

supported here, or am I looking for a job that's going to pay me more and go somewhere else? I mean, job satisfaction matters, but that's a very minute measurement. These days, I find chaplaincy almost having to advocate for itself to tell people, "We belong here. We have value."

The other thing, though, that's making it hard is that chaplaincy comes with so many flavors. Like, if you get us ordained, we're ordained in a tradition, and depending on what type of tradition, we don't always play well with others. So what happens when a Mormon, a Muslim, or a Jew walk into the bar—[laughs]—walk into my hospital and need healthcare that I can provide that is unbiased, that is supportive of who they are as a person? Not all of us have got such a world view from such a native place. I'm absolutely a geographically routed East Tennessee-language Jesus lover. It makes me a pretty unique feature, right? I've come from a very specific place. You have to really test me out to see that I've hit a pretty broad universal view from where I started. You couldn't take it for granted at any level. So when medicine is looking broadly not at Brian Cornell or my expressions but just where chaplains come from, which is ordained ministry, they almost think, "Couldn't we build this better, find someone who believes in things and expresses things, and call them a doctor or a spiritual therapist?"

We're almost too big a bugaboo to be helpful sometimes, because if I come in and if I put my hand on your head and say this, "By the spirit of Christ, you're healed. You don't even need chemo anymore," and there are religious expressions that will say that, then I am not helping you. I'm not helping them. That's a lawsuit waiting to happen.

So I find, especially the UNC Health System, not so much in the Duke or in Baptist, but I'm not sure yet, I see UNC running their chaplaincy corps more as still

necessary but a distasteful part of what they have to offer. In their chaplaincy department, people have gone from head of chaplaincy or some of the words that used to have more religious names, chair of the department, to where the one here at High Point Regional that's being run by UNC hospital, the head chaplain's called the manager of the department. I could be a manager at Walmart, I could be a manager at Target, and none of those makes me feel very good about myself. So when I see that and think that's the treatment of a whole division of people committed to love and live and to talk about spiritual things, it just shows tone deafness. It's really bad.

I've liked in the past some of UNC Health System stuff because they don't always come from trappings of religiosity, but I think that's one of their shortcomings. I find them being tone deaf. I'm not surprised that they've, I think, harmed the chaplaincy department to where all the blood said, "This is a good time to retire," and the new blood said, "Let's find other jobs." They're frustrated.

They've even turned the chaplaincy enrollment and training process over to general volunteer services, and I'm not walking in on that. I don't think of myself as a volunteer, and then maybe that's my ego, but I feel like the training that I'm given, which is a master's program level of training, it's a professional degree, requires the same level as if you had another professional, a master's-level person coming, saying, "I'm giving you my skills for free." That's not Gerontology Gerard, who is sixty-five himself and thinking, "Sooner or later I'm going to be dying or dead. It would be nice to model care to other people before I get in there and need it from others." Some of those people are the salt of the earth. They're great. I mean, the volunteer programs can be great, the old Candy Striper programs are gone and taking the place of these, a lot of the volunteers run



a lot of the hospital, saving the hospital money. But I don't want to be treated by it as another volunteer with volunteer perks. Or if I go so many times then maybe I'll be able to touch some of your wellness material. I'm like, "Dude, you don't even know why I'm there." So that's why I dis-enrolled from the chaplaincy program here and started looking for other counties potentially if I have more time.

[1:59:34.7]

NA: If you had a quick fix, the power to make the fix, to help with that—

[1:59:46.7]

BC: Golly.

[1:59:48.5]

NA: I know it's such a multifaceted issue, but like reconnecting those two things seems—

[1:59:53.3]

BC: Yeah, I think so. Okay. So as much as these dang things overlap, I mean, golly. Okay. So Wake Forest Hospital used to be bad, this hospital, and still is, and they have a whole religion department. They built a seminary in the least smart time to build a seminary where it makes no money or sense to have a graduate-level department building ministers when the whole program's in a decline and most people are going to say, "Why do you have a seminary, a theology department? Like, we're getting less and less students."

