

# Why Story?

At Element we believe it is important for people around us to understand the changes that are taking place in our own lives' based on the work of Christ in us. To help others understand what Baptism is and what it means to those being baptized on a personal level, we have asked them to share their life and stories with you, those attending and those online, in a more personal way than maybe you are use to.

In Baptism we are making a making a public statement about our life and commitment to walk in the ways Jesus calls us. Many people only get the Jesus "as seen on TV" and don't understand what Jesus does in "real life" or what following Him looks like on a practical level. Baptism is not magical, but it is a deeply spiritual event that reflects the work Jesus has done in our lives. The act of Baptism is symbolic in that we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ. We are essentially being buried (by going under the water) and raised to walk in new life (by coming out of the water).

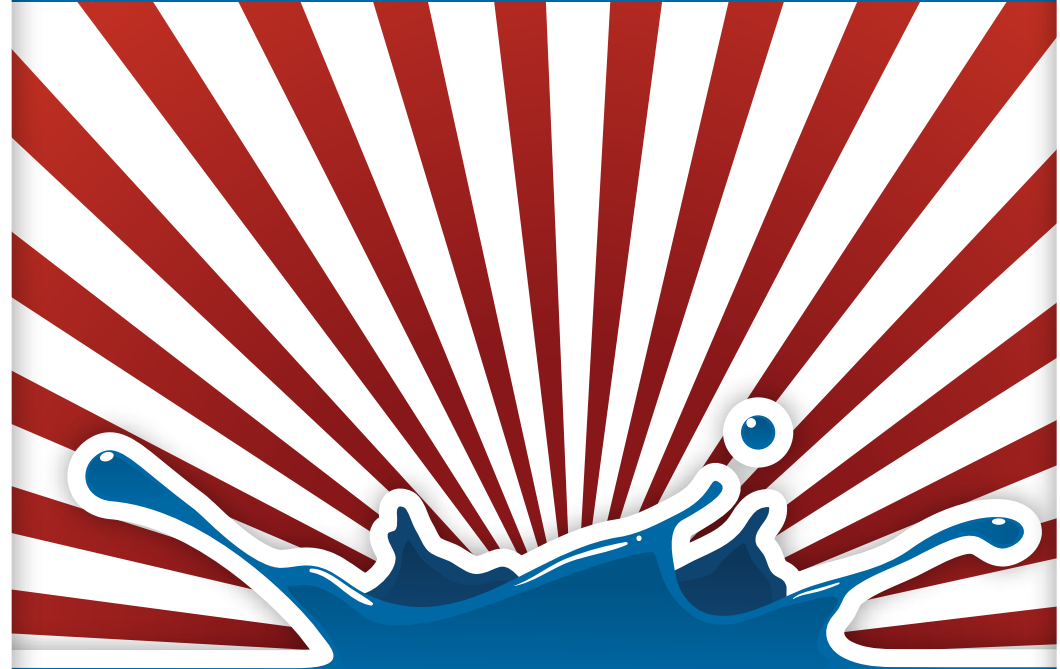
The entire point is public identification with Christ and His work within us. That He is our great God and savior that has come to restore a broken humanity that cannot have a relationship with God on our own. He is the Redeemer, He is the Remedy, He is the Hope, and He is our Life.

We also have the hope that one day you too will come to the saving knowledge of trusting in Jesus with your life. It makes all the difference in the world.

Aaron

# OUR STORIES

September 2, 2012



ELEMENT  
christian church

# Kyle Maxwell

## Do you want to be baptized?

**Our next Baptisms will be  
in early 2013**

*Sign up now!*



<http://goo.gl/iZtQr>

Hello. My name is Kyle Maxwell and I am 10 years old (double digits).

For a very long time I felt like I was a pretty good kid, I guess most kids do. As a “good” kid I didn’t really see the need for God so much so I was not that “in” to Him. Last year was when I actually made a commitment to God, but I had been going to Element for about 3 years at that point (no, I don’t see myself as a slow learner).

Anyway, after coming to Element for about 3 years I attended a camp last summer for the first time. I went up to Hartland Christian Camp with my friends at Element. My counselor Erik said that when I was ready I could say a prayer and accept Jesus into my life. I felt a strong pull in my heart I was ready devote my life to God. It was there, at camp, that I finally felt closer to God and asked him to be a part of my life.

Weird things happen when you devote yourself to Jesus; I have started reading my bible a lot more and I pray more often (both good things). I even feel much happier since I have started following and understanding what it means to walk with Jesus.

Even though I wasn’t “in” to God, He was “in” to me, and came to save me, even at 9. I think that makes God a pretty cool God.

# Araceli Cota

...through all the horrible things in my life, the Lord kept steering me towards Him.

