

LETTERS
— to a —
YOUNG
CONGREGATION

*Nurturing the growth
of a faithful church*



ERIC E. PETERSON

A master of “show, don’t tell,” Pastor Eric Peterson invites his congregation to attend to God through the liturgies of daily life. Transparent about his own struggles while inviting people into deeper faith, Pastor Eric is a fellow pilgrim on the journey, pointing us all toward the God who holds us. Warm, invitational, and rich, this is a book to be savored.

MARY S. HULST, chaplain at Calvin College

“Grace and peace” is Eric’s consistent complementary close for each letter contained in this pastoral epistle, and it’s also a great summary of his writing herein. Eric believes that the congregation is the anchor point from which we live out the dynamics of a baptized life, sending us out as salt and light into all the world. Kudos to Eric, and congratulations for receiving the story and metaphor baton so faithfully from his beloved father and mentor.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations; author of fifteen books, including *Becoming a Healthy Church*, *Crafting a Rule of Life*, and *Broken and Whole*

In a series of letters to his congregation, Eric Peterson explores—with great insight—the issues we all face as humans and as believers who live together in community. His memorable turns of phrase and apt metaphors are just what we need in our current culture of divisiveness to remember and embrace the transcendent unity to which Christ calls us.

KELLYE FABIAN, author of *Sacred Questions: A Transformative Journey through the Bible*

In these remarkable letters, I heard both Psalms and Epistles, both Oswald Chambers and Thomas Merton, both anguish and praise, both sacramental hope and nagging doubt. With humility and humanity and honesty, Eric invites his congregants to remember their

baptisms, to know that the Lord is good, to do what Christ followers must do. He is a finder, and he invites his congregation—and us—to find. He finds doxology in earth and sky, in joy and anguish, in all the places we seldom see cause for praise. I read these letters along with my morning prayers. Their poetic tones followed the Lectionary Collects seamlessly. At first, I read four letters each morning. As I neared the book's end, I found myself slowing and savoring, almost dreading the word *Epilogue*. I will read them again . . . and again. Without question, the hearts and minds of every pastor and every congregation who gets in on the savoring will benefit immensely from the warm light of these beautiful letters.

BILL ROBINSON, president emeritus of Whitworth University

In a world mass-producing books spacious in rhetorical rhinestones but spare and scarce in true gemstones, Eric Peterson has gifted us with a rarity: a diadem book of gems, each stone highly refractive of Christ. There are ruby-red chapters, brilliantly colored and translucent with truth; sapphire-blue chapters, lustrous and gleaming with beauty; ancient-demantoid missives, dazzling color bursts of love with hidden horsetail occlusions that only reveal themselves when you read slowly and open yourself to the mysteries of woundedness. You cannot help but experience new dimensions of the divine when you adorn your life with this diadem book.

LEONARD SWEET, author of *Rings of Fire*; professor (Drew, George Fox, Tabor, Evangelical); founder/chief contributor to preachthestory.com

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For

Eugene Hoiland Peterson



1932–2018

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INTRODUCTION

As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young . . .

DEUTERONOMY 32:11

THEY DON'T KNOW IT at the time, but eagles are born to fly. When the time is right—after ten to twelve weeks, on average—mother eagles begin to dismantle the nest around the eaglets. Sometimes the mother will even nudge the eaglets out of the nest, although the nest gradually becomes uncomfortable enough that the eaglets will leave on their own. That's when they begin to fly. It's an instinct they have that kicks in the moment they start free-falling.

Churches—in stark contrast—do not have such instincts. By appearances, they don't even have much common sense when it comes to the tasks of incarnating the body of Christ in the world through acts of justice, mercy, and love. Consequently, congregations, in their many and diverse forms, need to be instructed in the art of both being and of becoming a beloved community. While human souls were designed to soar, they need to be shown how. We need flight training.