But since they did it, wouldn't it be cool if they're talking about all the ways that chaplaincies can have measurable models of outcomes, scientific proofs of health? What if we did monetize all their dadgum activities and start figuring out where it's an asset or

start thinking more? Why not, golly, ask one of the five or six different larger programs who are out there to fund it? I mean, I'm trying to think who those different groups are, but there's the Reynolds program that likes to give money sometimes to religious development that's not Methodist and likes to give it back to its own university and own healthcare system. I mean, that would be a good one to say, "How about if we start stripping down and build two comparable models, one of which is not cared by chaplaincy and one that is? And then let's have certain outcomes, like what is staff retention?"

Or, shoot, just take the data out there. It's just some nerd going back in a cubicle. This is a flunky from plunk—that's not what it's called—a data-dive service, one of the mega data-dives that they now use for security, going into the resource, say, "What is the overall wellness and turnaround date and hospital stay, amount of care provided by people in chaplain departments and unchaplained?" Then can we go a little further and find out if they're minister-visited, because that also counts, and did we let the minister visit? There are some places that are so preventative of letting you know who's in the hospital, you can't get to them. I come in and say, "I'm here for Johnny Spear," and they look at the records because of HIPAA, and they say, "Johnny Spear's not here."

And I say, "But his daughter said he is, and she's here telling me to come visit."

"Sorry, there's no Johnny Spear here."

I find out his name is really Eustace, and they've entered the name Eustace Spear, but because I don't know his medical name or his Christian birth name but I know his colloquial name, they won't let me see him. Some hospitals have that tight a regimen and are either so distrustful or dysfunctional with how they're functioning with clergy, which,

remember, we come from “I got a middle-school education” to “I have a doctor[ate],” right? So you’ve got to speak our language a little bit.

Even the ones that come in slick suits and hair that’s slicked back and go, “I pronounce you healed in the name of Jesus,” I mean, if they have a client/member who receives that as part of their healing process, you’re letting that person get to that person as an opportunity for relationship that offers healing and hope. You’re not hurting yourself.

[2:02:51.8]

NA: Right. It’s opportunity and it seems like it could be obligation as well.

[2:02:55.5]

BC: Ought to be. Okay. So I’ve gone all the way from “He’s not here,” which it used to be a great bar over in UNC. Is it still there?

[2:03:03.3]

NA: It’s still there.

[2:03:04.0]

BC: [laughs] All the way from, “He’s not here,” to, “I’m so glad you’re here, and since you are, would you also be willing?” Those are extraordinary. First off, there’s a whole lot of high trust. You know who I am and you know my capabilities. I’ve come in to care for my patient, and the nurse or the adjunct staff has looked around and said, “This person’s capabilities and articulation of faith is strong enough that it won’t hurt us,” right? I play enough by the rules, considered by here that I’m not going to do any damage and yet I can provide an opportunity.

So when I come into an ICU unit, which is, as you know, one of our best protected medical environments, and needs to be, they say, “He washes his hands the right amount of time. He does not get in their face. There’s no physical contact if not necessary, but exudes a warmth and acceptance of the patient.” So they will redirect me every once in a while, say, “While you’re here, would you see so-and-so?”

The two places where that blessing has hit me the most has been in ICU unit. I’m there for “A” and yet the staff recognized either I have—they already know I have chaplaincy skills or I use them, that I’ve come as a local pastor, and say, “Would you do this?” That’s a gift. And the other place is in the birthing department, because hospitals double down, anymore especially, on exposure of mothers and infants to unknown—or, you know, John Q. Public. I’m already in a protected environment that I’ve had to come through with password, with badge, and/or both, but when I come in and do something with this and then the staff sees me and feels comfortable enough says, “There’s a situation going in here. I think you can help.” That is like you’ve got the gold medal that day.

But that allows for a high level of the staff to be self-informed and actionable. In other words, it probably means he or she didn’t have to qualify it through a larger leader, that either they are the floor leader or they’ve gotten enough trust out of the medical establishment or powers that be that they can make an assessment and say, “This is what’s good for my patient.” And they’ve gotten a deep-enough relationship with who we are to say, “You are also a help to this.”

