

Announcer: Welcome to Featured Faculty, a podcast series about Anderson University professors and their lives both in and out of the classroom.

Hannah Ader: My name is Hannah Ader and I'm in the studio today with Dr Jason Varner, Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity, who joined the Faculty of Anderson just a few years ago in 2016. Dr. Varner, you obviously spend a great deal of your time teaching, so I'd like to begin by asking you to tell me a little bit about that part of your job.

Dr. Jason Varner: I teach four classes a semester. Three out of the four of those are through the School Theology and Christian Ministries and one out of the four is always with the History department. So a bit of a split load there. Yeah, I teach undergrads almost exclusively, although I do supervise some master's students in the School of Theology. I teach everything from Intro to Bible, Christianity and Social Justice, those are the two that really I would say are my kind of heavier Christian ministries type classes. Then I have Intro to philosophy. I teach the Intro to Philosophy class here. American Religious History, History of Christianity. And right now I'm teaching a class that I'm loving and it's basically Europe from Charlemagne to Luther, which I love that class. It's amazing. It's a lot of fun.

Hannah Ader: Is that your favorite one to teach?

Dr. Jason Varner: At the moment it is, mainly because the readings, it's an upper level course, so the readings are kind of bringing me back to Grad school and and pushing me a bit to develop a bit ... Oh, what's the word? Maybe a bit more familiarity with the little eddies and streams of European history that you just don't get to when you're teaching main survey courses. I did my master's here at Anderson University, so I did my undergrad here, did a master's in Theology, but my master's in Scotland at the University of St. Andrews was in Early Modern History.

Hannah Ader: So does being over in Europe for Grad School, does that have any influence on, you think, the appreciation for this course?

Dr. Jason Varner: To a degree I think so, yeah. Some affinity. It was such a weird moment when I realized that my cohort, I was the only North American and my cohort, this was their history. They were far more prepared for that master's than I was, even as someone who had a history major from my undergrad. You know, they live that stuff. So I was an outsider and it took some catching up. I didn't make that my specialty here, and over there that was important.

Hannah Ader: Why history when you went over there?

Dr. Jason Varner: So, I had worked actually in several different industries after my master's here, I should say at Anderson University, and what I found was I was trying to get a better feel for what I liked, what I didn't. And I love ideas. I love books. I like the idea that with history there's so much to argue about, don't get me wrong, interpretation, and what does an event mean? And in what sense did it happen even to get into some of the philosophy of history. But there's also room, and I found this to be

true as I've been a student, an international student abroad, and also I will say as the only, I'd say the only evangelical Christian in my department, obviously I bring with me to Grad school certain agreements about reality, how about that. And I don't share any of those with any of my peers. And yet, because we're doing history, we had a lot of room for good conversation I think, because there was a lot that we could talk about that sources and data just kind of brought out.

Hannah Ader: A lot of people probably don't, especially coming back to Anderson and teaching, they wouldn't assume that you probably were abroad. Because I think people that go abroad tend to really like it there and want to say. But why Scotland, first of all? Why come back to AU?

Dr. Jason Varner: Well, Scotland's the best country in the world.

Hannah Ader: But you didn't know that before you went?

Dr. Jason Varner: I didn't. I suppose I didn't have experiential knowledge of that, but I'd certainly heard testimony and I had a sense. So why Scotland? Okay. Well, for me I'd had one professor during my first master's who did biblical studies at Aberdeen, Dr. Tim Dwyer. He was probably my best professor to that point, and still remains in that upper echelon. I remember actually, we had classes on Monday night, three hours, and when I signed up I couldn't believe we were going to sit still for three hours. And I thought this is going to be a slog. But I remember literally thinking midway through the first lecture that there's no place in the world I'd rather be than in this seat right now. And that's a great feeling for a student.

It's very rare in your life that you feel like you're in the exact place you're supposed to be in that particular time. When time and space intersect in a way that serendipitous, those are really special moments. And for me that was one of those moments, just that first class, and I realized this is special. It just gave me a passion, just in general. And I just liked that and he talked well about his preparation. And then I had another friend who had gone to St. Andrews actually for his master's degree and he spoke really well of it. And long story short, I'd always been kind of intrigued by Scotland. And what I found also was that they do their education a little bit differently. It's frightening to some degree because there's no safety net. They just throw you into the middle of it. But it's custom tailored to you. And I'd already had my master's, I had been through a lot of class. What I really wanted was to be in a setting where I was pushed, but where I could either sink or swim.