Growing up I came from what many would consider to be a large family; I had 9 brothers and sisters. My parents are immigrants that came to live in California and I, being only 3 months old, came with them.

I always loved living in a large family, I doubt that people who haven't lived in one could ever understand the appeal, but for me, it was wonderful. However, as I got older, some things happened in my life that are hard to share.

For a very long time I suppressed my feelings by self-medicating with various substances. I engaged in a lot of actions to try and get away from my own personal pain. When I even heard about Jesus I had such "self ignorance" that I could never come to follow Him on my own. Suffice it to say that through all the horrible things in my life, the Lord kept steering me towards Him. Looking back at my life I now see how He has helped me navigate these issues and held on to me every step of the way.

One year ago I came to a saving knowledge of Jesus. I was invited to a Bible study and learned something that open up my life completely, something I was never told, that Jesus actually wanted to have a relationship with me. I learned that the Lord has purpose for all of us. We are made in His image. We are to be little Christs, every one of us. I don't mean we are Jesus, but we are called to be His representatives to the world. When people see us, they should see Jesus. *2 Corinthians 5:20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.*

I want to be a person who individually serves Jesus, and is part of a church who serves Jesus more than just one day of the week.

A little while ago I believe that God opened my heart to search for a new church. I was invited to Element via a community co-worker and believe I have finally found that place. Serving Jesus in my life and alongside His church.

I now want the Lord to mold me to the person who He always wanted me to be; I want Him to heal me and help me grow. I now want live a life like Jesus', no matter where it takes me. Jesus died bringing glory to the Father and I want to live my life to the same end, bringing God Glory.

Because He saved me, I will always be His. I thank the Lord for His Grace.

# David Harman

I want to serve and honor Him in my life by honoring my wife and glorifying Jesus for the rest of my life.

My name is David Harman and I am 26 years old.

When I was about 5 years old my step-mom was reading to me out of my picture Bible (yes, I like the pictures). She would read to me out of it every morning when I was young. The one morning that I remember, when I was 5, we were reading about when God was recruiting the disciples and he was telling them, "I will teach you to be fishers of men." I stopped my mom and told her I wanted to be one of God's disciples.

My mom prayed with me and it was then that I surrendered my life to Jesus.

Since my conversion things were always up and down. It seems when you are young everything ends up being so much simpler. As I grew older and became a teenager it became pretty tough. Because I was always around Christianity I became disillusioned with my walk with God and, like a lot of teenagers, Jesus was not important to me anymore.

High School and College did not go much better in my walk with God. After graduation from college, real life began to set in and I came back home. You see things differently when you actually live life, so I started to invest time in my relationship with God again.

The most significant change in my attitude and actions came when I met my future wife and I realized I needed to change. Today, we have been married for 9 months and God has been at the center of our marriage.

Having a family, and that special someone to look after has been really awesome. God has used so many things to bring me back to Him, and for that I could not express all the gratitude I have inside.

I may have walked my own path, but today I understand that God never once left me. I want to serve and honor Him in my life by honoring my wife and glorifying Jesus for the rest of my life.

# Jason Ray DeLaPaz

My name is Jason DeLaPaz. I was born 35 years ago in San Luis Obispo, CA. I have been exposed to a lot of hurt and pain; I have hurt others and been hurt myself.

The story of my life is a long one, but what I want to relate to you today is going to be very brief.

In 2009, my younger sister died due to drug abuse. A year later, my older brother became gravely ill due to liver disease from alcohol abuse. My brother literally had one of those deathbed conversions because, while he was lying there, close to death he turned to Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Jesus saved him right there at the very end.

I was also with my brother when he died and his conversion made a huge impact on my life. Soon after I was trying to find a radio station and a sermon came on about repentance of sin and salvation. The Lord put it on my heart that the way I was living was wrong and that Jesus died for my sin.

The only way I think I made it through was knowing that Jesus was there with us every step of the way and that it would be okay. Having gone through the loss of my brother and seeing what Jesus did, and listening to the sermon on the radio, made me want to seek the Lord. In the midst of reading my Bible, Jesus revealed Himself to me and I became a Christian.

When times get tough, I remember *Romans 8:29 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

Jesus is always with us.

The Lord put it on my heart that the way I was living was wrong and that Jesus died for my sin.

# Kyla StClair

My name is Kyla StClair and in an age where no one wants to state their age, I will tell you mine, I am 48 years old. I was born and raised in Santa Maria, it has always been my home.

I struggled telling you my experience with meeting Jesus for the first time because I didn't want any of you to think I was crazy, but here it goes anyway.

