WHO AM I
20231112

As a disclaimer I would like to acknowledge that we all have our own stories and our own struggles, this is just mine which I hope will help you to get to know me a little better as we begin this kingdom journey together. Our family, besides my parents, included me and my two sisters. We lacked very little financially. My dad was an excellent provider, and my mother was deeply involved in our family. We grew up in a typical Greek family. If you have seen the movie 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding', that will give you an idea of what my upbringing was like.

The first clear memory I have of church must have been at around eight or nine years old, my mom took me to see Ray Macaulay at Rhema Bible Church. They used to meet in the Constantia Cinema in Rosebank if my memory serves me correctly. I do not remember the sermon or worship, but I do clearly remember a man being healed and getting up out of a wheelchair and a man throwing away his crutches and walking.

Following that experience, my mom took me to a Sunday school at church, together with my cousin Johnny and our sisters. This is where I made my first commitment to Christ. I remember some of the kids spoke in tongues and I could not. It did not worry me at all.

Later, our lives became very busy, and I forgot all about my commitment to Jesus. I always knew that there was something out there for me to do, but I was not ready to change yet. I drifted and ended up in the wrong crowds at school. I played sports every day and used to party as much as my parents allowed.

When I turned sixteen, I begged my parents to buy me a motorbike. They eventually, and reluctantly, gave in and I was on my way. Life grew busier and my newfound freedom saw me going to clubs and drinking. I was once again involved with the wrong crowds, sleeping around, and basically living a life of doing whatever I pleased, no matter the cost.

One Friday night, I went to a Bible study. A young man by the name of John was running it. I have lost track of him now, not knowing what has become of him, but he definitely impacted my life. In time, I had a motorbike accident. I did not even see this as a warning. My bike was so messed up that the bike shop needed six or seven weeks to repair the damage. I, however, walked away with only a few bumps and bruises.

I continued living life on my terms, doing as I pleased, much to my wonderful parents' dismay. After my bike came back from the repair shop, something happened a few days later that I believe saved my life. It is hard to believe but bear with me and hear my story.

I was on my way to yet another party after working at my father's video shop for extra money. As I rounded a corner, I collided with a bus. It hit me head-on. Either the bus driver was on the wrong side of the road, or I was. I do not know. I do not remember much about the actual accident. All I remember from that fateful night was lifting my head, looking down, seeing my left foot dangling straight down and my right foot was sitting at my hip with my knee smashed open. Blood was pouring out everywhere. The next thing I knew I was lying in the surgical theatre in hospital with my mom popping her head in to ask if I was all right. My response was, "A hundred percent. Don't worry."

Later, when I woke up in ICU my hands were tied down and I had pipes everywhere. I could not talk, and I drifted in and out of consciousness. At the time of the accident, there was a

Bible study group meeting in our house, made up of my mother's friends. They began to pray earnestly. A doctor, who had just left his birthday party, had arrived on the scene first. He had been given silk shirts by his mother and he tore them and used them to bind my legs. When he found me, I had lost so much blood that he could not find my blood pressure. That 'coincidence' saved my life. The ambulance which came onto the scene, was going to take me to the JG Strydom Hospital (now the Helen Joseph Hospital). A senior paramedic who was there said that I would die at the JG Strydom Hospital and the only place that could save me was the Johannesburg General Hospital. All these 'coincidences' saved my life.

The doctors whose focus was on saving my life, took out my burst spleen during the first operation. This was 6 hours long. A distant relation, Maro, was the anaesthetist. She told my mom afterwards that the doctors had the saw ready to amputate my leg. She was holding the black bag for the amputated leg. But another doctor came on duty and said, "Hold on, this boy is only 16. Let us not take his leg. I will try to save it." Another 'coincidence'?

Two days after the accident, at 5 a.m., my mother and father got the dreaded call from the ICU unit, the one which they had hoped they would never get. "Mr and Mrs Christie, please come to the hospital immediately. Your son is not going make it!" While my parents were rushing to get ready to come to my bedside in the ICU, a pastor from Zimbabwe, Andrew, called a few minutes after this call. He asked my mom, "Rita, what's happened? I have had a vision!"

My mom told him everything that had happened to me. His vision was very clear, and he shared it. He said, "Rita I saw blood and pain, but the Lord is going to save Andrew for His purposes!" My mother said that the peace of the Lord then came upon her in an incredible way. From that moment on she knew that I was going to be fine. I was incredibly blessed to have parents like my mother and father who cared so much about me, and who sat tirelessly at the

hospital all day, every day. My mom, being the typical Greek mother, decided that the hospital food was no good, so she brought me and others in the ward, food every day.

