

RANDY WILLINGHAM

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

◆ Pre-Conversion Background



The sport of wrestling was a major consumer of time for Randy over 15 years. He attained state, national, and international honors in competition and intended to coach until he turned toward ministry. This experience provided an opportunity for worldwide travel that began with a trip to Poland when he was 17 years old. He has, for many years, been exposed to people who are very different culturally. He continued competing for 2 years after his conversion, which provided the opportunity to share his faith in many third-world countries and across the United States. At his retirement, when he decided to go to the Harding School of Biblical Studies, he had just received the silver medal in the World Cup Championships. He was a National Freestyle champion, a two time All-American, three time selection for the East vs. West All-Star match, and an alternate for the 1984 Olympic Wrestling team. He was the third winningest wrestler from Oklahoma State University when he finished collegiate competition and almost two decades after eligibility, he was still listed in the top 20 wrestlers for number of career wins. These experiences also resulted in a global perspective while interacting with some of the most dedicated and hard working people in the world.

The relevance of this background is significant but not immediately apparent. The athletic context focuses both a continuous theme surfacing in Randy's life and a very important change. This will be focused later. The experience of Oklahoma State University Wrestling (this link goes to [Oklahoma State wrestling information](#)) also provides two additional relevant factors in understanding Randy's present perspectives. First, OSU gave Randy an experiential awareness of the power of tradition. OSU has won 34 Division One NCAA championships, which is more than any other school in any other sport in the nation. OSU placing second in the NCAA is simply not acceptable ... in spite of Iowa's Dan Gable! The practice room was regularly filled with spectators who were 60 and 70 year old former Olympic champions. And second, it was here that Randy initially



began interacting with the interface between younger men and older men by interacting with former Olympic champions and, at that time, future Olympic champions. The experience was facilitated by a friendship with an elder approximately 50 years older than Randy (see Errol Hunter mentioned below). These interactions provided one of the key factors in his decision to enter full-time ministry.



This history and its relevance to Randy Willingham's identity is significant but complex. The athletic history does a good job of capturing a picture of both weaknesses and strengths in Randy's life.

◆ Religious Background

On his father's side a multi-generational conflict existed between the Baptists and the Church of Christ. His great grandfather wrote a song entitled "The Church of Christ" in Work and Worship, Number 2, published by Will Slater in 1953. The occasion of the song was the death of his Baptist wife. He had left the Church of Christ for the Baptists during the marriage but returned to the Church of Christ after her death with this song as an expression of his "return." Early religious perspectives came through grandparents on his father's side that took him to church. After childhood he quit attending church and did not return until just before reaching the age of 22. After his conversion at the age of 23, he left Oklahoma State University to attend the Harding School of Biblical Studies. During this time he met James Thompson at the Institute for Biblical Studies but decided to attend Harding under the influence of Jimmy Allen and Silas Shotwell. After graduating from the Harding School of Biblical Studies Randy pursued a Bachelor of Arts in Bible and Religion at Harding University, a Master of Divinity in New Testament at Harding Graduate School of Religion, and a Doctorate of Ministry in Preaching and Church Growth at Abilene Christian University.

◆ Religious Mentors, Role Models, and Influential Persons

Randy has experienced a wide range of persons whom he has perceived as mentors, role models, or major spiritual influences throughout his life. **Leroy Willingham**, his grandfather, was the first spiritual foundational influence in his life. Leroy took him to church and would quote chapters of the Bible as Randy would read. Leroy was a very meek man who had memorized much of the Bible when a heart attack limited his ability to work physically. The family stories reported that he used to be a man of a terrifying temper but he had radically changed when he was influenced by a black preacher to give his life to Christ. Theologically, Leroy would be most comfortable with the *Contending for the Faith* publication. **Errol Hunter** was a 70 year-old mentor who baptized Randy and then served as one of three people to lead Randy through a 2-year internship. He served as an elder for almost 50 years and was retired from the eldership in the Stillwater Church of Christ shortly before he died at the age of 82. Errol struggled with whether or not to preach in his earlier life. He decided to retire early to serve as a full-time elder. He was a blessing to many ministers because of his ability to work effectively in

