

## Alumni Spotlight: Jason Smith (MACT '16)



**Current title:** Lead Pastor at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

**Family:** Wife: Jessica, Children: Savannah, Eden, and Charlotte

**Favorite professor:** Tim Laniak & Don Fairbairn

**Favorite classes:** Soteriology & Lewis and Tolkien

**Favorite memory:** Some of the best days of my time at Gordon-Conwell were long research and writing days in the library in Charlotte. I distinctly remember once, while buried in my piles of books, hearing the Lord speak to me that I was being prepared for future

moments of ministry and good works God had planned in advance for me, not just jumping hurdles for graduation and ordination.

### Would you tell us about the church you are currently serving?

I have been the Lead Pastor at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, CA for just over two years now. This is a 75-year-old church with a rich history of impact in our local Southern California region as well as nationally and internationally. I have the privilege of following Dr. John Huffman, former Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Gordon-Conwell and pastor of St. Andrew's for thirty-plus years, and he is still a regular attendee and mentor of mine. Our church is in a phase of revitalization as we grow younger, reimagine our unique ministry opportunities, and capitalize on a location that has small community feel with huge reach due to our context and congregation. We are a multi-generational church that is working hard on becoming intergenerational, along with launching a Leadership Institute, a Creative Arts Institute, and new initiatives in the area of Faith, Work and Economics. We are part of the ECO Presbyterian denomination and enjoy a robust mix of intellectual and transformational worship and discipleship.

### How did you come to be doing your current work in ministry?

I previously served for fifteen years at Forest Hill Church in Charlotte, NC with strong ties to Gordon-Conwell. It was a no brainer to pursue my seminary education on nights and weekends there and it prepared me well for vocational ministry in the local church setting. After a fifteen-year run at Forest Hill Church as a Discipleship Director, Campus Pastor, and Lead Pastor, my wife and I answered a clear call to St. Andrew's that was a huge move taken in faith for us. She had lived in Charlotte all her life, and it was where we had built long friendships, community ties, and lots of family. The thought of a change to a new church in an unfamiliar context was energizing, but also a bit scary for our family. Our oldest daughter was about to enter her senior year in high school and

the prospect of uprooting to move to the West Coast drove us to deep prayer and discernment.

However, in His graciousness, the Lord made it abundantly clear that we could trust Him with all of our concerns while we took steps of obedience to follow where He was leading. He has been true to that promise as we have adjusted to our life here in Orange County.

**What do you love about the ministry work you are doing now?**

Witnessing the authenticity of following Jesus in Southern California is such an inspiring and refreshing experience. Coming from the Bible belt where, even today, there is still some cultural pressure to at least attend church or be a nominal Christian, watching people choose Christianity in the face of cultural headwinds is amazing. When someone decides to give his or her life to Christ here, you can see the counter-cultural way they begin to live—from hospitality and building community to their pursuit of Biblical truth; it stands out beautifully. I love the challenge of building a staff team that is collaborative and laser-focused on our mission, as well as being encouraged to experiment with new modes of discipleship and evangelism.



**What are the particular challenges of serving in a large church in general, and in your specific context?**

The benefits of large churches are clear—access to financial support, diversity of thought and life stages, and enough critical mass to feel like you can make a demonstrable difference in service, outreach, and love of the community. However, as you might guess, these strengths have a shadow side that can be difficult. The complexity of leadership that must be delegated in order to be effective, serving the needs of a wide range of ages that have vastly different preferences and expectations, and the constancy of vision leak and mission creep that you must battle to stay tightly aligned all create a complexity that demands a different level of leadership than simply good preaching and team building. St. Andrew's is blessed with members who have led at the highest level of industry and innovation in many cases, which creates a pool of highly capable advisors as well as high expectations for excellence. It's a great challenge!

**What has been Gordon-Conwell's biggest impact/influence on your ministry or the way you engage in ministry?**

I think the largest impact on my ministry today is a deep and abiding love of teaching in a Biblically faithful and contextually relevant way. The diversity of perspectives in my classes caused me to hold much tighter to the essentials of our orthodox faith and allow myself to be challenged by the depth of thought and the passion for truth that people with different evangelical faith traditions and worldviews would bring to discussions. I

think in a place like SoCal, you can be much more effective after having wrestled with the implications and applications of the Gospel in real time rather than simply having assumed a priori from the academy. I believe my church benefits from that foundation that Gordon-Conwell gave me as much as I do in living out my faith.

**What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are beginning in ministry?**

Learn to exegete your community and the people whom God has given you to shepherd and reach them with equal passion as your exegesis of Scripture. Consider the incredible truth found in Acts 17, that God has placed you in proximity to people who are reaching for Him for His rescue, for His comfort, and for the abundant life He offers. As they reach to Him they may bump into you; His incarnated presence is staggering and thrilling. Learn to love the people you have, not just the people that you wish you had, and watch as God does more through your submission to them than your supervision of them while He works patience in you. That kind of ministry is beautiful and worth giving your whole self to.