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10-2019

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Recommended Citation

Odinma, Michelle, "From Prisoner to Pastor" (2019). *Lake Union Herald*. 879.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/879>

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Jean-Irès Michel

From Prisoner to Pastor

By Michelle Odinma

CHRISTOPHER CLARK was an easy target to spot at the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. In the morning hours before the bustle of passing students, he was usually found at 6 a.m. seated in the common area completing classwork. To some, this may not look spectacular but to Christopher, every moment he spent in the building was a reminder of God's constant blessings. While the seminary has allowed him the freedom to study and follow God's calling, things weren't always this simple.

A few years after graduating high school in '93, Christopher enlisted in the Marines. He completed six years in the service and arrived home in July of 2003, only to run into deep trouble. "I got out of the Marines and really tried to find employment, but I wasn't able to get anything," he said. With his first child on the way but no means to support his growing family, he returned to his Chicago neighborhood looking for work. His search led to one wrong phone call with the wrong person.

Unknown to Christopher, his associate was under surveillance. "The FBI was listening to him and they heard

us talking and pulled me in for questioning," he said. He had no information to give but, as he would discover later, the police assumed he was simply refusing to cooperate. In order to avoid going to trial, he took a 12-year plea agreement for conspiracy, fearing his sentence would become 24 years, if convicted in court.

Christopher's wife, Ebony Clark, was more than devastated. After the couple had received an answer to prayers in the birth of their first son, her husband was now headed to prison. "I didn't want to have to raise our child on my own," she said. But with the reality of the situation, Ebony put her faith in God. She worked as an accountant to support herself and their newborn son.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE SABBATH

From childhood, God had always been a big part of Christopher's life. He grew up in the Baptist faith and regularly attended service on his own. During his teen years, Ebony had introduced him to Seventh-day Adventism. "One Friday night, she couldn't come outside, and she explained to me why," he recalled from

their conversation. "That was the first time I had ever heard about it."

During his time of incarceration, Christopher spent time reading about God and reflecting on life. Being imprisoned could have easily crushed his spirit, but God had other plans. He began studying the Bible in prison, seizing the opportunity to "finally sit down and really focus." It was during this time that he finally understood that Saturday was the true Sabbath day.

After a year in prison, Christopher was released on bond and immediately headed to Independence Boulevard Seventh-day Adventist Church to continue studying the Bible. In November 2005, he was baptized, becoming an official member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Clark invested his short time out of prison serving as a church deacon and studying for an associate degree in electrical technology. When November 2008 arrived, it was time to serve the rest of his sentence. Letters from friends, family, church members and even a moving statement from the prosecutor were put forward to decrease his sentence time, but the decision was final. Christopher recalled the words of the prosecutor during the sentencing: "This man fought for his country, came home and tried to find a job, and here we are convicting Mr. Clark today. This is a tragedy. It just doesn't make sense."

From November 2008 to May 2015, Christopher spent his days in prison attending the Seventh-day Adventist worship services held for inmates. Friends from his new home church sent the Conflict of the Ages series to Clark. He began using them as a resource to conduct worship. The lifeless chapel sessions transformed into invigorating Bible studies. The visiting Adventist pastor recommended that Christopher consider attending the seminary once he was released. It seemed like a long shot, but he tucked the thought away. Attendance at the prison worship began to multiply. It was evident to both the inmates and the guards that he was anointed by God.

ROAD TO THE SEMINARY

Upon his release, Christopher looked for a sense of normalcy again. Months of searching led him to night-time custodial work with the Salvation Army. While cleaning he thought to himself, "Lord this can't

be my life." To his surprise, God responded. "You're doing that because you want to do that. I already told you what you are supposed to be doing. Trust Me and have faith." Christopher's late-night conversation with God promised a hopeful future and work in ministry. It wasn't long before he began to see God making a way.

One week later, local pastor, Robert Best, encouraged Christopher to consider applying to the seminary. Even though Christopher only had an associate's degree and little money to submit the application, he proceeded in faith and completed the laborious application process.

After intense review from the seminary committee, he was elated to discover he was accepted into the Master of Divinity program. He wondered how such a miracle of God could happen to someone who seemed so unqualified. But the miracles didn't stop there. He was advised to check if his past military service could still assist with his tuition costs. Despite being out of the military for some time, he was pleasantly surprised to learn of a new program for veterans which would cover 85 percent of his tuition.

He began his studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in January of 2016 and graduated May 5, 2019, four years to the day he was released from prison. "When the Lord authors your story, He gets the glory," said Christopher. He is reminded of God's perspective: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11 NLT)."

His future is undoubtedly filled with bright hope. Shortly before his graduation, he was hired as a pastor for the Lake Region Conference and currently serves two churches in Robbins, Illinois, and Gary, Indiana.

When looking back on his experience, Christopher is amazed. "God keeps making a way where you can't explain it. You can't in any way shape or form say, 'Well, the only way that happened was because of this or that.' No, it's just God." ■

Michelle Odinma is a singer/songwriter, completing her third year at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.