advocating good relations between the minister and an eldership. He had enormous credibility with both fellow elders and every minister with whom he served. Errol had a transforming experience in his life by reading the book by K. C. Mosier entitled The Gist of Romans. Theologically, Errol believed that too much energy was spent on the “peripherals of the faith.” He once summed up his core understanding of Christianity by referring to Philippians 2:1-11. **Silas Shotwell** was the minister at the church where Errol Hunter served as an elder. Randy served for a short time as an intern under Dr. Shotwell and was greatly influenced by Silas’ emphasis upon grace and the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Silas also assisted Randy and his wife Eva as they had conflict over the differences between the Church of Christ and the Baptists. His intervention led, most likely, to the survival of the marriage. **James Bales**, an author, apologist, and retired professor at the time he met Randy was a mentor while Randy lived in Searcy, Arkansas and they studied together in the home of Dr. Bales. James Bales would later engage arguments with an eldership that fired Randy in an attempt to assist Randy. **Jimmy Allen** and his wife Marilyn became personal friends and encouragement to both Randy and Eva. Jimmy was influential in persuading Randy that he had been wrong in his earlier responses to his wife on the issue of baptism. Jimmy’s understanding of baptism reflected in his book Rebaptism was a major source for relieving family tension over whether or not “Baptists needed to be rebaptized with a “Church of Christ baptism.” **Doug Brown**, **Rick Oster** and **Allan Black**, professors at Harding Graduate School, have deeply influenced Randy’s understanding. Doug Brown provided a challenge to many of Randy’s assumptions while Drs. Oster and Black fundamentally altered Randy’s approach to Scripture. Doug Brown’s impact was profound, complex, and mixed. **John Mark Hicks** played a short lived yet significant role in Randy’s experience of the influence of Doug Brown. **Charles Siburt**, professor, advisor, and friend had a significant impact as Randy attended Abilene Christian University. Charles served as lead advisor on Randy’s doctoral writing project. Dr. Siburt provided challenge, affirmation, and ministry tools that made the difference in whether or not Randy would ultimately survive full-time ministry. Randy had been fired twice from local congregations and was shortly to be fired for the third time when he met Charles. That meeting led to Randy eventually being re-hired from the last place from which he was fired and to effective work with another congregation that was in the aftermath of a church split. **Flavil Yeakley, Jr.** and **many others** have also impacted Randy’s life in various ways.

One of the reasons for including this history is to demonstrate the range of people who have had an impact on Randy’s life. If you know these men, you could enjoy imagining an eldership made up of men as diverse theologically and in personality as these men!

◆ Beliefs

Paul describes the core of Randy’s faith when he wrote “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5, NIV). Randy believes that the heart of the New Testament faith is that this historical event actually occurred, that Christ was literally raised from the dead, and that these events provide those who follow Christ in faith the promise of a future resurrection to eternal life based upon the atoning work of Jesus’ death. He believes the ultimate truth of the New Testament is that God’s love led to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Although Christians must guard against a “savior complex” a type

of that pattern does exist for the lives of believers. Thus, faith calls for courage but promises deliverance even when the cross blinds us as to how it can come.

◆ Church History

Church of Christ in a University Context

Randy's first experience in church work was an internship under three people at a church dominated by a large university. The three mentors were an elder, the pulpit minister, and the campus minister. The significance of this experience was that it was in this context that Randy's naïve perspective of church as a place of serene peace and totally Christ like people was to be shattered. The exit of the pulpit minister, the entry of new minister, and the developing church split provided the context from which Randy left for the Harding School of Biblical Studies. This was his first exposure to the underside of church life.

Church of Christ in a Rural Context

Randy served as the pulpit minister for two rural churches within driving distance from Searcy. The rural church context provided a totally different experience of church life than church in a university town dominated by a university of 23,000 national and international students, and athletic teams such as Athletes in Action dominated by highly motivated world class athletes.

Church of Christ in a Resort Area Context

Randy served for one year at a church located in a major resort area by a major river system and large lake. Church attendance occasionally doubled because of visitors. The ministry, concurrent with graduate studies at Harding Graduate School, was rewarding with church growth and good relations with the elders. Within one month from the time that the elders had tried to convince the Willinghams to make a 10-year commitment to stay with the church, a conflict developed over baptism. The two elders believed a person had to be baptized by a male member of the Church of Christ who is preferably a deacon, an elder, or a minister. The elders gave Randy two weeks to change his mind. The elders eventually demanded that Randy publicly preach that idea or leave. Randy chose to leave. Randy had been told that most church conflicts result from personality clashes but the most vocal elder and Randy got along great. Clearly the difference was one of doctrinal differences. An awareness of that perceptual chasm and Randy's total oblivion to how difficult it was to "reason" about such a chasm led to questions about a multiplicity of items such as eldership authority, his own ability to soberly assess a church he enters, his own ability to "persuade," and the various ways in which he should have responded differently in that church situation.