I come from a family that has a lot of great support, but we did not frequent churches very often. My parents believe, but never attended churches. I had Jesus explained to me more fully, believe it or not, in public school kindergarten. We would do Christmas and Easter plays and sing "religious" songs that our teachers would explain to us. At 5 years old I believed in Jesus. I didn't grasp all the deep theological issues (I still don't today), but I knew He loved me and I loved Him.

When I was 5 years old I was visiting my grandparents in Kansas and I inhaled some mold spores. I am asthmatic and mold can be deadly to asthmatic children. I went to the hospital and nearly died, the doctors even said they had done all they could and that my parents had to wait and see what would happen. During this time, when I was 5, I saw Jesus. I was sick, near death, and I saw Him with arms spread wide in a loving embrace. It was like one of those pictures and I think He revealed Himself to me and offered me hope...and I got better (again, please don't think I'm nuts). It was a beautiful experience that I remember to this day.

I eventually grew up and sometimes followed more closely than others, but I always loved God. A little over a year ago there was a lot of things spiraling out of control in my life and I realized I needed

# Kyla StClair (Cont)

I needed a real walk with God... God has used something painful and turned it into something wonderful.

more help than I could ever find on my own, I needed a real walk with God.

I came to Element over a year ago because of a personal invitation from a friend, and a client, Vicki Burg. I am a hairdresser and have lots of conversations with people about life. Vicki and I were having one of these conversations about our lives and I kept saying how so many things in my life were changing and I had hard decisions I needed to make, but couldn't figure out where to turn. Element kept popping up in our conversations.

At this time in my life I was now 48 years old, with a 21 year old daughter in college, and an 11 year old daughter hitting junior high...and I had no real guidance on how to handle all that life really is. I needed a good youth ministry to involve my youngest daughter, Kamryn, in as well.

I am a person who tries to "fix" things, it's what I do with hair (or at least hope I do), make it pretty and beautiful, right? I quickly found out that as much as the human race, me included, would like to fix everything, we really can't do anything on our own and we need Jesus. We not only desperately need Jesus, but we need fellowship with other people who won't judge us but will call us to something greater. A people who welcome us with warm smiles and genuine hugs of friendship, that mean what they say and say what they mean.

As a community of people following Jesus, there are lots of life changing experiences we all go through. I am sure many of your life experiences are not far from my own, and going through them with Element has softened the blows and hard knocks that life has

thrown my way. Honestly, without the hard times that have come into my life recently, I wouldn't even be at Element. God has used something painful and turned it into something wonderful.

I know that without the love of Christ, and the challenges He allows into my life, I would never have realized that I can't do it on my own. We need Jesus to teach us. Once Jesus opens our eyes to that fact, everything just makes more sense.

That is why I have ended up here, on this day, before all of you; my Element family. This is a huge step in following Christ more closely, which makes life get better day by day. I have placed it all in His capable hands, because He can handle it.

Thank you for being not only my friends, but my family as well...and accepting me.

# Beatriz Lopez Claro

I think the gangs made it easier to hide because all I saw in me was darkness.

Growing up I was a foster child and never really had a chance to call anyone “mom” or “dad.” I was made fun of as a child because I was a foster kid. People would poke fun at me because there had to be a “reason” my mom didn’t want me. Kids can be mean and it was painful growing up this way.

Where children can be mean, I found adults can be a lot worse. I was molested from the time I was 3 years until I was 8 years old. The crazy thing is that through all of it I knew there was a God, as many children in my situation do, but my question was “where are YOU through all of this?”

As a teenager I was very scared and got into gangs. I think the gangs made it easier to hide because all I saw in me was darkness. If I was that dark inside then a dark place of a gang was the most logical to me to live my life.

But the Lord God would always pull me through. Even though I questioned Him, He never left me to my self-imposed fate. There was always light at the end of my malice and wrong doing, the Holy Spirit through the conscience God gave me, was calling.

When Christ found me, He sent a foster child who was going through what I went through. I knew Foster Care was my call because I could see the pain these kids had from the inside out and the outside in.

God sure does work in mysterious ways because it was at the time I realized my call with foster kids that Jesus took the bandages off my eyes so I could see and opened my ears so that I could hear His call. I am now one like one of His sheep that can hear his voice from John 10. He is the truth, light, and life and today,

because of His grace, I now I have the privilege to call the most high Father “Heavenly Father.”

Today I no longer nag my husband and I love all the children God has entrusted me with. He is constantly showing me how to lift them up and not tear them down, to love them and encourage them, and to show them the mercy and trust that Jesus has shown me.

I would like to thank God our Father and Lord Jesus Christ for always being there through it all. I would also like to thank all of you for sharing this day of my baptism with me.

# Robert Tilley

...I now experience the peace, joy and love of Jesus as I never have before.

