

# Ecclesia Clear Lake Elder Profile

Name: Briana Perea, September 2023

1. How long have you been a part of the Ecclesia Clear Lake church family? What initially drew you to the community?

Manny and I first became involved with ECL about 10 years ago (our son Asher just turned 9, so this has been his church home his entire life). We had recently left a church where we were heavily involved, and were looking for a community where we could rest and recover. At the time, I thought I wanted to land at a large church where we could be anonymous, but after our first visit to ECL, we knew this was the place for us.

The pastor was leading a series on Acts, which was a great introduction to the community. We were also drawn in by the friendliness of the people we met, and sensed that this was a community of authentic striving. A lot of churches invite you to come as you are and claim that all are welcome, and we felt that the people of ECL really meant it. I have always felt that as individuals we may have our blind spots, but as a body we are willing to learn how to do and be better. Finally, I was impressed that women had a seat at the leadership table, and I appreciated the weekly practice of communion, which has been a way marker in my faith walk.

2. In what ways do you currently serve in the church and in the community?

Most recently at ECL, I served for a couple years in the rotation of people leading prayer during worship, before taking a pause last year. Prior to that, I volunteered in the children's ministry for five-ish years until we closed the building for COVID. Outside of ECL, I have at different times supported organizations relating to arts and culture, education, the environment and immigration through various activities.

3. Share an overview of your faith story.

I was first baptized as an infant in the Catholic tradition, but my family was not especially religious and I was left to my own devices when it came to chasing after God. We seldomly attended church, but I have always felt a curiosity about God and would look for him in a big, red children's Bible I found on a bookshelf. We did attend church enough that I developed a strong fear of hell, which was highly motivating in my pursuit of God. I prayed frequently and listened to religious radio, but I didn't realize that I was missing the community aspect of being rooted in a church body. One of my recurring prayers was for God to bring me closer to him, which turned out to be one of those "careful what you wish for" kind of things.

In my early 20s, I spent about half a year confronting traumatic experiences from my childhood, and decided life was simpler without God. It's not that I didn't believe in him any longer, but I wasn't too concerned about being close to him. I was stressed and worn out, and ultimately contracted a series of illnesses that forced me to stop moving, and to rest, which gave me time to contemplate things. I decided God had been working to get my attention, and spent the next several years searching for a community where I could belong and grow in my relationship to God.

Manny and I eventually set roots down at a church, serving in several ministries and learning the value of a body of people pursuing God together. My experiences there were instrumental in shaping my belief that close relationships are necessary for developing spiritual maturity and for experiencing aspects of God's love and grace. My experiences also taught me that churches can sometimes create a high barrier to entry beyond what the Bible dictates, often due to tensions surrounding culturally-rooted expressions of faith and personality. I know that God has room for us all in his house, and at this point in my faith walk, I am trying to uncover my role in sharing the good news of his reconciliation for people from all backgrounds.

4. At ECL we long to have deep roots in the historic Trinitarian Christian faith of the global church. Reflect on your understanding of the Trinity.

My understanding of the Trinity is that all three aspects - Father, Son, Holy Spirit - are necessary together for a fuller understanding of the divine being we call God. He is complete in his almighty lordship, in his humble servanthood, and in his discerned yearnings. He is Creator, Reconciler and Revealer. Why God chose a trinity to express himself I cannot claim to understand, except that he must be too "big" to contain in one figure as we understand it. The trinity reflects the multifaceted ways we relate not only to God but also to each other and to creation.

5. At ECL we long for deep bonds of connection in human relationships within our church and in our community. What is the role of authentic and healthy community in church and in faith formation?

I think a church thrives best when it has a healthy community within its walls, and a tangible relationship with neighbors outside its walls. My personal experiences have taught me that community is necessary for spiritual healing and growth, but real damage can be done when churches are not healthy. So we must be careful stewards of our people, resources and the organization itself.

We are called to bear each other's burdens, and historically ECL has done this well at moments of disaster, but I hope we can also do this well on a smaller scale from week to week. We are also called to be iron sharpening iron, and I think diversity (of all kinds) and trust are important factors for a church body in this regard. Finally, we will not be a welcoming place for our neighbors if they walk in and sense disfunction, so authentic

and healthy community is essential for us to be able to serve well outside our walls. There is a caveat, however: given that we are all flawed, imperfect people striving together, grace must also be present for a healthy culture at ECL.

6. At ECL we long to be actively engaged in matters of compassion and justice in our community and world. Why is this an important longing? What does a healthy posture of pursuing this longing look like in our context?

I believe that God invites us into his creative work by authorizing us to tend to his garden, and our individual gifts and passions determine our precise roles in that restoration work. When I imagine what God's ideal of wholeness looks like, matters of compassion and justice are right there in his call to care for the poor, widowed and orphans, and in his condemnation for deceit, idolatry and hypocrisy. Such matters are also present in Jesus' humility when he breaks bread with society's outcasts, and in his righteous anger at the religious leaders who poorly represented God to the people.

In general, I think a healthy posture for serving each other and our community starts with listening more than speaking. This allows us to learn where our biases and shortcomings fall, and helps us recognize the opportunities we have to be and do good. There is a possibility for meaningful connection when we are able to think beyond ourselves and consider the experiences of others. This also requires an awareness of what is going on around us so that we can use the gifts and resources we have to fulfill our callings, together.