



# RENEWAL PROJECT IN PROGRESS

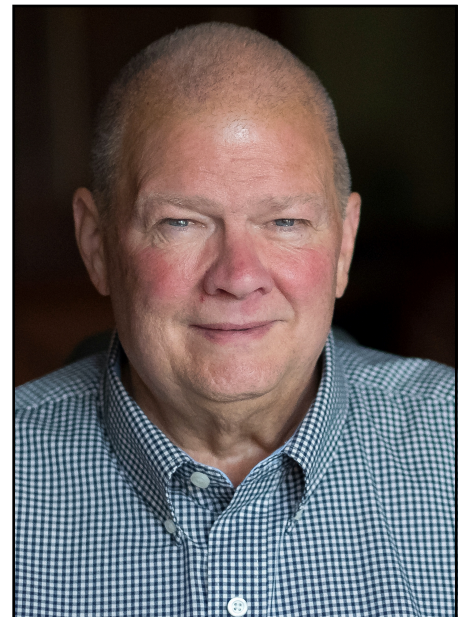
*A personal testimonial by Daryl E. Witmer*

Monson, Maine | ©2017-2018

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*In early 2017* a philanthropic Maine-based foundation began investing millions of dollars in the small town of Monson, Maine. I've lived in Monson since 1975 and have watched the town suffer through years of decline. First we lost our primary employer, then our elementary school, and then the General Store. But now, suddenly, through no merit of our own, we have been chosen. The foundation's stated intent is to revitalize the community — renewing Monson as a center for art, recreation, and agriculture. They've taken us on as their project — and we're hoping for the best.

This incident seems to me not altogether unlike what God has committed to do with my life. I was born over sixty-six years ago. But at birth I was spiritually dead and separated from God. I was damaged and in decline. And then one day, because of absolutely nothing that I had done, God in His great mercy chose me and took me on as His project. He revived me. He is committed to re-forming me. And I'm sure that He will see the process through to completion. *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 1:6).



**Here's the story of how it all happened, and is continuing to happen.**

On May 20, 1951, I was born into a Christian home. My father and his father and his father's father were all strong believers. They lived out their faith consistently. My mother was also genuine and disciplined in her commitment to Christ. As a young boy, I remember often seeing her reading her Bible and praying. I would hear her singing hymns of faith around the house. There are ministers in my lineage. So you can see that the roots of my family tree are grounded deep in the soil of Christian faith.

I was raised in the fellowship of a Christ-centered Bible-preaching church located in Paradise, Pennsylvania. We went to Paradise every Sunday! The congregational singing was especially heavenly — hymns in four-part harmony. I remember the words of those hymns today. They were rich in theological truth. They helped me to form an early understanding of God, His attributes, and His purposes for human life.

When I was seven years old I asked Jesus Christ to rule my life and forgive my sins — past, present, and future. I took it on faith that He did just that, instantly. I was baptized and joined the church at the age of 14. Then I got involved in the youth fellowship and eventually became its president.

I memorized Scripture. I defended my faith and my Christian moral standards in school. During my senior year of high school I was elected student body president. I passed my college exams and was accepted to Wheaton College in Illinois, as well as to our denominational college in Virginia.

But about this time I began to ask a lot of questions. How could I be certain that Christianity was true? What if I had been born in India to Hindu parents? Would I still be a Christian? Who was I, really? Why was the Bible true and not the Book of Mormon?

Just short of the completion of my second year in college I decided to put all further formal education on hold. By that time I was dating Mary Rachel Lehman, whom I would later marry. But I suspended even that relationship. Everything in life somehow suddenly seemed secondary to resolving these deeply pressing philosophical and spiritual issues.

For the next two years I traveled extensively. I read continually — often late into the night. I talked to others who had either already experienced, or were currently engaged in, a similar search for truth. At least in cursory fashion I examined Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, objectivism (Rand), immaterialism (Berkeley), and a variety of other philosophies, belief systems, and worldviews.

I was determined to be totally objective in the *process* of my search, and to follow the truth wherever the truth would lead. Beginning with the foundational axiom *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), I tried to build a unified worldview on the basis of reason alone. Over a period of time, and on my own, I came to a view that I later discovered was already known in philosophical circles as *radical solipsism*. My pilgrimage for truth had been trying and fearful to begin with, but this concept left me utterly lonely and distressed. Still, unwilling to reject the view on those grounds alone, I pressed on.

In early Fall, 1972, I boarded a 747 flying from New York to Switzerland. Arriving in Geneva, I traveled by train and then by bus to the little mountain village of Huémoz. There I met Os Guinness who, after an interview, registered me as a student at the *L'Abri Fellowship*, a study community for others on a quest for truth about meaning. Founded by the late Christian author and thinker, Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer, *L'Abri* at that time had already become noted as a *shelter* for seekers of all ages, helping many to find a reasonable basis for historic Christian faith. Schaeffer himself was once referred to in a *Time* magazine article as a “missionary to the intellectuals.”