My name is Robert Tilley and I was born in Tucson, Arizona in 1970.

I grew up in a good family, with good solid morals, with good role models, but no religion. It wasn't until High School that I really became aware of Christianity. I was sort of tricked into it by my friends when they invited me to a "FUN" camping trip at Hume Lake. It was there that I surrendered my life to Jesus, He came into my life and I became a Christian.

I believe that God was always in my life, I mean we are only here because He is here. I had always felt GOD was keeping watch over me and guiding my good decisions, but after meeting Jesus, everything became so clear.

Unfortunately, high school ends and friends go to college, the military, and move on in life. For me it was the military, and the year after high school was full of turmoil that eventually led to 20 years of strain and distance in the relationship between God and me. It all started with sex outside of marriage followed by many other unfortunate incidents.

I look back now and can see that even through all the drama and pain, GOD was still there, holding me, loving me, and keeping me from falling off that cliff edge. I believe He even guided me in right decisions even at the last moments, but still I kept my distance.

A few years ago I met my wife, Diana. I suddenly knew it was time to stop running and reach out for Jesus...I just didn't know how. Two months later, my son Jeremiah moved in with me. Through him, I came to Element during the summer of the Song of Solomon

(what a ride that was coming back to church again). Shortly after that, Diana and I were married and I now experience the peace, joy and love of Jesus as I never have before.

Everything feels so right and clear again.

Life is so amazing with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.



# Diana Tilley

I knew if I stopped doing what always brought darkness and despair and simply trusted in Him, He would bring hope and healing and I would finally understand my purpose.

My name is Diana Tilley, I am 38 years old. I was raised in a Christian home from birth. My family and I were a part of a wonderful church community at First Christian Church of Downey, CA.

My Dad died of cancer when I was 4 years old and the church family stayed close to us during that very hard time. Half of my best childhood memories are from being a part of that church and the other half is from my Mom. I was actually baptized August 19, 1984 (when I was 10), because living according to God's will was my desire.

We moved to Lompoc when I was 12 and never settled into a new church family. This was an extremely awkward time for an already shy girl, so I honestly did not mind not having to make new connections.

Even though I had a great set of values in place, nothing good can come from being out of touch with Jesus and a church community. At the age of 18, I became very focused on fulfilling what I believe was an emptiness from a lack of a relationship with my earthly father and heavenly father.

I was acting rather desperate to find a male figure that loved me, and it wasn't until I was 32 that a friend told me something that opened my eyes and steered me back to Jesus. She said, "He knows you more than anyone else. He knows everything about you and loves you as you are." As I absorbed and learned to trust this truth, I began to let go of my anxiety and let Him guide me. I knew if I stopped doing what always brought darkness and despair and simply trusted in Him, He would bring hope and healing and I would finally understand my purpose.

That is exactly what happened.

I made better choices, though I still stumbled along the way, but Jesus knew what was in my heart and that I wanted to follow Him. I still struggled through a series of poor choices, but He blessed me with a son and now has provided a perfect place for me in a family of my very own.

My husband is now leading our family in becoming a Christian family, versus a family of individual Christians. I am getting baptized today not because I have to, but because I want to publically rededicate my life to GOD, as an adult, alongside my family.

I profess that following God's word, letting Him fill our hearts, and trusting Him in all of life, will make you rich with all that is important. Do it His way, not your way!

# Jeremiah Tilley

It is so right to actually be walking with Jesus again, trusting Him, and honoring Him with my life.

My name is Jeremiah Tilley and I want to share how God has saved my life. I was born into a family with two loving parents, unfortunately, they didn't share that love with each other. When I was just two years old, my birth parents were divorced.

I grew up with my mom being in the Air Force, so I moved around a lot. At one point, we were living in Alabama and I had a near death experience. I was very sick, so my mom took me to the doctors. They assured her it was just a cold and it would pass in a couple days. After a few days, I was getting worse, not better, so my mom took me back and made them diagnose me again. It turns out I had pneumonia when I was just five. The doctors prescribed penicillin to fight the sickness, and that's when we discovered I was incredibly allergic to penicillin.

After changing my medication, I began to get better slowly. All I remember of this event was sleeping for practically two weeks straight, and the occasional meal, which I couldn't keep down. The doctors said I was lucky to be alive; my immune system was weak from the pneumonia, then I had horrible reaction to the medication that was supposed to help me, and I wasn't eating. I lost over twenty pounds in two weeks, when I was already very small. All I can say is that God obviously had something in store for me, so He didn't let me die.

When we moved to Arizona, my mom got divorced again because my stepfather was cheating on her. This event destroyed my mom; her health started deteriorating and her trust of men became non-existent. She was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia and Bipolar disorder. My mom then went looking for something she could believe in, which she found in the Latter Day Saints (Mormonism).