I spent the next few months in the hospital. I had six operations in the first six weeks. It was during that time that I had a visit from a relative, my uncle Harry. He had been involved in a church and came to pray for me. Again, I committed my life to the Lord. Harry prayed for me, and I felt the Lord touch my leg. Harry said to me, "Right. The Bible says, "Pick up your mat and walk", so do it!" I really believed that I would.

But things went from bad to worse and my leg became infected, and my other leg had to be re-broken four times in order to straighten it. Where was this God who told me to 'pick up my mat and walk'? I began to get angry with God. I spent from July to December 1987 in the hospital, except for a week or two when the doctors felt I should be allowed to go home to spend some time in a different environment. I lay in an orthopaedic bed at home. My mother had to change my leg dressing daily, sometimes more than once because of the infection.

I spent another six months in a wheelchair and struggled to recover. Once I eventually managed to get onto crutches it was wonderful, but then spent around three years on crutches. My right leg just would not heal. After four bone grafts, several pins and plates were put into and taken out of my leg. Nothing seemed to work. I was growing angrier and angrier with God and drifted away from Him again.

It was around this time that I met and fell in love with my wife, Mandy. We met when I was seventeen and she was fourteen. We married six years later, and we have been in love ever since. We have three wonderful children: Joshua, Daniel, and Annah-Faith. I thank the Lord for

my wife's love, support, and encouragement. Mandy and my children are central in my life and are my reason for living while on this earth.

When I was eighteen, my cousin Johnny was killed in a car accident. We grew up as brothers and his death was devastating to all of us. And served to drive me further from the Lord…

On the morning of his death, we went to see a movie. I told him to wear his seat belt and be careful. That night a drunk driver jumped a red traffic light and hit his car. He was killed. This tragedy served to push me further and further from God. I became angrier and angrier.

My father was a wonderful man. He was not without his faults, but he was my best friend. He was a leader in our community and he was the glue that held our whole family together. Not just my mom and my sisters, but cousins, uncles and aunts as well.

Every Sunday we would gather with family for a *souvla* which is a Greek barbeque. It sometimes used to get too much, and I thought, "Do you know what? I could use a Sunday to myself." But the thing was that these family times that my dad organized, were great times of sealing us all together as family. We spent the last three years of his life together. We worked and played together almost every day. I am eternally grateful for that time.

I know my dad loved me a great deal. I shared this in a testimony at our church one Father's Day morning. My Mom came up to me afterwards and said that my dad had always said that as soon as they could do leg transplants, he was going to give me his legs and take mine! He loved me that much. The example that my dad set for me was one of strength, integrity, and love. Nothing was too much for his family.

After twenty-seven years of my mom's prayers, Dad gave his life to the Lord. Hey man, wow! But the Lord chose to take him home only three days after that critical commitment in his life. When that telephone call came through at 5 am it was unbelievable. "Mr Christie, please come through, your dad has been shot…" I asked if he was ok and the policeman's response was, "No. He is dead. Could you please come through?" It was as if my very heart had been ripped out of my chest… my dad, shot? His death left a hole in my life. Who will I call when things go wrong? Who will be there for me? Who is my security and backstop? Who will give me advice?

I got angrier with God after my dad's death. My sisters entered Dad's dry-cleaning factory. He was lying in a pool of blood and covered with a white sheet. I was not allowed to go over and hold him because it was a crime scene. My sisters then had the "audacity" to tell me that he had made a commitment to God. He had accepted Christ in true repentance and for forgiveness for his sins.

I was very angry. What kind of God allows this to happen? After twenty-seven years of prayers, he finally comes back to God and ***bang!*** He is murdered for his cell phone. My anger grew. At a barbeque with friends, one evening, I shouted at God, "Come on! Come down here and fight, stop messing with me and playing games!"

If someone at the table gave thanks to God for the food before a meal, I would get up and walk away from the table. If you opened a Bible close to me, I would get up and walk away. One afternoon, my mom brought a pastor, Wayne (now one of my closest friends), to pray at our pizzeria. I glared at them from behind the counter as they were praying. If you speak to Wayne today, he will remember the day he prayed with a lady in a restaurant with a big Greek glaring at him.

Costa Mitchell, the previous ND and JJohn[1], a pastor, evangelist & author from the UK, came into the restaurant one day for lunch. My mother came over to me and said excitedly, "Do you know who those men are?" I obviously had no idea and when she told me that they were pastors and evangelists, my first reaction was to wonder if religious men were allowed to sit so close to a bar and eat pizza! My mother encouraged me to go over and chat with JJohn and Costa. As I was the host in the restaurant, I reluctantly went over to do that. I was pleasantly surprised to find that they were 'normal' people.

