

My name is Michael Karnes. My wife Amy and I and our daughter Zoey are members of Ebenezer Lutheran Church. I have attended here for about 10 of the last 17 years. Why do I go to Ebenezer?

The short answer is Amy. Thank you.

Pretend like I'm actually done, wait for laughter, walk back to podium

I was born and raised in a cult. The Worldwide Church of God, led by Herbert W. Armstrong. We celebrated the Holy Days outlined in Leviticus 23, including the Days of Unleavened Bread, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. We ate kosher, we kept the Saturday Sabbath, we had a first tithe, a second tithe, and twice every seven years, a third tithe. Salvation was dependent on our works and our devotion to the church and to Herbert Armstrong, which meant we never knew if we were saved or not. We were the one true church and there was no salvation outside of the Worldwide Church of God. Members who left the organization were doomed to the lake of fire. I was 20 when I started learning about what grace truly meant, and I was 22 when I asked God to save me because I knew I could not save myself, and I definitely knew that Herbert Armstrong couldn't save me.

After this, I floated around many churches, looking for the right one that would feed my spiritual needs and one that fit my personality. There were a few disasters along the way, and some options I thank God I turned away from, options that would have put me right back into the frying pan right beside those cud chewing animals I grew up eating.

And then 2004, I found a woman who understood grace the way I do. After Amy and I met, we decided it would be a great idea to date the worst possible people we could find before actually dating each other. God knew we needed this, though, because during this time, Amy and I became very close friends and got to know each other as our true selves. When we finally started dating each other, I went with her to a church denomination I had never tried before, and frankly was a little intimidated by it.

Lutherans? Aren't they Catholics? Don't they worship Martin Luther or something? Don't they have strange services with kooky habits and wear shirt buttons up to their chin bone? Amy assured me, and I quickly learned first hand, that Lutherans are not like that at all. Lutherans simply know that grace covers all sin, and God's love is free for everyone, thanks be to our Savior Jesus Christ.

In 2005, Amy and I were married here at Ebenezer. In 2007, Zoey was baptized here. We participated and served every way we could. Our church extended beyond Sunday morning and beyond the walls of this building. It included knitting groups, youth trips, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, music. Anything we could be a part of, we did. We felt full of the grace of our Lord and wanted to share that with each other and with young people.

So why do we still attend Ebenezer?

We love our Savior whose good news is preached every week and whose grace wins every time I try to one up him with my sin. We love our church family. We feel welcomed and appreciated by our friends. We love the small groups, book studies, and other activities that we can participate in. We love our pastor who loves us and everyone else just as they are. Pastor Kayla loves Zoey and actively works to make this church a place for her and other young people to grow in their walk of faith. I am blessed to be able to share my music with you all, and it warms my heart each time I see and hear you all singing along. We love the ways we can serve the least of these in our community. We truly are the hands and feet of Christ. It doesn't matter if our reach extends to the ends of the earth, or to the one person in that moment who needs a helping hand or a kind word. As the lyrics of Dream Small say, "Just let Jesus use you where you are. These simple moments change the world."