I went along with her, and though I enjoyed the community, I didn't share the same beliefs. My mom soon found a new husband in a British immigrant named Jonathan, my favorite stepfather. Although Jonathan was great for me, he was a drunk and didn't have what it took to be a husband at this time. After a few years, my mom had to move to Colorado to get away from the heat, which set off her Fibromyalgia. Jonathan wouldn't move, so my mom was divorced again.

Once we moved to Colorado I began to care more about myself than my family. My mom was becoming worse in her health and relied on me to do all the mundane tasks, like grocery shopping and making sure everyone made it to work and school. My older sister was unfortunate enough to be diagnosed with almost the same things as my mother and was thus just as incapable of everyday tasks. Throughout the life with my mom, it was the summers with my dad that kept me from going insane.

I made new friends that were definitely not Christians, and I started to act like I wasn't either. Near the end of my junior year of high school, my best friend, Dillon, said that he was going to move in with his dad. I didn't want to stay with my mother any longer if Dillon wasn't going to be there to help me release the stress. I decided that I was going to move in with my dad, which is something I always wanted to do, but never had enough will to overcome the guilt of leaving my mother.

So I moved out to Santa Maria about two years ago and that was the beginning of my new life.

My life-long friend, Alex Hagel, convinced me during the summer of

# Jeremiah Tilley (Cont)

2010 to go to his church camp. I did, since I wanted to make new friends here in California. I ended up making the best relationship of my life. When we got back from camp, I began going to Element every week as well as youth group.

At first, it was just my younger sister Staci that would go with me to church, but eventually my dad and my loving stepmother started coming with us. I began to hang out with my family as much as my friends, a change from Colorado, and I was living not only for myself, but for those around me. James saw my willingness to help others and so he got me involved with the youth ministry after I graduated in 2011.

Ever since, God has been in everyday of my life, and I plan to keep it that way. It is so right to actually be walking with Jesus again, trusting Him, and honoring Him with my life. I have waited too long to get baptized, but I am also glad for the delay because now, not only will my family be there with me, but they will be getting baptized with me.

# Staci Tilley

My name is Staci Tilley and I am 12-years-old. I am one of those people who have “grown up with God” all my life; what I mean by that is my family believes and I attend a Christian school.

Even though my family believed and I attended a Christian school, I did not actually start attending church until roughly 2 years ago. I am a Christian, I believe in Jesus, but that does not mean that I have ever lived a perfect un-sinful life. In God’s eyes my sin is terrible, I own up to that, but I also know that through His grace I am loved and restored.

Today, I still struggle with sin, as we all do (I mean, we ARE human after all), but know I will do my best to not lie and live up to the call God has placed in me.

Part of the reason I want to get baptized is that it is taking another step in walking with God in my life. I know baptism isn’t magical and that it won’t stop me from messing up in my life, but it is a step of obedience towards God.

Jesus is my best friend, and I hope that we will always be this close. I am not saved by works, but I will work hard to do the right thing for the rest of my life. Because I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, I want God to be my number one priority for the rest of my life.

I have been wanting to get baptized all my life, and today I get to be baptized with my entire family.

# Megan Dickey

...so the moment Pa took his last breath I cut ties with God. I was mad.

My name is Megan Dickey and I came into this world on January 28, 1987 after 72 hours of labor (that is not a typo, Seventy-Two Hours)! Many people have that definitive date they know they became a follower of Jesus, but mine is more of a journey. I don't have a day I can point to, it is something I have grown into as I understand more of who He is daily. My life is definitely surrendered to Jesus, He is my God and Savior...I guess this testimony is more to explain to you the process.

As a child, my family attended church services on occasion. Typically, it was holidays only, but sometimes more. I was always taught about Jesus and how a relationship with Him was important, but church was not something we attended regularly.

When I became a young teenager, I regularly attended youth groups. I was a big fan of Uturn and attended Crosspoint Church, but as high school approached I became very negative about everything (including church). I left all church attendance and activities because I thought none of it was for me and what I wanted to do in my life.

After high school, I began to realize my mistake and tried to work on mending my relationship with Jesus and finding a home church again. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people can relate, going back to church was a struggle. My problem was that I never became excited about attending any certain church. I believe my relationship with God was growing again (I would even say He was best friend and true love) but I didn't have a church connection. At that time, I didn't realize how important a church community is to Jesus and our life on earth.

Life has many ups and downs and during the Super Bowl 2007 (Indianapolis Colts and the Chicago Bears) my Pa went to the emergency room and discovered he had stage 4 lung cancer. I would like to say that God became my strength, that I depended on Him to survive my days, but when my Pa died on October 9, 2008, I cut all ties with Him. My Pa was a huge factor in my life, and watching him suffer like that killed me inside; so the moment Pa took his last breath I cut ties with God. I was mad.