I connected with JJohn immediately. He is also from Cypriot origins like me and also married an English girl. As we began to chat, I found, to my surprise, that we had a lot in common. I enjoyed his sense of humour. As we continued the conversation, I found that I was enjoying him as a person. Then he asked, 'The Question'! "I'm speaking at the Hillside Vineyard tomorrow and I would like you to come. Would you come?"

If anyone else had asked me that, probably at any other time, my answer would have been, "No, definitely not." But our God is a God of set-ups and JJohn coming into my restaurant that day at that time was the perfect set-up. I went along to hear JJohn speak. His message impacted me, and the Lord touched me.

I remember a scripture that the Lord burnt into my DNA all those years ago and it remains a key scripture in my life:

[1] *JJohn has been speaking about the relevance of Christianity since 1975. He is described as a creative speaker with an appeal that transcends gender, age, race, culture and occupation. His much-loved art of storytelling helps people to discover spiritual meaning in a way that makes sense of everyday life.*

Luke 4:18-19 *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, (19) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

This scripture formed and informed my life. Little did I realize that it is a key scripture to the Vineyard Movement,

It took time and a whole lot more screaming, shouting, battling, crying, and moaning at our Father in heaven, but through His infinite wisdom and through His patience with me, I received healing from my pain. The final healing came while I was driving. This was a defining moment in my Christian walk. I had been going to church for a while now. I had completed the Alpha course and was sincerely journeying with the Lord. As I was driving home from a friend's factory in Cleveland, I got onto the M2 westbound highway. As I got onto the highway suddenly, I was not driving any more. I was overcome with a vision. I do not know how long it went on but the vision I saw, changed my life.

I saw my dad, sitting on a wall about door height. He was looking down at me, trying not to smile. It was the kind of smile that you sometimes have when you are just so proud you cannot help but smile. Dad was kicking his feet backwards and forwards, like a child does. The love, healing and peace of God came upon me in the most wonderful way. It was a sacred moment in my life. I find it difficult to share the story for fear of diminishing what I saw and felt that afternoon, in any way. I do not know if it lasted a second or fifteen minutes, but I cried and worshipped God the whole way home.

This is my God. This is your God. I do not know why He took my dad, but I do know that I will see him again one day. I know that I would rather know this fact than have him here with me for another thirty years and then *not* know in such a case, where he would be if he died one day.

JJohn sent me tapes and books as a mentoring tool and within six months of meeting him, Costa Mitchell, the National Director of the Association of Vineyard Churches in South Africa, invited me on a trans-local ministry trip to Zimbabwe. On this trip, I was deeply touched and empowered by the Lord.

On our way back, Costa asked me a question that would change my life forever. He asked me, casually, "So, Andy, why don't you start a small group?" I did not even know what a small group was, but he explained that I could invite friends around to my home and teach them. I asked, "Teach them what?" His answer was that I should register with the Vineyard Bible Institute and, while studying, teach what I was learning.

On returning home I spoke with Mandy, and we decided that this could be something the Lord had in mind for us. We planted the home group in our home. The group grew rapidly, and we experienced a wonderful season of the Lord's favour and blessing. Within about eighteen months, in August of 2002, we went public and launched Willow Hill Vineyard Christian Fellowship in a Catholic College called La Salle College. The Lord moved within our community and in 2006, He opened the door for us to move to the Ontdekkerskruin Dutch Reformed Church where we met until 2015. We then moved to an incredible facility called Oakfield Farm where Willow Hill Vineyard continues to meet.

As I have done my best to live out Jesus' words in my own life, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* Our Lord has shown me His favour and gradually my life motto emerged, "TO KNOW HIM MORE AND AS I TAKE HIS LIFE TO BE MY OWN, TO MAKE HIM known"

I now am the senior pastor right here at CVCF, I lead in our region, serve on the Vineyard National Leadership Team in South Africa, I lead the Vineyard Missions Africa Team, as well as serving on the Vineyard Global Missions Team. And through His hand and blessings I got my Masters in Missional Leadership last year.

I am speaking about this to introduce myself, for you to get to know me a bit, and to show that our experiences often define us. They begin to form our identity. I know, after sixty surgeries, my dad's death and other traumatic life experiences, that these experiences began a work to define me and my identity. My experiences dictated a journey of discovering who I was becoming and how I responded to the world around me.

As I have continued to walk closely with the Lord, many things have changed, and I find I am becoming who the Lord has called me to be. I am in a process of *becoming* and, hopefully, some of what you have heard will help you in your own 'becoming', becoming the person God has called you to be, rather than being defined only by your experiences or your achievements.

Being a person defined by Christ. That is the challenge!