Church of Christ in a Demographically Changing Context

Next, Randy followed a well known minister's ministry at a church with no elders. The ministry was a two-year pulpit ministry. The church was led by a number of informal

opinion leader men from the context of “the men’s business meeting.” The church was a congregation of 100% white people in a community that was approximately 80% black population. The community was racially divided and highly sensitive regarding racial dynamics. A Harding Graduate School Professor advised Randy and the local black preacher in developing evangelistic work in one of the projects. Services were started in one of the projects but some of the women began attending the congregation where Randy preached. The situation did not go well. Randy temporarily listened to his advisor. He dropped the work in the project. However, he became conscience stricken as the situation grew worse. He left the congregation two months before finishing his Master of Divinity degree. At the time of this exit, Randy was in the application process at Princeton, SMU, and Westminster to do a Ph.D. in New Testament. Those plans were dropped. Randy and the congregation are now on wonderful terms with each other.

Church of Christ in a Conflictual Context

Randy then accepted a job offer at a small church in a small town of around 1,000 people, and worked with that church for a total of five years. Eventually he was planning on staying a short time and studying German at a nearby university to prepare for finishing a Ph.D. but the church had an ongoing conflict being lived out among its members. The eldership was divided against itself with one autocratic authoritarian leader and one elder who had previously served eight years as the pulpit minister before being fired by the authoritarian leader – with whom he was serving as a fellow elder at the time Randy was hired. The church story involved people from previous dysfunctional family backgrounds, families presently involved in dysfunctional family dynamics, power plays through the use of money, and conflicts that exerted a directional influence on the church even though no one had the permission to talk about those conflicts. All this mix came together to produce a suspicious environment with dirty politics and unhealthy group processes that were very complex. The rules seemed to be the “survival of the fittest in dirty fighting.”

Randy came to a point of burn out with the church and feared coming to a point of not being able to continue serving because of emotional burnout. A series of events led to a telephone conversation with Charles Siburt at Abilene. Within a matter of hours from that conversation Randy was sitting in one of Charles’ class learning about the emotional dynamics of the very dilemmas he was facing in his ministry. Charles, and the D. Min. program at Abilene, assisted Randy to face ways in which he himself had contributed to church problems and to face reasons why he felt uncomfortable in healthy churches. Randy was assisted to focus upon his own baggage, his own motives for ministry, and his own need for healing. He came to the terrifying realization that perhaps he was in ministry because of a need to “rescue.”

Questions of ministerial legitimacy were acute but I found hope, peace, and the power of effective skills. However, the question remained as to whether or not it was too late. A question existed as to whether or not Randy would survive the ministry at this particular church or whether or not he should even try to do so. He became aware that his own spiritual sickness had contributed to the sickness of the congregation and he felt he had to try. He began to do his doctoral thesis on conflict management and was attempting to respond more responsibly to the congregation at which time he was fired. However, he

was rehired and stayed for two years afterward. He attempted to assist the church into a more healthy way of living as he was attempting to do the same thing himself.

During these two difficult years he learned to love ministry in new and surprising ways. He made a determination to remain in ministry but felt he would probably always serve from the context of a small congregation in a community of 1,000 in population. A great deal about this church is written in his doctoral thesis that would provide a clear perspective of the complexities, obstacles, defeats, and victories of this ministry experience.

Church of Christ in the Aftermath of Conflict

Randy moved from the congregation to a congregation that was slightly more than 2 years old, and had been borne out of what Randy call's a "church splant." A "church splant" is a church split that is framed as a plant. He followed a well known minister at this church and served for almost five years. The aftermath of conflict was over the role and function of elders. The time with this new and refreshing church was a time of reflection and healing for both Randy and the congregation. The church had only occupied their building for 6 months when Randy began serving.

The group was made up of highly motivated and highly talented leaders who were ready and willing to try a different approach to leadership from their earlier experiences – which they ironically shared with Randy. A series of role renegotiations led to an articulated partnership between Randy as the minister and the eldership. A deliberate effort was made to form a leadership team that was a true partnership. Together they initiated a process to identify informal leaders and forge a conscious and deliberate partnership between the elders and the informal leaders of the church.

The work with this congregation also demanded that Randy work with people by "reaching up" instead of just "reaching down." Here he became comfortable working with people of wealth and learned the *theological value* of forming partnerships between "theologians" and "businessmen."

The church recognized Randy's desire to work with other churches, ministers, and elders. As a result, they gave him the schedule of a professor – without the budget limitations! However, Randy felt that the congregation did not provide the platform he needed to access churches, ministers, and elders.