I started to live apart from God as much as I could, and on October 29, 2010, I found out I was pregnant. I know it sounds cliché, but at that moment even though I thought I cut ties with Jesus, I hoped that Jesus had not cut His ties with me. That is the most amazing thing, our salvation doesn't rest upon us, it rests upon Him, and He never left me even through the worst of all I did. I started talking to God again because, I believe, He never stopped talking to me. I started thinking about attending church again, but I still had a lot of pain and my heart wasn't in it...yet.

About 6 months ago, my stepdad was baptized at this church he attended, it had this bizarre logo (Element), so I went to support him. That is the strangest thing, I attended one Sunday with him and felt at home...I actually found a church I wanted to call home.

Three months ago I went to a retreat that helped me realize why I had drifted away from God when my Pa passed. I realized that I had felt let down and hurt by God, but He has bigger ways and plans than I will ever be able to comprehend.

Today I trust Him more than I ever realized was possible and I look forward to attending church services on Sunday and becoming

# Megan Dickey (Cont)

part of His body. I believe that I am friends with God because He first loved me. My son is 15 months old and I can't wait to teach him about Jesus. I know I have a lot of life ahead of me, including struggles, but I also know God has my back and won't give me anything I can't handle. I look forward to my relationship with Jesus, growing and becoming unstoppable.

So that is my story. Today, I get baptized because I want to publically proclaim that my faith and salvation is found in Jesus. If you have been through anything in life comparable to what I have gone through, I pray that you too will come to the same place I am today: in love with a God who sought me, bought me, loved me, and brought me home.

# Frankie LaFuente

My name is Frankie Lafuente and I am 22 years old this year. I was born in Riverside, but raised in Corona (yes, like the beer). I was raised going to church as kid; my dad went, but mom was very involved in the life of the church. I was taught that I should believe in Jesus, that God is a father, and that eternal life is only found in Christ...the problem was I didn't really believe it. I mean I believed but I didn't BELIEVE it.

When I was 10 my whole world turned upside down. My parents separated and my mom, with all of us kids, moved to Arroyo Grande. After the move we stopped going to church altogether.

When I was 12 my dad came back into the picture and my mom and dad started work it out. When I was 14 we all got back together and moved to Santa Maria. At 14 I started high school and got into a ton of "screaming" music that hated God. It's strange, looking back, how clear it all is now; the less I wanted to do with God the more angry I became and the more lust I experienced.

In my senior year of high school I met a girl who was in the same state of mind as I was and our relationship was not healthy. My whole world became her. I not saying it was all her fault, because we make our own choices, but she introduced me to drugs that slowly progressed downhill. After a few months I only dated her off and on but I jumped into the Rave scene. A lot of drugs, "hooking up," and stupidity became the normal mode of my life.

When I was almost 19, the beginning of college I met a girl who I thought I was going to marry. She pushed me to get a job and the people I ended up working for were a Christian couple who modeled Jesus in how they lived. Every day the radio would be on

# Terry Snyder

... Eventually the Holy Spirit started to convict me of my drug use and lifestyle.

to a radio station where there was someone preaching about Jesus (yes, at work). Eventually the Holy Spirit started to convict me of my drug use and lifestyle. I started to began to get a glimpse of what life could truly be when live with Christ as the center...and then I moved, again.

In May of this year my fiancé got into UCLA and we moved to Brentwood together. The eye opening work the Holy Spirit started to do in my life began to fade as I began to focus more on myself again. My fiancé was in a sorority and very busy with school which left me a lot of down time. My downtime steered me towards drugs, again. I became very selfish and my health became severely affected, to the point where I began to see and hear things that were not there.

I didn't have any money to pay the bills and I had to move back home. Having no money and being hooked on drugs is not a great catch for most girls, so my fiancé dumped me.

I went through a detox program and was able to see the where my life was headed. It was at the bottom, where Jesus revealed Himself to me and offered me hope in the worst place I could ever imagine myself. Too many people say God is crutch for weak people, well, thank God He is because I would never had made it out alive without Him.

In the lowest place Jesus saved me, restored me, and redeemed me...and that was 4 weeks ago. Today I stand before as a new creation in Christ getting baptized as a public proclamation of my faith. I am now going to school, have a couple part time jobs, and connecting to a church (Element). I am getting healthy again, but the most important thing in my life is spiritual health.

Jesus is amazing, I love Him because He first loved me. If you are at a place in your life where you think you have hit bottom, Jesus is already reaching out to you, trust Him with your life too.