[2:05:16.4]

NA: And they're exhibiting a kind of agency by going around the establishment in that way.

[2:05:22.4]

BC: Yeah, I'm not used for—I mean, I don't think I've ever made a church member out of a clinical visit. I don't think I ever have. And sometimes people say, "Where you from? Where are you?" And I like that. It means they care enough to track me down, but I've never yet had a patient in twenty years that I've cared for on the floor walk into my sanctuary. Lord, I'd love that, because you know if they came to your church they'd say, "Your pastor saved my life," or something close. I mean, it was enough to make them think that that was foundational, right?

[2:05:51.1]

NA: Right.

[2:05:51.6]

BC: And no matter what they think of you locally, that would preach pretty loud. "Ha, ha, I give up the sermon that day." [laughter] You'd enjoy that one, right? But so that's never happened, not that I'm aware of. But what it does mean is it cements my relationship with the staff person, that I am now a person of value to them and can continue to offer ministry there, right, that I can buoy them up, that we become a team. And I really am impressed. I mean, the delivery area, the OB/GYN area in Appalachian, where I was most recently, was not only a tight unit, but if they had a lost baby very often, man, the whole place came to pieces.

One time I responded as the on-call chaplain and went to them and said, "Can I be of help to you?"

And they were like, “We’re so glad you’re here.” I almost got pulled in. Remember, I’m white, kind of weird-looking male, bald head. I’m hopefully paternalist. I show some skills at being a father. But everyone in there is female, even the doctor is female, which is, I think, a good expression of ministry where it’s needed. But they let me come in and be a resource because they were grieving that they had not saved a baby, and I got to be with them and not say good or bad but just to pray and say, “The god that is for all of us, we ourselves don’t feel full and we are not content about this, but we ask for your presence anyways and certainly for the mother who we’ve tried to express at every level our love,” something like that.

I was short, sweet, didn’t linger, but what a gift, because otherwise I have no value. But they said, “Well, we think whatever you’re carrying has something to add here.” That really happened because of the chaplain who is the head chaplain there, the chair of the department, is phenomenal. So they’ve learned through her to trust the chaplains already. They go to her. I mean, I really think she’s one of those glue players they talk about on NBA teams where the team person themselves does not score goals, make blocks, but when they’re in, everyone’s stats go way up. I mean, how do you measure that? That’s kind of an eye-test event. But she’s community liaison, patient liaison, staff, and loves her job.

[2:08:07.9]

NA: And how do you build that? The other question—[laughs]

[2:08:13.5]

BC: Yeah, it’s almost unbillable. It’s almost entirely unbillable. Or what they really almost ought to do is place them into Human Services. Start Human Services and

then remember maybe what we—so start with staff support. I've met industrial sites that keep chaplains on, especially if you employ a lot of Hispanics. The mills environment in Gastonia, there was a mill that was large enough and hired enough folks Spanish-speaking that they got a Cuban chaplain, and he was a phenomenal liaison not only for the mill, but he would come to our clergy meetings in the area and talk about advocacy for people. So he was helping make his workers' lives better because they were being recognized as real people even as Hispanics or maybe as non-English-speaking people first. It also meant that we kept looking at whatever mill that was, that it was a place of respect, that it was almost operating in a faith point. I mean, they show up at clergy meetings and go and suddenly we're paying attention to that mill. There's something cool going on there, right, that the millworkers, that the mill employers would have their humanity in needs.

