

In 2008, at 450 members and growing, Richwoods Christian Church in IL found themselves in need of a new place to gather for worship and be sent from for service. While beginning negotiations for a furniture store that would soon be empty in the part of the city where they ministered, they learned they would be neighbors with the “Islamic Foundation of Peoria, one of [the] city’s two major mosques.” As Pastor Powell confesses, “my first reaction to this discovery was fear...Close to half the city’s population is nonwhite...Given that diversity, what did I have to be nervous about? Did I worry worshippers at the mosque would try to bomb our church? Of course not. But I did make jokes about exactly that, I’m ashamed to say. Mostly I worried that members of the mosque would feel resentful we’d moved next door. That they’d be chilly toward us, or that we’d inadvertently offend them.”

“Having a church next door to the mosque didn’t worry me,” remarked Imam Mufti. “What I wondered was whether there would be opportunities for a relationship between our two places of worship...Mostly I expected we wouldn’t hear much from [them].” In 2010 in Florida, a member of the clergy had threatened to burn copies of the Quran on the upcoming 10-year anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. In response, a letter arrived at the mosque from Rev Jim. Moved by it, Imam Kamil commented, “It was heartening to receive an overture of peace and friendship from a Christian pastor.” Two years later, the two of them, “along with a local rabbi...were invited by a nearby university to co-teach a course about the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Islam and Christianity.” Over the time they spent together prepping for the class, Jim and Kamil realized they shared a deep passion for God as well as for the work of ministry and immediately bonded. Through that project and a series of public evening talks on each other’s respective faith traditions, attendees walked away not only with a greater understanding of their neighbors, but of all that they had in

common. Granted it wasn't a completely smooth journey. There were concerns that this was a compromise of faith and of being a possible target. This bridge that was being built was too far for some people, in both camps. Perhaps even a few members from each religious center questioned, like the worshipers in the synagogue, "Who does he think he is?" Yet, friendships were forged. As both spiritual guides recognized, "Growing closer to one another, we grew in faith and love." Two by two, these leaders and communities are casting out the demons of stereotype and prejudice.

At two years of age, little Trenton Cochran became a big brother to a baby girl named Lindsay. He, along with his parents, soon discovered, however, that she would have to live with a condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy. Unable to crawl or walk due to weak legs, Lindsay has been in a wheelchair ever since she was only two years old. In 2014, when he was 12 and she was 10, they did a video interview together in which Trenton expressed a deep understanding that his life would have been very different if he didn't have a differently abled younger sister. This brother and sister duo are not only best friends, but are each other's support and inspiration. In this mutually respectful relationship, he helps her with physical tasks and she teaches him responsibility. And now as they continue to traverse this bumpy, winding road together, they also advocate for other kids with disabilities, serving as ambassadors to the wider world. Two by two, they are healing wounds of exclusion and teaching people about a love that reaches far beyond the borders of physical limitations.

"Look who's home and has become incredibly successful! Can you believe what he's accomplished!" "Who does he think he is? This guy who is merely a manual laborer and whose fatherhood is questionable to say the least." Whether this was a mixed reaction within the diverse crowd, or a general mood shift from astonishment to resentment, Jesus' welcome home leaves quite a bit to be desired. Rejected by neighbors that watched him grow up and whose kids were his

playmates as a young boy, and by friends who sat next to he and his family at worship every sabbath and enjoyed meals together, Jesus leaves in amazement at the lack of faith he witnesses within his hometown. With this fresh display of the gospel's more astringent flavor, he travels from village to village teaching and commissions the disciples on their first mission. Conferring upon them the very same authority from the very same source just spectacularly denied, he sends them out into the realm of risk, two by two. With no bread, no bag, no money, not even a change of clothes, they go two by two, *completely* dependent on other. On strangers for food and shelter. On each other for strength and courage. And on the Teacher for wisdom and direction. Not only was this an exercise of faith, of *absolute* trust in and dependence on the active God of their lives, but it was also their baptism into discipleship.

Almost two centuries later, the Spirit continues to blow across this land ecstatically welcoming people into the Creator's hometown and baptizing them into the vocation of discipleship, including Avyruis Ayzeekial. The same authority that was scorned by many and bestowed upon the first followers, is given today to this new child of Christ. Like all of us who have been immersed in water and the Word, the Sustainer will forever bond Avyrius with the Savior who loves him to the ends of heaven and earth. Like all of us, the Spirit will empower him to cast out demons, heal others, and proclaim through his life and relationships God's transformative message. Like Avyrius, in the daily gift of baptism, Jesus assures you and me that we are never alone. And like Avyrius, we are all in a relationship of reliance. Upon one another. Upon creation. Upon, ultimately, the Lord. So, whether it is two by two or in a crowd of thirty some thousand, may we, ever invigorated by the Word, grow in faith and love and go forth from here casting out demons, extending healing, and sharing with others God's life-altering grace. Amen.