It is strange writing my story because sometimes I feel as if I don't really have a story to tell. I was raised going to churches and have heard about Jesus from as early as I have memory. As long as I can remember I have believed and trusted Jesus with my life; that He died and rose for me and the world.

Years ago I got married to woman who was committed to the Catholic church. We had children, and she wanted to raise them in the Catholic tradition, so I attended sporadically for many years, mostly on major holidays. It wasn't that the Catholic church was bad, I simply didn't agree with all the ritual and it never felt like a home.

A little while ago I was diagnosed with throat cancer and decided it was time to get serious about finding a church to call my home. I checked out a few different places before finding Element. It saddens me that it took this illness to make me put myself out there to find a church home because I know I need Jesus, but I also need other people as well. The journeys we take in life are not meant to be solitary journeys, but journeys walked with other people who love Jesus as well. I also know that with the help of prayer from others, many things can be accomplished. I look forward to a more meaningful and deepened relationship with Christ and His church community here at Element or wherever He may lead me.

Today I am getting baptized because Jesus called us to be baptized; it is a step of obedience. I want to grow closer to Christ, and this is a step in that direction. I know faith in God and His word is the only way through my illness. Whether my faith results in healing or not, my hope will always be in Jesus.

Without The Father, Son, and Spirit in my life, there is no life. I look forward to wherever my path with Christ may take me, and I know that with Him my journey is not alone.

... Eventually the Holy Spirit started to convict me of my drug use and lifestyle.

# Tammy Graef

...I was treated, again, like I was damaged goods.

My name is Tammy Graef; I was born 36 years ago in Newark, Ohio. Writing a story like this is hard because it will give you a very intimate look at my life.

Due to abuse by my biological father I became a temporary ward of the state of California with unsupervised visits. I entered foster care at about 6 months of age. Around 1983, my biological father committed suicide by walking in front of a semi-truck. Before ending his life, the last time I saw him was at the termination of his parental rights hearing. Before he left the building (and my life) he said, "No one will ever love you and you will never amount to anything."

When I was 8 years old, I entered foster care permanently until I was 17 years old. The first foster care home I remember was when I was 5. My foster father sexually abused me for 3 years before my foster mother did anything about it. The foster father was sentenced to a year and a half in San Quentin for his crime. I was then placed in a residential home for children at the age of 9. Social workers tried placing me in numerous foster homes for the next three years. When I was 12, I was placed in a group home, spending weekends with a woman who would become my foster parent for the next three years. In the meantime, at the group home, I came to form a bond with the group home "parents," especially to the group home mom. I was saddened when I had to leave because I actually started to feel like I had a family.

The next five years in the foster system were difficult. I found myself resentful because I did not want to be there, resentful towards my foster mother because her care for me was not heartfelt. I was treated, again, like I was damaged goods. I was

dragged to church, forced to read self-help books and given the impression that, to her, I would never amount to anything but being damaged and hopeless. My freshman year of high school, I came to the point of writing good-bye letters to two of my friends, one of which told someone and it got back to my foster parent.

This letter started off another round of self-help books, written by Christian authors, counseling, and daily Bible verses. Around this time, a woman of a friend of my foster parent came to live with us. The reason I was given was that she needed a place to live. Both of these women wanted me to call them mom; they both wanted me to think, believe and act like them.

I made plenty of mistakes in high school. I was promiscuous. I wanted to be accepted and wanted by people, and I wanted it to be on my terms. I wanted to walk down my own path, not the path that my foster parent or her roommate demanded of me. I still found myself attempting to please them by going to church and being baptized, all the while it was something I did not want to do at all. Today I know that their views did not depict what is true about Jesus, but at that time I didn't know any better.

My senior year of high school I dated a guy in my class. At one point we had a report due the next day and I went to the library to work. My foster parent called for me and demanded I call her back. When I did call her back I got yelled and cursed at, again. Something inside me broke and I had had enough. I told her I would not be coming home and that I would be staying at the boyfriend's house.

I graduated high school, the relationship with the guy ended, and I met a guy who I married and I had three daughters with. My first

# Tammy Graef (Cont)

...He is working in my heart and mind. He is my redeemer. He is restoring me.

year of marriage was not too bad, but the years to follow were not so great. He became abusive to my daughters and me. Eventually my two oldest daughters were put into foster care, at my request, in hopes that my husband and I could go through anger management, counseling and parenting classes. After 2 years we finished the requirements of the court and the girls were back for good without court involvement...but the abuse continued.

My husband at the time was in the Army and was due to go overseas to Korea. I moved from one mistake to another because I started to talk to a guy on the Internet and decided to go live with him. My girls and I hopped on a bus and rode to the location. On the ride I spent all the money I had on food, diapers and what not. When we arrived, the guy met us at the station and told us his "mom said we could not stay." He took us to a motel and paid for one night.

