**I’m not positive but I suspect I am the only active member of Covenant who found this church through an ad in the Houston Press. I’ve been accused of noticing the ad because I was scouring the personals. To be fair the ad was located in that general area of the paper but I’m sticking to my story that I was checking out the restaurant listings. I noted the ad because this was in the fall of 1995 and my life was undergoing huge change. I was nearing 40 and hadn’t been active in a church since my late teens and had just stopped drinking and found 12 step meetings. I was determined to change my life permanently so I took what I heard at meetings very seriously. It seemed the crux of the program involved finding a connection to God and I thought I might need a little outside help. I was intrigued by the word Baptist being included in an ad that stated “We welcome persons of all racial and ethnic heritages, all sexual orientations, and all faith perspectives to our Christian community.” I wasn’t even raised Baptist… we were Methodist but I thought to myself, “this I have to see”. It was the first and only church I visited.**

**I came to Covenant for the first time in December of 1995 and we were meeting at Bellaire Christian Church on Alder Street between Bellaire and Gulfton. Services were at 1:30 in the afternoon. The congregation was dwarfed by the size of the sanctuary and as I remember it there were about 40 attendees on an average Sunday. After church we would gather in the narthex of that building and form a circle where we would share our “Celebrations and Concerns”. On one of my first Sundays someone shared a prayer request for the Baptists who at that time were intent on converting our Jewish brethren. I thought to myself “these people are awesome”. Any Baptist church that is praying that the Baptists will see the error of their ways was intriguing enough to keep me coming back.**

**I also recall an early sermon that was completely affirming of the worthiness of gays and remember this was 20 years ago in Texas. I remember looking around at the congregation who at the time was mostly older than I and thinking “well they won’t be back next week”. Then it dawned on me they had been here for years. I was the newcomer. It was precisely what was being said from the pulpit that kept them coming back. I felt at home at Covenant. I had spent a couple of decades thinking I needed to get back to a faith community and when I finally got serious about including God in my life Covenant was here for me.**

**When I got to Covenant serious talk had begun about having a permanent home. I remember multiple meetings in the parlor of that church on Alder Street where we envisioned all our hopes for a new church building and most of the faces I remember from those days are in this room tonight. Most of you know from personal experience or have heard that during construction we as a congregation came to the lot at 4949 Caroline and wrote our hopes for this community on pieces of paper and stapled them to the beams of the building. I don’t remember what I wrote but I know that what has occurred has far exceeded what I could have dreamed. I suspect that is the same for many others who were present that day.**

**In this community I have been allowed to be a deacon, a worship leader, a committee member, a community volunteer, a Children’s Education teacher, even a yoga practitioner. When I was ordained as a deacon I brought my entire family because I knew they wouldn’t believe it unless they witnessed it. I remember too whisking them away as quickly as possible after the service so they wouldn’t grasp quite everything about this “liberal, ecumenical congregation”. When asked by parents what we were discussing in Children’s Education I occasionally responded that we were doing “Manger Makeover” or “Today we are discussing Glitter, Glamour and Galatians”. In truth my fellow teacher and I stuck to our lesson plan and we got the honor of knowing some of the most amazing young people you could ever meet.**

**In this community I am challenged both spiritually and intellectually. I once confessed as worship leader that sometimes you guys are over my head. I remember a social outing with a young Covenant couple and the discussion turned to writers. One of them turned to me and asked me who my favorite existential writer was. I remember a long pause before I blurted out “Did you guys see the dress J Lo wore to American Music Awards last week?” I felt a bit smug when they looked as baffled as I had just been.**

**In the twenty years I have been a part of Covenant one thing I have consistently believed is that this is the right faith community for me. I believe in the difference we make in the lives of those who participate here and I believe in the difference we aspire to make in our community especially the marginalized. I am consistently moved to tears at worship. From my life away from Covenant I know there are so many who need what we have here. A few folks I have told about Covenant are here tonight. One recruit recently told me I was an awful salesman. We had discussed his searching for ways to grow spiritually and I casually mentioned what my church has meant to me. I am reluctant to promote too much because I know what a turnoff that is to me but we have something really special here that can make such a difference in the lives of others. It is so gratifying to see all the newer faces who have their own stories about how they got to Covenant. The fact that one of the main reasons we need to expand our building is that we need room for our children and youth is especially gratifying to those of us who joined at a time that there was not a peer group for younger people.**

**I have so much gratitude for the gratitude Covenant has played in my life these many years. I have felt loved and supported through every challenge I’ve gone through and I also have felt affirmed and celebrated for every great thing that has occurred in my life. I want to thank those whose dedication and sacrifice has supported this community for years before I found it and wish all of you newer than I the many years of growing up here at Covenant that I have experienced. I would like especially to thank our friend Richard Huff who we lost just this past August. He helped make our home on Caroline a reality and his dedication to our church is something I want to honor by giving more of myself to this community that he so loved. I look forward to being a part of the exciting days ahead as we work together to do the things that will allow many others to find what we have found at Covenant.**