My time at *L'Abri* was brief. It did not yield an instant solution. In fact, after meeting personally with Schaeffer on two occasions, my spirit was in an even greater state of turmoil. He used an apologetic approach with me that he widely advocated, known as “taking the roof off” — pressing me to face the frightening implications of living consistently with my false worldview at the time. As a result, I experienced even greater confusion, fear, and desperation. Walking alone in a grassy meadow high in the Alps some distance from town, I actually contemplated for a moment whether I wanted to go on with this painful search, or with the journey of life at all.

Looking back, I believe that God sovereignly designed my visit to *L'Abri* to accomplish a number of purposes. From conversations around the dinner table at Chalet Les Melezes, to cleaning toilets and baling hay as part of my work assignment, to the books and lectures and tapes that I was assigned for my study course, important foundations were being established — or reinforced!

The turning point in what was without question the most determinative period of my life came later that same Fall. I was back in the United States and it was a dismal, wet, weekend in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. As I lay half-listening to the wind and rain tear at the canvas roof of the tent in which I was camping, I began to uncover what amounted to a series of critical errors in the reasoning process that had led me down the deceptive path of solipsism.

Of course, it was not me, on my own, who uncovered these errors. I’m convinced that it was the Spirit of God, by means of some key revelatory thought trains, who introduced these errors and correctives to my mind. I was His project and He was guiding me into all truth (John 16:13)—reviving and re-forming me.

This major development opened doors to the overwhelming evidence that I had already discovered for *intelligently* building my faith on the propositional truths of Scripture. And then, within weeks, for the first time in a long while — or perhaps even *ever* in my life — I was able to approach the infinite-personal God of the Bible by faith, in confidence, and with intellectual integrity.

I spent that Winter with wolves in the remote reaches of northern Alberta, Canada — reading, studying, reflecting, and refining the conclusions resulting from my long search for truth. At some point during this period I also began to experience my first sense of a call to ministry. I’m quite certain that this call came from God, but I’m also sure that it was inextricably linked to the growing desire that He had placed in my heart to share with others the insights gained from my own quest.

Following our wedding in 1973, Mary (Lehman) and I lived in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, for nearly two years. I worked with my father in the front office of a country inn owned and operated by my folks at that time. I served as Director at a church camp, supervising staff and program throughout the intense (no pun intended), fast-paced, ten-week, 1000-camper, Summer season.

At the same time, thanks to a mentoring relationship with a seasoned pastor who believed in me, I began to gain first-hand experience in local church leadership — preaching, visitation, administration, and more — at a small church in Christiana, Pennsylvania.

Two years later God moved suddenly and miraculously in our lives. Within just months He opened to us a great, new door of opportunity. In September of 1975 we were called to serve a three-church rural parish in north central Maine. For the next eight and a half years I preached three times every Sunday morning. During the week I was even busier, meeting the needs of three growing congregations. Our oldest sons, Andrew and Stephen (twins) were born in 1976, and another son, Timothy, was born in 1979. With three churches and three boys, our lives were full.

From the beginning of our 30 years of pastoral ministry in Maine, one of our major goals was that each of the three churches would eventually be established as a doctrinally sound, self-supporting, local ministry. In 1984 we took a big step in that direction by calling a full-time pastor to serve the largest of the three fellowships. An ensuing period of transition went well and we were feeling most encouraged in the work when, once again, our lives were suddenly and dramatically altered by developments with life-changing implications. It was just 13 days before Christmas.

On December 12, 1984, overnight, I developed a rare autoimmune condition known as Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). Within just hours I was admitted to the largest medical center in our region of the state. By the following day I was almost completely paralyzed in every part of my body — unable to move, swallow, or even breathe on my own. A mechanical respirator pumped air into and out of my lungs day and night — hour after hour — as I lay totally helpless in an Intensive Care Unit. The days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months. In spite of the continuous presence and loving support of my family during the entire time of my hospital stay, the ordeal took a huge toll on our lives — in so many different ways.

My hospitalization lasted from December, 1984, until August, 1985. But even then the ordeal did not end. In fact, it continues to this day. I say this while simultaneously keenly aware that my own physical condition, limitations, level of pain, and challenges do not begin to compare with that of many others who have experienced far worse, including perhaps some of you who are reading this. But in the midst of the battle it's not easy to compare. Each of us struggle with our own set of trials.

For me, it has been health issues and financial expense, all secondary to life in a wheelchair. Because Mary has been willing to help me, she has not been able to earn a full second salary. Insurance certainly does not cover many of the expenses that are related to my disability. Additionally, there are quality of life issues inherent to long-term leg, hand, and finger paralysis. I almost daily miss playing guitar, riding horse, walking in the woods, standing by Mary's side, and looking people straight in the eye while conversing (rather than sitting under a shower of their spit!)