Now they might have said, "No, we just see it as a more prosperous workforce." I don't know. But I think they must have known at some level that they—I think what happened is they probably were measuring rates of retention, sick days, and the ways that families got back together. I bet they probably had a measurement, several of them, that said we're getting value out of this, enough to pay thirty- to forty-thousand dollars a year to keep this person in doing what they do. Or maybe even half time. That's a perfect what we call tent-making ministry. I'm here maybe half time and then maybe work at a mill, and that's a great symbiotic—

So I don't know how you bring it into all the hospitals, but I know that chaplain or that piece seemed to vibrate well within human resources. I think patient resources is where we started, but maybe we ought to go the other direction. I've thought about it a

couple times. Maybe our side program is working with the patients, and maybe where you measure us to figure out billing is the same way you would in Human Resources, because how do they figure out billing? I mean, you've decided it's important. I know they have employee wellness programs that are outstanding in most hospitals anymore, because they've realized if we want to tell people be healthy, we need our staff to be healthy. Plus, by the way, it drops our insurance costs, which they had the same problem we do. Unless they have a retention problem and everything else, if we're dealing with diabetes of their nurses or doctors, then what have they got? Or worse, undiagnosed alcoholism in a professional that then gets caught in an operation. What if we lean them toward healthiness and they don't become alcoholics? [laughs] Win, win.

So this will be in the Human Resources department, I think, probably to start about re-implementing chaplaincy, I think, and then I think you loan them out. So the other place, the hospital I was working I liked, is they are the first part trained for talking not just about hospice ministry, but what is the other one that when you have long-term suffering for prolonged periods of time and there's going to be drugs to deal with coping with the suffering that's not—

[2:11:29.0]

NA: Palliative?

[2:11:29.7]

BC: Palliative care. They become the advocacy for palliative care, which I don't know why that wouldn't be good yet. Does that make sense?

[2:11:36.9]

NA: Mm-hmm.



[2:11:37.2]

BC: It seems like all religious expressions that sustained community ought to have some conversation about palliative under—you know. What do you do with a suffering god? [laughs] What do you do with a god that allows us to suffer? What do you do with a god where there's pain in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are all kind of in the palliative discourse of "This is something I have to keep dealing with, and it's not going to go away, but how do I at least find a way to thrive beyond it or to maintain a life that has value?" I think that's within the discourse pretty easily of a clergy, a well-trained clergy.

So, palliative care, end-of-life care, and, ideally, and I've seen hospitals doing this—they're doing it in Baptist; they had scholarships for this—they want us to go out and find out from congregations, "Will you be a first-, second-, or third-tier congregation?" A first-tier congregation is one that says, "We want to put a nametag on you that says who you are, that you're given permission to park in one of the two clergy parking spots, and tell you about what type services we have."

Now, that's all good for a hospital, because, first off, they just took the herd of cats that pays the least attention to rules, right? I mean, I'll even have to decide if I want to pay Social Security. That's me as a clergy. I used to getting my way and do what I want. You've suddenly slapped a nametag on me that identifies me to the staff so they can know who I am and who I think I am. Maybe if I need be, I can be sidelined, but it also means if you want to show some sort of deference and know that I'm a possible team player in the room, I'm tagged. I'm tagged. You might even have a magnetic strip on there that's tracking me and know if I'm in the right place or the wrong place. You've

taken me from parking all the places where maybe I shouldn't, put me in two spots, and you've told me the rules. Along with now if my church member says, "Oh, man, my rheumatism is getting up, I got to go to Jo-Jo's still and get my walking medicine," and a pastor who's so tired of the drunkenness that this person has, the rheumatism's real but they're tired of their self-medicating with a still, says, "I remember there being a special rheumatism department over at the hospital. Why don't you go check it out?" So they become advertisements for the healthcare system. So that's stage one.

Stage two is would I as a chaplain show up in an emergency case and be able to provide extra services? The nice thing about that is you sign up for it, but the chaplain gets to decide whether they want to or not. So since our chaplain there was multi-gender expression, and you say, "Well, women can't be ministers, certainly no gay ministers," then she can say, "Huh, I don't think you're really stage two, because I want someone who's going to work with me, see the responsibility I have here and be able to build me up and not harm the role and responsibility that I have as administrator."

