I have always been interested in religion in general, although I grew up unchurched and did not feel the need for a faith community until I reached my thirties. I studied the world’s major religions and attended churches in several Christian denominations, but none appealed to me. In fact, organized religion seemed to be a focus for much of the evil done in the world; during graduate school I read Freethought (anti-religion, especially anti-Christian) publications, which supported this outlook. As a child and young adult, I felt most strongly connected to the spiritual when I spent time alone, roaming the meadows and forests. Naturalistic pantheism came closest to my spiritual views: I believed in a non-sentient and impersonal Universe as being synonymous with God, represented most strongly by Nature.

When I first began attending the Religious Society of Friends’ Meeting in 1997, I also spent time in an Episcopal church as part of a women’s spirituality group, and played music for mass several times. I learned a lot about spirituality in general through the women’s group, and I realized then that the quietness of Friends’ Meeting didn’t meet all of my needs. Nor did the already-established Friends book-study group. Friends, also known as Quakers, often refer to themselves as seekers—experiencing leadings to seek God in different ways and places—and these leadings can draw us away for awhile but usually draw us back to the Meeting too. Sometimes I felt the pull of formal ritual and at other times the beauty of spiritual music lured me to the Episcopal mass. Neither of those is found as a programmed part of my Meeting for Worship. Yet my connection to and interest in the Episcopal church waned over time.

I began to feel curious about the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church when I met two Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs), though by then I had been a confirmed and recorded member
of the Religious Society of Friends for several years. While curiosity initially drew me to attend
each of their churches, it was something much deeper which led me to continue seeking to
understand their beliefs and way of life. Looking back, I can’t explain the draw I felt as anything
other than a call from God—it was not rational but it was insistent, persistent, and wouldn’t let
me go about my daily life. Over several months, curiosity evolved into a deep need to be
present to the Adventists. I was drawn to religious devotion in the worship services and to
studying the Bible in Sabbath School, not just to reading about their religious practices on my
own. Thus, despite my many reservations about their beliefs and my discomfort in their
presence, I began to study and worship with them.

I sought to have this leading or calling formally recognized as ministry within my Friends
meeting. Thus, I requested to be recorded (officially recognized) as a Minister of Ecumenism in
order to feel grounded in the Grand Rapids Friends Meeting and to give a clear signal to the
Adventists that I wasn’t seeking to be converted. This ministry led me to study the Friends’
religious tradition much more deeply than previously, though I have just begun to scratch the
surface.

During this time, I did experience a profound conversion, leading me away from my view
of myself as a non-theist, believing in god as synonymous with universe, to my experience of
God as a Being, capable of asking me directly why I continued to doubt and resist. At first
acutely resistant to a Christocentric standpoint, I also came to understand its place in the history
and present expression within the Religious Society of Friends. I seek to follow the radical
example of Jesus, the epitome of living out “that of God within,” while acknowledging the
powerful exemplars from other faiths as well.
In documenting the living out of my calling, I began to examine what it means to reach out to another faith community and to be welcomed in by them, with the permission and blessing of my primary community. I pondered what ecumenism can mean for the world’s peoples who are trying to get along without warring over religion, what it means to welcome people who are not going to convert into the community—what it looks like to meet individuals exactly where they are. I wondered if there is a line beyond which either party is not willing to go, how relationships develop, and what it means to love thy neighbor as thyself.

This, then, is a description of a personal journey between Christian denominations. It is also one depiction of how we might live into love, meeting each other within Christianity and also across religions. It is my attempt to grapple with others’ beliefs and move into love and acceptance despite and even because of our differences and uniquenesses. After this period spent with the SDAs, I better understand theologically conservative and evangelical Christianity, including the variety of Friends’ thought, practice, and history.