Hannah Ader: So did you like that form of study after already getting a master's here and then pursuing, did you prefer that? Or did you enjoy it?

Dr. Jason Varner: I did. I did. I know it's not for everybody, and it's scary. I remember my first meeting with my supervisor for my master's, one of the courses, I say courses, the classes literally consisted of us sitting in a professor's office and talking. Another one of my courses is a one on one, just you and a really well known professor in their field. And he said, "What do you want to learn?" And I played the dumb American card, which I think

I do that really well without meaning to. But I just said, "I have no idea. You tell me. What do I need to learn? You know, I don't even know what I don't know." And he said, "Well, tell me some things you're interested in, some questions you have, in this case, about intellectual history in the early modern period. What are some questions you have?" And I just said, "Where do I start?"

But I was at a point where I was ready to swim. And so I got after it and learned the system and learned how it worked. And I actually loved that. The best part was, when I learned to be efficient, nothing held me back but me.

Hannah Ader: As far as learning, that was a really great place, I guess. But what about socially, emotionally, spiritually?

Dr. Jason Varner: Yeah. Well-

Hannah Ader: You loved it.

Dr. Jason Varner: I did. I did. It's hard to know where to start. I thought I would hate it. I thought, man, going over there, it's going to be kind of bleak. And you know, it's away from all the people I know. A lot of the cultural things that I'd come to see as important or necessary even, I wouldn't have those. So that was a scary thing for me. I had never lived abroad, and not to mention you're thinking about investing in more education, that often leads to debt. This is risky.

In the back of my mind I wondered, could I hack it? Had I been prepared to a level where I could make it at a major university. And so there was some fear. I found that I just loved everything about it. I loved the nature. I love the outdoor kind of feel. I loved it even when it was gray outside. It was always green. The Scottish people were just so kind and interested, it seemed like. So, yeah, culturally I loved it. They're also a hardworking people who like to be outside and in nature and that suits me.

Hannah Ader: Scotland's not really known for bluegrass, right?

Dr. Jason Varner: True. That's right.

Hannah Ader: But you are in a bluegrass band.

Dr. Jason Varner: That's right.

Hannah Ader: Do you want to speak into that a little bit?

Dr. Jason Varner: Interestingly, I will say that those forms of folk, bluegrass, Americana music, do have roots in quite a few places, but one of them is in the Celtic lands at least. So I think there are parallels that you see through some of that. Interestingly though, I hadn't really done music in a while when I went over there, and then got to be really good friends with a couple of musicians who were there and ended up beginning to play some things with them. And realized that I was about the only

redneck in St Andrews, and that became quickly evident. But also that music I think was interesting to people, and exotic to them, whereas for me, that was growing up.

And so, with my friends I played music with, one in particular, she and I would play different places. So we played quite a bit and it kind of gave me back my ... I don't know, it just made me want to learn to play better in terms of guitar and singing, and that became kind of a big part of what I did over there weirdly. And then that gave me then a hunger for it when I got back, to kind of explore it further and begin writing more and playing more here.

Hannah Ader: Then becoming part of a band, was that after you got back or was that before?

Dr. Jason Varner: That's right. Yeah. Well, Trent Palmer and I had played way back in the day. But it's the kind of music that you don't have to be any good at, and I certainly wasn't. But we would just sit around his living room or mine and just pick it at old songs that we'd heard growing up or learned growing up. Yeah, we'd sit around and play, but we'd maybe played a couple of times for people, but nothing ... We hadn't written much yet. We'd written a couple songs just for fun. But then getting back, yeah, we just decided to start playing more. Another local friend, Mike Snyder, who's actually an incredible instrumentalists, and just adding that to the two of us, to Trent and I, that added so much. And then from there we just started writing a lot. And so that's a whole new kind of thing.

Hannah Ader: Did you take away anything musically from here when you were doing your undergraduate? Was that something you were really interested in? Or did that spark in Scotland and did you bring that back here with you?

Dr. Jason Varner: You know, I did some vocal kind of stuff when I was an undergrad here. But weirdly, here's the truth, I would visit the nursing home on Sundays when I was a student here, with Paul Saltzman and some guys from one of the service and social clubs to And every Sunday we'd go and it was almost by accident, the people there wanted music and they wanted hymns. They wanted things they could remember because they were lonely. And I guess every year when a new calendar would tip over, they were more alien, you know? More outside of their home culture. It's interesting, we think about cross cultural things in terms of space usually, but I think there's something powerful about conceiving of cross cultural relations or cross cultural experience in terms of time. And for them every year that passed was a further step away from their home culture.