Role three for a congregation was super cool because there we say we're committed to mutual healings. We will get ourselves trained to where we can be in positions to take patients to and from hospital visits as needed or medication visits. Certainly we will open ourselves up to be a possible congregation that support and care for those, but neither will we require nor expect. In other words, our expression of who we are, our evangelism becomes the behavior, not a word event. And since they have found through some studies that church-cared members tend to live longer than those that live in isolation, which you could say in almost any society—like rock-'n-roll band-ers that travel. I mean, pick a society. But if you can identify a group and have measurements

out of them, you find the people that are isolated or maybe new to a community that can get adopted by a church will have a longer opportunity to thrive because they have all these people to help. “Granny, did you take your medicines tonight?”

“Oh, dear, I’m so glad you reminded me. I forgot completely, making this apple pie.”

So I think they figured something out at Baptist, wherever they’re giving the scholarships to all of their community systems, and they were paying for someone like me, a clergy who understood chaplaincy enough, or a chaplaincy understood speaking to congregations, to go out and enroll them, and we were enrolling congregations to be first, second-, or third-tier participants. The response was outstanding.

I’ve been apparently thinking about a lot of this for a long time, just dying for this poor young man to come and ask me. [laughter]

[2:16:08.1]

NA: No, that’s great.

[2:16:08.5]

BC: I mean, I think about this all the time, I really do. I don’t even know. I haven’t done chaplaincy for a year, but, yeah, I dig it. I love watching it. I really wish I could get into all the numbers. I mean, there’s a part of me that wishes someone made me go to class and I knew where the—you know, I want to go in and look at the healing charts, say “visited by a chaplain,” not me. I want the deep data, and I know it’s out there. I just don’t think anyone’s looking at it. I’m almost certain it’s out there.

[2:16:32.6]

NA: I mean, it must be.

[2:16:34.9]

BC: Has to be. I recorded form upon form, form, form for seven years in Appalachian, so, okay, I wasn't getting paid at Appalachian because I just wanted to do it, and at first I said, "Okay, I'll let you pay me." She put me on the payroll and everything else. Then I stopped filling out my financial forms because I didn't—you know. It's my way of saying, "You've hired me, you can fire me, but I still don't have to do this for money." And part of my attitude was, "If I get paid, will I lose the fun? Like, this is my gift. I'm donating it. You're trying to kill it paying for me," right?

And I love that lady. She gave me a lot of—she's like, "First off, I don't care whether you get paid or not, but I care whether I do. If you don't value yourself, what are the chances they'll keep valuing me?" You know?

[2:17:16.8]

NA: Okay, sure.

[2:17:17.7]

BC: "Secondly, I do value you, and I want this position to keep being valued, and I don't think you understand how this works." I had to then fill out forms so that they could trace the numbers I was on campus and then how many patients did I see. That's a real value. It's in the logs. I mean, even if I didn't fill out a timesheet, she had to fill one out behind me and kind of guess at it. But I still swiped my swiper somewhere coming in and out to tell them I'm around. I filled out forms with data points all over that told what I did. They've got the how long this person lived, what type of illness, did it extend them beyond the statistical norm? We've got all the data. Someone just needs to nerd out and say, "I want to go look at it for a while." I mean, you don't even need a big sample size to

start getting what we would call regional data. It's there. But maybe people just don't have the time or the finance time. But, man, wouldn't it be cool?

[2:18:08.1]

NA: Yeah.

[2:18:09.1]

BC: I mean, and what can you draw from it?

[2:18:10.7]

NA: Yeah. I think you're asking the measurement. We're talking about the intangibles of being a clergyman, too, or a clergyperson, excuse me. So you're thinking about things and you're thinking about a nontangible value and trying to put it into a quantifiable thing, and clearly it's possible, but we've never put those two ideas together.

[2:18:33.6]

BC: Right. And I think we've so long gotten used to the fact it's not possible that we act like it's not, but I don't think that's true in either realm. I would love for science to push back and say, "Everything's measurable, damn it." That's kind of their deal. I've been waiting. I feel like recently they've been kind of soft, too busy saying, "Science is facts of little F's built up over a period of time." Like science did block chain before block chain to block chain, right? Fact is still a fact, whether or not you believe it.

