

We are so thankful every day to have Emmanuel, Father Chuck, and each of you in our life. We joined as members of Emmanuel more than two years ago for one basic reason: it was meant to be. Simply put, there are no coincidences in life.

In 1969, the Yianilos family moved from Buffalo, New York to Springfield, Virginia. Our family (members of the Greek Orthodox Church) moved directly across the street from Charlie and Barbara McCoart and their very large Catholic family with seven kids. Who would have thought then that nearly fifty years later — in a national capital region that has more than 6 million people — that Chuck and I would be living in Alexandria worshipping together at one of our neighborhood Episcopal churches. While Chuck and his siblings are closer in age to my own siblings, the McCoart family was a strong presence in my life from the outset. Some of those memories include: neighborhood soccer games in the street; watching Chuck's brother Kevin jump out of a top story window in his house into the deep snow in a blizzard in the late '70s; Colonel and Brock McCoart (two of Chuck's previous German Shepherds) always sitting regally in the McCoart front yard; seeing the smile on Charlie McCoart's face during one of the high school parties I had when my Mom was out of town and wondering if I would be told on; and my mother repeatedly telling me and my siblings — why can't you all be more like the McCoart kids?

But beyond fun neighborhood memories, Chuck has seemingly been a source for compassion and spiritual growth in my life from a young age. It probably all started for me after my Dad died when I was 10 years old. Chuck started to regularly check in on my mother, who was understandably devastated. Chuck would help around the house and yard but most importantly, he would sit down with her and patiently listen to her. To this day, my mother has not forgotten the time that Chuck spent with her, and even today he remains a special person to her.

My own deeper connection with Chuck started to develop in college, as I also started to seek deeper spiritual meaning in my life. After I learned that Chuck was in the area, we connected and regularly started to have meals together. Again, he would listen, not judge, and show compassion and understanding. It quickly became obvious to me that Chuck was unlike any other priest I had ever been around.

After Torra and I met in 2001, I introduced her to Chuck. Like me, she was drawn to his sincerity, his aura, his loving manner, compassion and his really relevant sermons to everyday life. Torra and Chuck found an instant bond. His message is one of inclusion and love, which is how we see God. Meanwhile, Torra and I started to look for churches to call our own. For one reason or another, we just never seemed to find a connection. So, we would sometimes make the trek down to Mount Vernon to see Chuck at Good Shepherd, but joining the Catholic Church did not feel like the right fit for us. So, we continued to search.

Over the next several years, Torra and I got married. Chuck was there to help marry us. We had children (Anthony and Ellie), and Chuck was there. Like all families, we have experienced good times and tough challenges. Chuck has been there with us every step of the way with love and spiritual guidance. After Chuck told us he was leaving the Catholic Church and joining the Episcopal Church, we prayed that he would find a church home close to us in the neighborhood. Of course, he ultimately landed at Emmanuel. Interestingly, a few years before we had tried to become part of the Emmanuel preschool family but were not lucky enough to have won the preschool lottery. Nevertheless, when Chuck told us he was coming to Emmanuel, we felt like we had won the spiritual lottery.

So why are we at Emmanuel? Because it seems like God has cleared a path for us to walk on and has given us everything we ever wanted in this parish community. We have an amazing pastor. We feel like we are part of a growing spiritual community where inclusion, compassion and young children are welcome and appreciated. It is important for us to have a community where there is a strong component of children's spiritual education as well as a recognition that children in church can, well... act like children sometimes. I also love the fact that Joani is so vocal in support of people with mental illness. What important work that so few people are really talking about. And, finally, we love that there are so many families with young children and a sense of vibrancy in our parish community. Torra, the kids and I look forward to continuing to grow in this community with each of you. We are so blessed for this amazing opportunity and are so interested in seeing why God has brought us all together.

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