◆ Harding University

Randy was invited to teach at Harding University as an associate professor in the Bible department. His desire to train, equip, empower, and challenge prospective church leaders led to his decision to teach at Harding. He has been at Harding since the fall of 2000.

He has increased the focus on equipping ministers and elders for effective godly ministry. He wrote and has taught "Leadership Strategies," "Servant Leadership" for master level students, "Conflict Management in Ministry" for both undergraduate and graduate

students, Moral Theology & Ministerial Ethics, and Religious Foundations for Christian Ethics. He also teaches Introduction to “Christian Ministry.” He has taught Old Testament Survey, Honors New Testament Survey, Life & Teachings of Jesus, the Gospel of John, the Corinthian Letters, and Christian Home.

He has taught seminar courses entitled “Integrating the Ministry in the Bible & the Ministry of the Bible,” “Congregational Assessment & Strategies,” “Integration of Biblical & Church Exegesis,” and “The Integration of Ministry.”

Dr. Willingham’s unpublished written work includes the following.

The Religious Foundations for Christian Ethics Course – A template for teaching an ethics course to non-receptive and resistant non-traditional students

The Two Shall Be One Marriage Course – A 16-week study for churches or small group bible studies

Orientation to the Our Congregation - Template course for churches attracted to Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Church model but are in conflict about implementation. The material is designed to be adapted by church leaders for their own context. The material grows out of local ministry, consultation with various churches, and on-site research with Rick Warren and the Saddleback Valley Community Church.

Faith & Family: A Journey from the Throne to the Pedestal - Christian Home Workbook

Fighting for Peaceful Fighting Case Study & Course Workbook for Masters Students

He received the distinguished teacher award in 2006 and was promoted to full professor in 2013.

◆ Academics & Certifications

Academics:

High School: Clinton High School, Clinton, Oklahoma, 1978

College: Oklahoma State University, 1978-1985
All-American Wrestler
National Freestyle Champion
Alternative 1984 Wrestling Olympic Team
Silver medalist in World Cup
Graduate Assistant Coach for athletes who became World & Olympic champions

Harding School of Biblical Studies, 1985-87
Certificate in Biblical Studies

Harding University, 1987-88

B.A. degree in Bible and Religion
Minors in Greek and Physical Education

Graduate School: Harding Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, Tennessee, 1988-92
M.Div. degree with emphasis in New Testament and Philosophy of Religion

Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas, 1992-1995
D.Min. degree with emphasis in ministerial leadership and conflict management

Doctoral Thesis: *Fighting for Peaceful Fighting: A Teaching Ministry Moving Church Members from Suppressing to Managing Conflict*

Doctoral Committee: Charles Siburt, Flavil Yeakley, Jim Mankin, & Paul Lakey

The original intention for a doctoral project-thesis was to develop a ministry apprenticeship that connected academia and the church context. Church conflict in the ministerial context, however, prevented that option. The project-thesis grew out of and shaped the experience of being fired and then rehired as the turn-around in myself and others led to more healthy ways to disagree. The doctoral work received special awards for its quality and the professional development in the project.

Post-Doctoral Course Work:

Counseling for Church Leaders, Abilene Christian University, 1998

Spiritual Leadership, Blackaby Ministries International, 2010

Positive Leadership in Times of High Anxiety, Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship, Michigan University, 2010

Specialty certifications:

Natural Church Development Coach, Smart Church Resources

Dynamic Facilitation Facilitator, Dynamic Facilitation Associates, Center for a Wise Democracy

Interim Ministry Certification, Center for Congregational Health, Arkansas Southern Baptist Association

Conflict Dynamics Profile, Leadership Institute at Eckerd College

Authentic Leadership Profile, Leadership Circle

Organizational Culture Profile, Leadership Circle

Prepare Enrich Premarital Counseling

His Needs/Her Needs Marriage Facilitation, Family Dynamics
Institute

Level-B Psychological Instruments (MBTI, TJTA, Firo-B, Firo-F, etc.)

Marriage & Family Mediation, Oklahoma Academy of Mediators &
Arbiters

Committee & University Work:

Alpha Chi Malachi

Master of Ministry Developmental Committee

Harding School of Biblical Studies Advisory Committee

Master of Ministry Advisory Council

University Appeals Committee

Faculty Search Committee

Center for Advanced Ministry Training Advisory Committee
(MMin)

Center for Advanced Ministry Training Advisory Committee
(BMin)

Strategic Planning Committee for College of Bible and Ministry