[laughs] Come on. So when did the church say that that wasn't true? I mean, we've been giving science a runaround since Copernicus on, God bless, but sooner or later, why would we keep selling the idea of the perfumes and all the—why would we sell the apparatus of religiosity if we didn't think there's an outcome, even if it's a bad one? And we do. You want a thorn that was a piece of the cross that Christ was sanctified on, I

forget what that's called, selling you a—oh, we've got modern equivalents, but we used to sell these things to people, say like be some sort of spiritual talisman. We still do. "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets or whatever. I mean, we got them in whatever version they are. Have you gone to see such-and-such movie? It's all about—"oh!" These data points have always occurred. Sometimes they just embarrass us, but sooner or later you ought to be able to say, "If I participate with you, how much time do I spend doing what? What are the outcomes we want? Is it happening?"

Today I came in, and there's a little bit of a conversation in this church that we should consolidate our services on a Sunday so that the Vacation Bible School program that's done some heavy work on the week only has one service to come to, and that kind of we as a church can bang it out, like, "Wow, Shazam, Broadway, only one time! Sing all the favorite songs. See it again, your child's favorite crafts. They love Jesus." And the church has the muscle all together at one time to make all the hotdogs and everything they want to to have a good presentation. So not only do you go through worship, but then you get us again, "Aha! Wouldn't you like to be here?" So we consolidate our worship, which means we take two services, one at 8:45, one at 11:00, and put them together. But because we put them together, no one gets dibs. We smash them in the middle where neither exists. So we do it at 10:00 o'clock, so then at 11:00 we're dismissing, you get to go eat lunch, and you go home. I've asked them for heuristic models that say did our tithing go up, which I hate. I mean, whatever. They're still going to pay me the same, and it's never changed before. But did our tithing go up? Did our attendance go up? And, more importantly, did our discipleship go up?

Now, I'm asking a question they don't even have membership values for exactly. But I love those questions because they are answerable. Every one of them is answerable. There's data points for it. So I went looking for them because they've done it for years. So I went back and found out that the general average attendance in this year is 141 between two services, and the average was 90 at one and 51 at the other. But when we did attendance on one of the Vacation Bible Schools, it jumped to 191. So that would suggest combining the two services. Actually, one plus one is more than two. But our tithing model is every Sunday it's \$4,009. On VBS Sunday, it dropped to \$28,000 or to— where's the other? I've got another number; \$2,754. It almost drops by a third. Now, that's a non-perpetual model. What it tells me is your changing the structure of worship accommodates us in a way that is convenient maybe to membership and to people coming from outside, but it does not result in an increased revenue, which increases programs.

And here's the other model that cares. I've never yet found someone who came to VBS after a week and worship and said, "I'm coming back with my child again." That's it, but basic discipleship model. I couldn't even tell you good or bad discipleship, but if you're never there again, it's zip. So I'm flexing back to the church, and we'll get to that email after I'm done with you, of "Here's my evaluative correlations and I have measurements for several of these. I'm not going to move the services from two to one to accommodate you if you can't find that the financing goes up," and that'll speak to the bean counters. They'll be like, "Oh, yeah, why would we do something that harms us by a third?" Even if they thought it was good and convenient for them, the number will bother them at 1,500. I know it will, because they don't like me giving out \$10 to a

person who wants gas out here. That's going to drive them insane. I'm turning them back on themselves. It's awesome. I sat in here and went [demonstrates].

The other piece, though, and I think this is what I want to look at long-term is if you don't have someone return again, you've broken discipleship. And here's the other piece I'm going to tell them. "When you move an 8:45 service and move an 11:00 and someone comes for the first time to one of those places, and you've moved the service, there's a sense of betrayal. They're probably not going to try it again.