Nevertheless, in spite of all this, I have come to recognize the astounding fulfillment of God's promise to me in 1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV). That text says that . . . *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

For me the **temptation** has at times been to yield to despair, or to simply give up. The **way of escape** is at least five-fold: **1)** God has given me an indescribably supportive life-partner in Mary; **2)** God has given me work that is meaningful and important; **3)** God has supplied our financial needs, although not all of our wants; **4)** God has placed in our lives many faithful caring friends, including our AIIA Board of Directors; and **5)** God has made available to us the many advantages of modern technology, allowing me to be independent to a great extent, e.g. drive our van safely and reliably to my office each day — even in the dead of a harsh Maine Winter!

Mary helps me every day in countless ways — emotionally, physically, practically. She has given up many of her own dreams and desires in order to stand by me in sickness (not health) and in spite of the fact that things took a turn for the worse (not better) just eleven years after we exchanged vows. She has been faithful and positive through it all, a truly indispensable part of my ministry.

By January of 1986 I once again began productively serving as pastor of the churches in Abbot and Monson. Five years later, because of continued growth, the Abbot church was also able to call a full-time pastor. We elected to remain with the third church, and to continue living in the community where we'd been since 1975. But at that point we were faced with the prospect of only half support.

Once again God moved in a remarkable manner, clearing the way for us to launch a new, national, ministry of Christian apologetics. Because apologetics had played such a key role in the way that I had come to meaningful faith, I had long harbored a great passion for such work.

By the Spring of 1991 we had formed a Board of Directors. We agreed that the primary goal of this new initiative would be to provide simple but intelligent answers to many of the difficult questions about the rational basis for the Christian faith. We called the organization the **AIIA Institute** and based our work on the principles and approach of the Apostle Paul at the original Areopagus as recorded in Acts 17.

Since its inception in April of 1991, God has steadily expanded AIIA's circle of influence. We began with a mailing list of 500 and are currently mailing our bimonthly thoughtletter to well over 10,000 addresses in all 50 states and 35 countries internationally. For many years we have hosted a Spring Symposium, a Fall Forum, an annual two-day DEFENDERS seminar for college-age youth, and a monthly meeting known as Faith Matters, where we review the latest in apologetics resources.

In addition to maintaining AIIA's website at [AIIAInstitute.org](http://AIIAInstitute.org), speaking in churches and various other venues throughout New England and beyond, and publishing the thoughtletter, we operate a Resource & Study Center in Monson that features an extensive library of apologetics-related texts and audio-visual resources and also provides a base for our administrative work.

Following four years of preparation, in May of 2016 AIIA hosted **WHY JESUS? 2016** — very possibly the largest Christian apologetics conference in America — ever, and almost certainly the largest ever in northern New England. Up to 7,000 believers and seekers attended the event from 22 states and four Canadian provinces. With over 50 exhibits and a team of nationally-known speakers, it was a truly historic occasion, and a great rallying point for the Church in the six-state region.

Later in 2016 AIIA hosted a standing-room-only forum on what it means for belief systems to co-exist, featuring representatives of Buddhism, Atheism, Islam, Judaism, and evangelical Christianity. This forum was held at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. It proved to be an enlightening and informative event, and one that afforded Christianity a full seat at the table in a secular academic setting where the Christian worldview is often marginalized — notable in and of itself!

In June of 2017 AIIA called together 45 vocational Christian apologists, pastors, campus ministry leaders, and other Christian believers with a passion for Christian apologetics. For 24 hours this group holed up in a large conference room at a Bangor area hotel, putting our heads together on how best to practice and promote apologetics at the local level in our generation. In the late Fall of 2017 we published a white paper detailing the results of this Think Tank event. A complimentary copy was sent to over 700 local churches throughout New England and beyond, and a downloadable version of the paper was made available on AIIA's website.

This is the story of God's power being manifest through the weakness of just one person. He took me on as His project — investing in me — accepting me, saving me, reviving me, re-forming me, and renewing me for His own purposes. He's already done this for the Church, historically. He's now doing it for me. He'll do it for you. To God be the glory.

*"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves;" 2 Corinthians 4:7*

**Daryl E. Witmer**

Monson, Maine

Updated to January, 2018

**NOTE:** For a **free** copy of *Passing Showers*, a 48-page booklet with photos, that offers an account of some of the spiritual lessons growing out of my 1984-1985, and ongoing, ordeal with Guillain-Barré syndrome, and/or to be included among the thousands of others who are currently receiving a **free** copy of AIIA's one-page bimonthly thoughtletter, the *Proclamation*, write to:

AIIA Institute

PO Box 262

Monson ME 04464

Or contact us at [AIIAInstitute@aol.com](mailto:AIIAInstitute@aol.com) or via the Contact page at [AIIAInstitute.org](http://AIIAInstitute.org)