Usually, the way both individuals and congregations

grow into their identity as members of the body of Christ is through trial and error, fits and starts, failure and missteps. Lots of mistakes can be found in the wake of the church's two-thousand-year developmental history. In fact, one of the ways to read and understand that history is through its conflicts and controversies, councils and trials, confessions and declarations, heresies and apologies, detours and errors. When it comes to exhibiting the Kingdom of God, rare are the moments when the church has ever gotten much of it exactly right. It, therefore, is in constant need of guidance. Such guidance is provided both locally and personally.

Although flawed and imperfect themselves, pastors are entrusted with the unique task of attending to the care and cure of souls, as well as giving attention to the health of congregated souls. Lacking ecclesiastical instincts, young churches in particular need instruction and discipline. The art of pastoring involves both encouragement and correction in the way of godliness. Many are the saboteurs that would derail this holy agenda.

I recall an occasion many years ago when I was meeting with my spiritual director. I must have been expressing anxiety about what was going on in our congregation at the time because, uncharacteristically, she interrupted me and said, "Eric, you're being hypervigilant. You need to relax and trust God!" Equally uncharacteristically, I shot back in defense: "You have no idea how inherently fragile congregations are. If somebody's not paying attention to these issues, it could all blow up in a moment. A pastor can't *be* too vigilant!" In my

defensiveness, I may have overstated the case, but I still think I was essentially correct: With a variety of forces threatening to do damage, congregations require constant oversight, intervention, correction, and positive reinforcement if they are to grow into healthy expressions of the body of Christ.

The apostle Paul wrote letters to the smattering of congregations he had started around the Mediterranean region in response to issues that were threatening the unity and the purity of the church. It doesn't require sophisticated exegesis to infer that almost all of these letters were prompted by problems. To wit, there was bad theology and bad behavior that crept into these young congregations, threatening to infect the body with a disease which, left untreated, could spread and become deadly. Addressing such issues is prophetic and pastoral work of the highest order. At times the tone we hear is scolding: "You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a spell on you? Have you taken leave of your senses?"¹ Other times the language borders on flattery: "Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God."²

Whatever the circumstances, Saint Paul was interested in establishing the first-generation Christians' imaginations and lifestyles in a cosmology as big as the Kingdom of God itself. Following his pastoral lead, I started writing monthly letters to my congregation. It was a new church plant. I was its young pastor. We were going to have to figure out how to grow up together. Nobody told me I had to, nor how to do this, and I didn't have any clear contemporary models to follow. Initially, it was a practical way to connect with our

congregation when there was no physical hub to the organization. We rented space on Sunday mornings in a high school. Midweek gatherings were held in people's homes. There were lots of logistics to coordinate and details to communicate during those early formative years.

Over time, especially after we constructed and nested our first-phase building, these congregational communiqués shifted in tone from organizational to inspirational. What you hold in your hand is a selective sampling of essays which span two decades of a young church's growth and development, all of them attempts at developing both a vivid biblical imagination and a faithful lifestyle response.



As I looked back at this collection of letters for the first time recently, I was struck with the realization of how much *I* have learned and grown through the demands and delights placed on me since being pressed into the pastoral vocation. Now well into the third decade of serving the saints and sinners of Colbert Presbyterian Church, I am convinced that this has been the primary environment that has forged me as a child of God. It has been among the supreme gifts of my life to participate in the developmental stages of this young church, for in many ways, we have indeed grown up together. The following collection bears witness to that life and growth in the particularities of people, place, and time.

Toward the end of his life, there were a few occasions when I spoke for my dad. His last public address was a lecture

INTRODUCTION

I delivered for him at Princeton: Jeremiah-like, his words in my mouth. The standing ovation that followed was all for him, though he was thousands of miles away. There were also a handful of times that I wrote for him. As dementia robbed him of his fertile imagination, I did some ghostwriting to help him meet his remaining commitments. The task of a ghostwriter is to communicate the ideas of another, and to do it in their own voice. I'll never forget the first time I did this. After spending half a day attempting to "channel" Eugene, trying to get the words and the voice to sound like him, I pushed back from my desk and said to myself, "I no longer know where his voice ends and mine begins."