The other thing that happens is, if you're an insider and think you're a regular attendee at this church but maybe you've had summer vacation three weeks and got out of rhythm but you know what to do, come to church at 8:45, you'll be fine. They come to church and forget that it's consolidated service, although they might have had several print items come reminding them, but what you've done is told them they're not an insider but an outsider, and they will be hurt and they might not come back, and I've seen that too, especially on an Easter service. Holy God, that was bad.

So then you lose tithers that you've worked on for ten, twenty years, you lose the privilege of discipleship, *and* you've lost a member. Those are what I would call hyper events. There's no way to make that up. That by itself is enough reason to never ever move worship. Now, what you ought to do is always add. So you can do an 8:45, then you can say, "You know what? We're going to do worship at 10:00, then we'll do one at 11:00." I could just have a prayer open at 8:45, barely turn on the lights, someone walks in, I pray with you, thump you on the head, say, "Be healed," or whatever, because I like that.



Then we do the 10:00 o'clock big service, and then during 11:00 we'll do another service if anyone wants to. But in other words, you don't change the culture by taking away, but rather you add to. And then if it's finally meant to be, it will finally accrete. But if they're only doing this every fifth Sunday and there's only four of those a year, this is an unsustainable behavior and it's measurable. There are numbers I didn't have to go back very far for. Attendance and finances are two measurable models in every church.

So I went in there and I want all the numbers, right? But if numbers can tell you that, that's not hard. That was not hard. And I was really drooling over that beforehand, because I could give the church its own datasets back to say, "You can influence this." It will be interesting to see how they flex back, like how much are they inconvenienced in their minds because really what the church is saying at the basic level is, "We've not done that before." I mean, even though it's a new expression in one sense and they're consolidating into one every four times a year, I'm going to say to them, "Here's your datasets. Do you want to keep doing it?" And they've got to decide. What they've been saying to me is, "This is a new expression. This isn't something I've done," to, "Maybe this is the point." Like Jesus, I see him all the way in the New Testament saying, "But I give you a new teaching," right, and he's teaching them new behaviors. Even where the disciples are usually astounded, saying, "Uh, we've not heard that before. You're going to get us in trouble," he still persists. So, Christianity, come on. [groans] Two more reps.

[groans]

[2:26:23.8]

NA: Grow a little bit.

[2:26:24.4]

BC: Yeah. [groans] Flexibility, do some yoga, sun salutation. Namaste.

[2:26:31.6]

NA: Think you're the first pastor to pull data on their church for them? [laughs]

[2:26:36.6]

BC: I don't know. I wouldn't think so. That's a good question. What have others before me done? Data's so good. I mean—

[2:26:46.6]

NA: It does a lot.

[2:26:48.1]

BC: Dude, you just solve problems for yourself, like you don't even go into it. It's stuff I don't know that keeps me up at night. Yeah. Yeah, it's stuff I don't know. Like, if I do a process of making strong disciples of my youth program for twenty years and only 1 percent of them return back to church, what's that data say? I can't project data. I don't know what it's going to do. I know what it's done. I think the church ought to look at that all day long and figure out. I mean, I think we should have a little think tank that just sits in there and nerds out all day for Jesus. They do a little this and burn some incense and pray for each other, and then they look at data all day. Then they come back and say, "Woo-hoo!"

There's something called the Pew Research Association that gives money to do some of that, and then there's the Reynolds program, and I'm trying to think who else advertises on NPR that they're kind of the hippies of the religious set. And I kind of feel like there are several out there. Shoot, Bill Gates these days supports Duke Divinity School.

[2:27:38.6]

NA: Oh, really?

[2:27:38.6]

BC: He's got some money, I've heard. I bet he'd just love to go to Tennessee. I don't know. Let's look at the data, like what's effective church look like? You know, you can still have miracles and look at data.

[2:27:49.5]

NA: Yeah.

