



Defined by the Gospel

*Pastor Bryan White of St. Peter's discusses
imperfection, full and lasting joy, and wearing
his hair down to his shoulders.*

By LEE M. HURLEY Photos by BRIT HUCKABAY

Growing up in Virginia Beach, Virginia, attending an Episcopal church with his parents and sister, Bryan White committed his life to Christ through the popular YoungLife ministry. As early as junior high school, Bryan "heard and responded to the gospel." He attended the University of Virginia majoring in religious studies and was mentored by none other than the Rev. Paul Walker, who had recently arrived from downtown Birmingham's Church of the Advent. Bryan was ordained in 2011 in the Anglican Church of North America and then moved to Oxford, England, to serve at St. Ebbe's church. Fast forward a few years and Father

Bryan found himself as Acting Senior Pastor at HopePointe Anglican Church near Houston where he was serving when called to Birmingham to lead Saint Peter's.

How long have you been serving at St. Peter's? I came here in the beginning of December after a four-month search for their new Senior Pastor.

Tell us about your family. My wife Lauring grew up here in Birmingham and owns her own interior design and renovation company. We have a son, Tucker, who just turned one. We're obviously biased, but we think he's the cutest boy in the world.

How would you describe St. Peter's? We're a people defined by the gospel, or as it has been said: the fact that we're

more broken and flawed than we ever dared believe, and yet at the same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This simply means we're an imperfect and yet joyful group of people united in our common love for Jesus. Something unique to St. Peter's is our size. While no church size is better than others, we've found being under 200 people provides a very strong sense of community. It's the reason we use the language of "church family." Everyone has a meaningful role. We're also blessed with a broad age profile, ranging from the very young to a portion of people who are in retirement.

What do you enjoy the most about your role? Being a priest allows me to walk with both Christian and non-Christian friends through the deeper questions of life; the sort we think of as our head hits the pillow at night: "Is there really a purpose to my life? What really matters? Does God actually exist?" Christianity has a lot to say about these questions, and more.

What is the hardest part about being a priest? No one's job is easy. I do think, though, that clergy face a unique challenge of knowing just how much suffering people go through, privately. Wherever we go, whether it be a restaurant or movie theater, we're conscious that a number of the people there could be in the middle of serious health problems, strained marriages, addictions, financial issues, or other hardships they might never tell their friends about. Walking in that knowledge can be hard, but it's also a privilege to be invited into some of the most tender areas of parishioners' lives.

You lived in Oxford, England, for two years, serving with college students at a local church. What was that like? A lot of people think the higher you go in the ivory tower, the less likely you are to find Bible-believing Christians.

While that may be true in some places, I was surprised to discover the number of Christian professors and students at Oxford, one of the most academically rigorous universities in the world. These were thoughtful people persuaded of Christianity's truthfulness and goodness.

What are some things you enjoy about being in Mountain Brook? My wife and I have loved how friendly people are. We like to eat dinner in Crestline Village and push our son around in his stroller afterward. Everywhere here we go, people are so kind and quick to strike up a conversation. We also love Mountain Brook's natural beauty. The trees and rolling hills are gorgeous, and looking off the hill where we live makes me feel like I'm back in Charlottesville, Virginia, one of my favorite places.

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SPIRITUALITY

What are some of the spiritual challenges we face in Mountain Brook?

The Scriptures say we've been created to look to God for our greatest sense of joy, meaning, and identity. But generally speaking, the more success someone's had, the harder that becomes, and most of us in Mountain Brook have been successful to varying degrees. This means that instead of looking to God for these things, we're way more likely to turn to our jobs, money, beauty, education, or other alternatives. It's not that all these are bad. They can be great. It's just that none of them is strong enough to bear the weight of our deepest longings.

What is something most people don't know about you? I grew up in Virginia Beach, where a lot of teenagers spent their time skateboarding or out in the ocean. Like a lot of my friends, I had hair down to my shoulders. My grandfather spent his career in the Navy and frequently reminded me he'd happily cut my hair for free!

Can you share a favorite Bible verse? I've always loved what Psalm 16:11 says about God, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence, there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures evermore." So, we can find joy and pleasure in God, David says, that is both full and lasting. I realize that if someone's not a Christian, that might sound pretty strange, or even weird. But if you are one, you know there's a kind of joy that runs so deep, it can be experienced regardless of whatever's going on in our lives, even in the midst of our suffering.

St. Peter's is an Anglican church. What does that mean? Anglican means "Of England," and the Anglican Church is a global communion spreading across 164 countries around the world. Anglicanism is also often explained as a tradition composed of "three streams:" Evangelical, Spirit-led, and Ancient. Sadly, "evangelical" has become a highly politicized word. When we say evangelical, we simply mean accepting Jesus' teaching on the urgency to believe in him, along with a high view of the Bible's trustworthiness and goodness.

To say we're "Spirit-led" is to say we value the ongoing role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life, in ways that may seem more subtle and invisible, and still others that might be more supernatural. Finally, we're "Ancient" in that our leadership, worship, and beliefs stand in continuity with those which Christians have been passing down for centuries.

Have you decided on a football team? My wife might have gone to Alabama, or maybe Auburn. I promise it's one of the two. Do I remind people where my allegiances lay from the pulpit? No way!

What are some of your hopes for St. Peter's and this community, specifically? Of course, we want to bless the people of this community by supporting them in their spiritual needs. Before I arrived, St. Peter's had been a place not only of great teaching, but also emotional and physical healing. Our hope is to be a church family that welcomes everyone, especially those wanting to grow in their faith, have their questions taken seriously, or simply experience healing.

At the same time, we also want to contribute to the common good of both Mountain Brook and greater Birmingham. A question we'll always need to ask ourselves is this: if we were to magically disappear from Mountain Brook, would anyone even notice, and if they did, would they care? My prayer is that our presence here would be so meaningful, that if we indeed disappeared, even someone who's not a Christian would say, "It's a shame that church is gone. I might not have shared their beliefs, but I know one thing: our city was better because of them." ■