The next morning, I found the girls and myself alone with no money and no idea what to do. We walked for a bit and a woman asked if we were okay. I explained the situation and she said I should go to the police station. I went to the police station and talked to the victims advocate person who called my mother-in-law at the time. She spoke negatively of me and informed the victims advocate of the girls being in foster care before, and of my husband being in Korea. I was arrested and charged with three counts of child neglect and spent four days in jail.

At the hearing, the case was expunged, but after talking to the social worker, the negative comments from my mother in law, and the girls being in foster care, they thought it better for me to terminate my parental rights. I wanted to fight this at first, but was

told I would lose if I did. A thought then struck me: if I gave up my parental rights and my husband did the same, the girls would be safe. I requested they remain together and that was allowed. My husband and I were divorced a year later.

After the divorce I made more mistakes, had more bad relationships, all the while looking for something I felt I needed. I continued to walk my own path while being angry and feeling utter resentment and hate for myself. I was angry with God as well, in fact, I hated Him. I hated what He allowed to be done to me as a child, hated that my daughters went through abuse, hated that I tried to get out of the situation for the sake of my daughters, but I still failed to protect them...and I hated myself for my part of the blame.

I looked in the mirror; I could only see hate, contempt, failure and indescribable anguish. I had lost any hope of being happy. I looked at myself and knew there was no hope for not hating what was staring back at me.

I know it's a lot to take in, but fast-forward to this last November.

I was married again and my husband and I would pass by Element when we were driving around town and something (Jesus) pulled me to want to go. I knew I wasn't who I needed to be from the times going to church as a teenager. I even began to remember some of the sermons I heard when God's Spirit made me finally realized that I could not continue this life on my own. I can't walk my own path because my own path always leads to destruction. I wanted something else.



# Tammy Graef (Cont)

In the latter part of November we started going to Element. The first service we attended I understood I needed Jesus. I spoke with Eric after the service and prayed with him. That day I came home and got on my knees and told Jesus that I was sorry for all of my sins and sorry for thinking I could do it on my own. I told Him that I needed Him and truly began seeking Him in prayer and reading his word.

In the time that I have been going to Element I have been seeking Him daily, praying for Him to make me whole, and to make me who He wants me to be. He is working in my heart and mind. He is my redeemer. He is restoring me. I have committed myself to Him, to reading His word and to going to Him in prayer.

Element asked us to write our story and to answer the question, "Why do you want to be baptized?" My reasons are as follows: the life I lived, the trials I faced, the emotional pain, the physical pain, the brokenness, the bitterness, the hate, the conditional love, the anger that plagued my life and my views and beliefs left me destitute. I used to think the experiences that went through were all that I was.

I now believe that Jesus allowed me to face these trials to show me who I am, and can be, IN HIM. He chose me in love and I chose Him because of who He is. I chose Him because He first chose me. I believe and follow Him because He died for me, because God's love is so great and pure, because He is my heavenly Father, because he is constantly working in my heart, and because I am His.

Being baptized is symbolic that all of my past, without Jesus in my life, is washed away including my past mistakes, failures, and emotional baggage. It is all buried and I am raised to walk in new life in Him.

# Caleb Conforti-Armstrong

My name is Caleb Conforti-Armstrong. I am 12, and I was born in Santa Maria. My family was attending CrossPoint Community Church which closed down recently. We started coming to Element because my brother, Nicholas Conforti, and sister, Emilee Conforti, had attended here with their father, and they really enjoyed it.

Before I became a follower of Christ I was rebellious and stubborn towards Christ. I was trusting in myself, and myself alone, to determine and lead my own path. I know you are thinking that I am only 12, but believe it or not, 12 year olds need Jesus just as much as everyone else. I was very closed up and kept everything, all my thoughts and feelings, inside of me.

I don't know the exact date that I decided to follow Jesus, many people have an exact date, but I don't. I know I went up to a few different alter calls during church services...but what I truly remember as my defining moment was one day, in the shower, I broke down and really confessed my desire for Him. I earnestly long for Him and His goodness in my life.

There are a few events that led to this moment. My dog, Jake, got hit by a car and died, I started going to Crosspoint Church and youth ministry, and I really wanted to have peace in my soul. When Crosspoint closed I was very sad, but Jesus offers life and hope again. He truly is a gracious God.

I now find my life has much more joy, and I feel a great peace inside. I don't feel so alone any longer because, I have been found by a great God who loves me.

Even at 12, I have had lots of hard struggles, but God has pulled me and put me together again..

...I earnestly long for Him and His goodness in my life.