And so to sing some of these hymns would allow them to go home. And I realized that my dad being a pastor and my mom being a music director and a pastor, I spent three times a week singing hymns in church and I know them all. And I know the harmony parts. I mean, they're drilled into me. Whether you wanted to or not, you grew up in that environment. And so singing those, I loved it. And we'd do it every week and that was kind of my reintroduction almost to that world. And then I

realized I kind of like it. So that was actually more than anything, musically kind of an influence for me.

Hannah Ader: What led you back here? Coming back from Scotland, having your master's and your PhD, why Anderson?

Dr. Jason Varner: Yeah. Well, part of it is Anderson's been home, perhaps not geographically, but maybe existentially, since I was a little kid. We'd come here. We moved a fair bit with my dad being a Church of God pastor, but by virtue of being a Church of God pastor, once a year for a week, you were anchored here for camp meeting. We would camp out in the grounds, and even as a little kid, I mean, that's some of my earliest memories. And then, so the campus, I was always around it. My parents had met here. And then, I have grandparents here in town, so come in for Christmas and other things. This was kind of a sort of spiritual home in a sense. So that was part of it. So when I went to university here and then got my graduate degree here, that only cemented it further. I'd worked for the university and I have a real affinity for not just the mission, but the way we go about the mission. I think it suits me personally, probably because I had been formed by it.

My grandmother was one of the first students in Morrison Hall. So, I can't help but think that it wasn't just when I arrived at the age of 18 that I started being formed by the university for better or worse. The rhythms at this university have kind of I think determined some of how I think, who I am, et cetera. So the idea that not just what we believe in, but the way we believe in it, has always been intriguing to me and it just fits me like a hand in a glove. And so to know that there might be a position opening in this area ... Dr. Strege, Merle Strege was my professor and mentor, and knowing that he was going to be retiring at some point in the near future, that was always on the back of my mind on my radar. Might I have a shot? You know? But I didn't think much of it.

The timing just kind of worked out. And actually, the job opened before my PhD was done. I still had another year to do, but nothing will light the fire under you like a job opportunity in a world without many. The academic world, it's tight. So the chance, honestly, to get a job in academia is pretty rare at this age, in this stage, I should say. Most of my cohort from the University of St. Andrews is still not in a tenure track position. They're still working hard at publishing, et cetera.

So I'm very, very fortunate. But to do so in a place I like, whose mission I believe in, where I happen to have friends, all these things, it was just a no-brainer. But the other thing I will say too, is I have a real desire to spend time with students for the sake of a shaping culture and for the sake, really, of transformation, both for me and for them and for the culture we all swim in. And so a place like this allows you quite a bit of time, in fact encourages, demands to some extent, time spent building into that culture. Whereas other places you may be doing more research that won't allow you to have that kind of interaction with students. Yeah.

Hannah Ader: What's one thing that really drives you to be here? To be in this place, whatever it is? Just one thing that you've learned.

Dr. Jason Varner: One thing that drives me, I don't know how to put it. And this is funny for a Church of God boy like me, I certainly have Calvinist experience in that I do feel drawn sometimes by God and I feel like he's kind of given me a motor and a heart for certain things. And even if I didn't care with my brain or my own interest, et cetera, he just won't let me go. And I just have a passion for more. I want to see things happen. And it's not like I'm driving anything, or I don't feel driven even, except to the extent that I do feel driven by something else. So I don't know what drives me. I imagine the better question is who drives me. And I'm not even sure who that is.

I read about him in scripture and I have some experience with the Lord, but perhaps my most a clear awareness of him is in this ... I can't tell you what it is, I just feel driven by him for certain things. And thank God, because I don't have the momentum or the motivation some days. But yeah, I just feel compelled. I couldn't even explain it. Isn't that funny? Some of it resists description and that's why they say the most important things are caught, not taught. This is one of those things I've caught and I don't even know where, but because it's caught, I can't even tell you exactly what it is, other than I think we call it the Holy Spirit. But even then, I have no box to put it in. I just know that that's what drives me.

Speaker 1: This podcast is a production of The Andersonian, the student newspaper of Anderson University. For more in this series of faculty interviews, please visit [andrewsonian.com](http://andrewsonian.com).