[2:27:51.0]

BC: High-five up. I do love the numbers that Jesus puts out, two loaves, five fish, right? And then suddenly he's got remainder ten barrels of leftovers. Like, that's some crazy math. That is not a good dataset. [laughter] Miracle, drop the dataset out right here, aberrance. I need a few more sets. I need more field tests. Or the classic dataset or at least variables of Christianity, one plus one plus one equals one. Holy Trinity. That is some crazy math. That is not stuff that holds up at any level. No wonder the scientists come banging at our doors, go, "Um, no! You can say it, but it doesn't make it so." [laughs] But we've been professing that stuff for two thousand years and somehow we're still convinced.

[2:28:44.8]

NA: And they never blink an eye, do they?

[2:28:46.4]

BC: I know, right? I mean, we say some crazy stuff. I hope I've entertained you some, at least. You've sustained so much here.

[2:28:53.8]

NA: Absolutely, yeah.

[2:28:54.6]

BC: Good. My wife is going to be so happy you did this.

[2:28:56.9]

NA: I'll be listening to this for a long time. [laughter]

[2:28:58.3]

BC: Yeah. I'm twenty years now in ministry.

[2:29:04.0]

NA: You're teasing out some wisdom for the future.

[2:29:06.6]

BC: Maybe, maybe. Will I get a chance to hear this again at some point?

[2:29:09.7]

NA: Yeah, I can get this to you any way you want it.

[2:29:11.1]

BC: I'd love it.

[2:29:12.0]

NA: Yeah, absolutely. Have you talked yourself silly?

[2:29:15.7]

BC: I was already silly. I hope it was worth your time.

[2:29:23.1]

NA: It absolutely was, unquestionably, yeah.

[2:29:24.7]

BC: Well, thanks.

[2:29:27.0]

NA: Thank you so much for bringing me here.

[2:29:28.4]

BC: I hope you still feel like I'm a person of faith. I am. I just carry a little bit—I really am sincere about wanting to see the goodness of God in us and around us. I just don't take myself very seriously anymore.

[2:29:41.0]

NA: I think that's the right way to go, yeah.

[2:29:42.4]

BC: I don't know. I don't know. Maybe.

[2:29:43.7]

NA: You might be the person of faith that some people are looking for.

[2:29:45.4]

BC: I think I am. I'm not sure if I'm in the right place. It's hard to find.

[2:29:48.4]

NA: [laughs] History smiles on the troublemakers, Brian.

[2:29:51.4]

BC: Well, you know there is some serious truth about that. [laughter] Thank you for that remembrance.

[2:29:56.5]

NA: Of course.

[2:29:57.4]

BC: I mean, that is awesome. Well, then I have really got a great potential.

[laughter]

[2:30:02.8]

NA: Is there anything else you want to add before we shut it off?

[2:30:08.8]

BC: No, I'm good. I'm just thankful for the chance, and it's kind of cool. So every once in a while when North Carolina feels like it's taking a few steps back in terms of our heritage, I like to think that some of the deepest pieces that do make North Carolina good are around, and stories are a part of who we are. You think that we've got—okay. So a person who was writing for *Saturday Night Live* is a native of High Point University and won an Emmy for her writing. Some of the best comedians that are out there right now are North Carolinians.

[2:30:41.1]

NA: Really?

[2:30:41.8]

BC: Keeps reminding me that there's need to both tell stories and to use comedy is one of our expressions as a border state, that we are really one of those melting pots still between the North and the South, that we have been a place of great change. Not always great, but entertainers and storytellers come out of places in tumult and places where new stories are being written. They're trying to synthesize and find their way.

So to find a North Carolinian institution supporting a desire to record these stories and to have them be a part of what influences the future, to me is touching some pretty good stuff. I kind of trust storytelling. I call it gospel, right? I want to share gospel. But

sharing a story is one of the best ways to share a little-T truth and have an opportunity for it all to build into a big capital-T Truth and to learn some things. So I love that privilege.

It's been neat to interact with you.

[2:31:35.4]

NA: The privilege has been mine—

[2:31:35.4]

BC: No, no. Thanks.

[2:31:37.6]

NA: —bearing witness to you.

[2:31:39.2]

BC: Thanks, I appreciate it.

[2:31:41.7]

NA: Cool. So I'm going to turn this off.

[End of interview]