

Astounding
God
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Giving
Stewardship 2006

Paula & Peter Arvedson

INTERVIEW BY WENDY EDWARDS



Wendy: Tell me about how you came to be at All Saints.

Paula: We came in 1989. We had been looking for another church home. The church we'd been in for 20 years was very small and had no children except our two. We thought our kids needed a program with other kids their age. We'd visited several other Episcopal churches, but our boys weren't really excited about any of them. When they said, "Let's go to All Saints Pasadena," we said, "Oh no – really?" Peter and I had been church convention delegates and we'd gotten the impression of a great big All Saints Pasadena that was a bit arrogant.

Peter: I don't want to say we had a "history" with George Regas exactly, but he stood out greatly in our minds because of his social justice passions.

PA: His speeches at conventions . . .

PE: They took a lot of time!

PA: We often left with the impression that we weren't quite as good as All Saints, and its "bigness" was a concern. But since our boys were the main reason we were leaving our other church, we figured we'd better take them seriously.

PE: Quite by accident we arrived on a Homecoming Sunday. We went to a Bible study at 10 o'clock, and the boys were directed to where the teenagers were meeting. When they came out of that, they said, "Okay, we're home."

WE: Just like that?

PE: Both of them had walked into groups where they met friends from school and Boy Scouts and felt instantly welcomed. So we kind of sighed and said, "Okay." At a small church you do everything. I was on the vestry, I became Junior Warden, Paula was choir director, we were acolyte masters, and we were just dead tired. So we came to All Saints, and quickly discovered how powerful George's sermons were. His way of speaking, his changing voice inflection, would just reach out and grab you. I found myself listening to sermons in ways that I never did before. And when our son Kristofer reached Eagle Scout, George allowed his Court of Honor ceremony to be held in the church, and he gave the Invocation.

PA: George had kicked out the troop that had been at All Saints in the 1970s because he thought the Boy Scouts were too militaristic, and he was fighting against the Vietnam War at that time. His honoring our son in that way was very meaningful.

WE: I haven't asked about your work. Tell me what you do.

PE: I'm in my 34th year as a science teacher at La Puente High School, and I'm the lead teacher in its Science Academy. I was asked to apply for the 12-member California Teaching Advisory Council. It was formed partly because we aren't producing enough science-trained teachers anymore, and science-related jobs are leaving California. Getting on that Council has broadened my horizons a lot, and given me renewed purpose in maintaining the fight in our school district. I get a lot of support and good ideas from Paula.

PA: I teach at Cal State LA in the Charter College of Education. It's the only charter college in California, and the first in the nation. A charter requires that you have an advisory board that includes community, students and staff. Everybody has a vote. It's a lot of work – but it's good. I teach how to teach – mostly social studies – but my doctorate is in math development. I got involved in science education because of Peter.

WE: You two are a real team!

PE: Yes, but sometimes I dream of retiring because of school district politics and incompetence at the administrative level. On the other hand, Paula is saying, "Oh man – I'm just getting started!" For me, the students are the reason I get up and go to work. Here we are, three weeks into the fall term and we're still opening and closing classes, and shuffling kids around the schedule. But enough of this. Let's talk about something that *is* working!

WE: I know – let's talk about Stewardship!

PA: I was the first-born of a Southern Baptist preacher. A lot was expected of me at church. My dad became an Army chaplain, and by the time I finished high school, I'd been to 14 schools. Dad was sent to Vietnam while I was in college, so I moved back home to help out. After Dad came back from Vietnam I moved with them to Fort Lewis, Washington, and that's where I met Dad's assistant, Peter Arvedson. Peter asked me three times if I would marry him, and I kept saying, "No, I don't see a Southern Baptist

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Paula & Peter Arvedson Interview (continued)

and an Episcopalian getting together." I have to say that the third time he asked me he added, "For you, Princess, I would be a Southern Baptist!"

WE: Then how did you end up making the switch, Paula?