I suppose the same could be said for the letters that here follow, and anyone familiar with Eugene's writing will readily detect his influence on mine. My pastoral voice has developed largely through the many years and many conversations we have shared together to the point where it's not always clear just where his ends and mine begins. Although Eugene died on October 22, 2018, I often feel as though he is still overseeing my life and ministry.

In death no less than life, he has been both my father and my bishop. With much gratitude, this volume is dedicated to his memory.

Eric Eugene Peterson
Pentecost, 2020

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—

*What My Life
Is About*

MASTER PLAN

*These forty years the LORD your God has been
with you; you have lacked nothing.*

DEUTERONOMY 2:7

THE YEAR 1963 included two related yet not very widely known events. It was the year my parents gave birth to a new church and to a new son: Christ Our King and Eric Eugene. Many people can say that they grew up in the church, but not many people mean it literally. I can. And I do.

During those early, fledgling years, the bedrooms, kitchen, and dining room in our modest-sized house doubled as Sunday-school classrooms. The living room was a frequent gathering place for evening meetings during the week, even a wedding or two! On Sunday mornings my mother would go to the basement, remove the still-damp diapers hanging on a line, toss them in a closet, and set up folding metal chairs for the worship service. Later, when everyone left for their own homes, the diapers would be rehung to finish drying.

I grew up in the church, observing my father as he skillfully

executed the pastoral vocation while my mother attended to the liturgies of hospitality and homemaking. There was no separation, no distinction between matters sacred and things secular. After all, if a house could be a church and a laundry room could be a sanctuary, there wouldn't seem to be much, if anything, beyond the reach or the concern of God.

It helped, of course, that my parents' faith was well-integrated, so that who they were on Sunday mornings was no different than at any other time. The man who preached the Word of God in worship was the same one who served up mashed potatoes at our dinner table. The woman who listened to people's problems during the day was the same one who read a book to me and tucked me into bed at night. It was a lifestyle I lived and breathed and enjoyed, even after the church was built just half a mile away. As a result, I came to adopt a worldview that was permeated by awareness of the presence of God in all things and in all people at all times. I suppose that would be considered a blessed upbringing.

As a teenager, when I was ready to get some distance from my younger brother, with whom I shared a room, I moved downstairs. By then it was just a basement again, where we played Ping-Pong and watched television from beanbag chairs, the gatherings for Sunday worship but a memory. My new bedroom was located in what had once been the chancel area. Consequently, there was a white Celtic cross on my closet door. An old, forgotten baptismal font, from which I was claimed as a child of God, sat in a corner. A still older, second-hand organ was there as well. Even the antique Communion

table—given by a historic church in Baltimore (presumably when they upgraded to a new one), on which the words “In Remembrance of Me” were carved—was still there, just gathering dust, having been decommissioned as the Lord’s Table. Like the ruins of ancient civilizations, these were the remaining vestiges of those holy meetings between God and his people in our basement when I was but a child.

Of course, as a kid, I didn’t think it was unusual or strange having those things around. It was just the house I was raised in. And while I was certainly aware that my friends didn’t have liturgical furnishings in their bedrooms growing up, I don’t think I realized just how much that whole ecclesiastical environment got inside of me until recently. To find myself now as a pastor, therefore, shouldn’t (though at times it still does) surprise me. Environmentally, spiritually, socially, even genetically, it would seem that I was predisposed to the pastoral vocation.

The master plan of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church was drawn up by an architect, and over a period of twenty-five years and three building projects, that plan was completed with remarkable accuracy to the original concept. Obviously, it’s fairly easy to track the growth and development of a church through the progress of its physical plant. But I am reminded that in my baptism, there is a master plan for Eric Eugene as well, which is continually unfolding and developing. The Chief Architect is none other than my Lord Jesus Christ, who continues to oversee this God-blessed, God-dedicated life and ministry.

WHAT MY LIFE IS ABOUT

So happy fortieth birthday to me. And happy birthday to my old friends in Bel Air, Maryland. May we, over the second forty years of our lives, continue to grow into the master plan of Christ Our King.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Eric