PA: The first year of our marriage, we went to different denominations trying to find a place where we were both comfortable, but we wound up back at Peter's church. I was confirmed there in about 1970, and I felt like I was completely at home. Two things happened as I was growing up that probably influenced my decision to go into the Episcopal Church. When I was 15 and we were living in Germany, some relatives who were Episcopalian came to visit us, and we went with them to a church service in Copenhagen. I was just awestruck. I liked the liturgy and the incense and the costumes and the fanfare! And when we'd moved back from Germany, I went with my dad to the national Southern Baptist Convention. I was 16 and the civil rights movement was just starting. I listened to the discussion and arguments and was amazed when they finally voted that the Southern Baptist Convention would not take any stand on civil rights because of the separation of church and state. At that moment I told my dad, "I'll go to church with you, but you need to understand that I'm not here. This is not my church."

WE: You were at a pivotal age to have that experience.

PA: Right. I'm glad for it. Of course, the rest of my family, who are all still Southern Baptists, don't understand me at all.

WE: Let's talk about how you share your resources with the church.

PA: Well, as a Southern Baptist preacher's kid, I was always tithing. During our searching year, Peter and I would put something in the collection plate wherever we went, but we were living on my \$425 per month while he was in school full time. That was the only time I didn't tithe, and it was also the only time my life felt out of alignment. Something was wrong, though I didn't identify it until later.

PE: I never tithed. I chucked what I could in the plate, and that was it. But when I was a chaplain's assistant, especially when I was overseas, I met a lot of people who identified themselves as born-again Christians and heard them talk about tithing. They also challenged me to confess my faith, step up and accept Christ as my personal savior. That's when I realized what infant baptism was about. What it means is that you're brought up always knowing that you're part of the body of Christ. It's not a conversion experience: you're there. It took a long time to realize what a blessing that is, the tremendous power of God's love. We promise at their baptism to raise our children with that sense of belonging – a big challenge to pull off in today's society. But those kids are

going to know at some point how loved they really are, and recognize how great it is to have been, and know they always will be, in God's family.

WE: How do you connect that with giving?

PE: I really do understand that none of what we have is really ours. I could say, "This is our property, this is our house," but it's just where we live. It's stewardship – taking care of it in the best way we can and sharing it with others. Tithing is not a big deal. We just do it. This is going to sound superstitious even though that's not how I mean it, but there have been some times in our lives when the bottom fell out, when we didn't think we could be any more broke. That's when something came from somewhere that was absolutely unexpected. It was there, it was a gift, and it was life. I teach science: truth based on repeatable observations. You can't repeat these observations. This is religious truth, it's faith. I know God is there, and I have hope for things to come. It's an incredible gift, and there's no question about sharing that with others.

PA: Back when we were living on my \$425 monthly salary, our rent was \$127, and if we paid all the other bills, we couldn't eat. One bill would get paid one month and another would get paid the next. Then we joined the church, and I said to Peter, "We really need to tithe," and he agreed. He wasn't working anyway! So the very next month, \$43 went to the church first. I thought, "We couldn't pay our bills before, and now I'm taking another \$43 out!" But when we'd get to the end of the month, all

the bills were paid and we would have a little left over. We looked at each other and said, "This is really weird!" We decided it was because we had gotten our priorities straight, and when you do that, other things fall into place.

WE: Do you think it's easier to tithe if you've grown up with that idea?

PE: We were small group leaders in the Covenant class a couple of times, and I recognized from listening to others' journey of faith stories that the whole concept of giving is a real struggle. People wonder, "How much can I afford?" And I sympathize. If you haven't tithed before, it feels like a gigantic leap of faith. But I've also been struck by this phrase: "All Saints walks the talk." I think that's right on the money. When I put the money in the plate, I know that it's going to do real work, and that feels good.

PA: We're still at All Saints even after our kids have grown up. We are fed here. Giving back is the most natural thing in the world.

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