“The best life”: Eugene Peterson on pastoral ministry

David J. Wood interviews Eugene H. Peterson

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In the early 1960s, Eugene Peterson was planning to finish a Ph.D. in Semitic studies while he worked as an associate pastor at a Presbyterian church in White Plains, New York. He already had degrees in the field from the Biblical Theological Seminary in New York (now New York Theological Seminary) and from Johns Hopkins. But the academic career was put on hold: Peterson decided that his real vocation was to be a pastor. In 1962 he was called to plant a new congregation in Bel Air, Maryland, near Baltimore. The congregation, Christ Our King Presbyterian Church, eventually grew to 500 members. Peterson served the church for 29 years, during which time he and his wife, Jan, raised three children.

After retiring from Christ Our King, Peterson taught for five years at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He now lives in his home state of Montana. (He was raised in a Pentecostal family—and played basketball in the same high school league as Phil Jackson, coach of the Los Angeles Lakers.) Lately he has been working on a series of books on spiritual theology.

Peterson is the author of 20 books (all still in print), including The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language. *His complete translation of the Bible will be published this summer by NavPress.*

Clearly, Peterson’s decision to pursue the pastoral life did not involve turning away from intellectual pursuits or discarding his passion for biblical languages. It is equally clear that his vocation has been distinctly pastoral and that his intellectual flourishing has been shaped by and for that vocation. I talked with him about his experience of the pastoral life, and about how the demanding and complex life of the pastor can be lived with integrity and joy.

I sense from reading your books and conversing with you that you are generally filled with gratitude for the life you have lived and grateful also to have been a pastor. Is that right?

I've loved being a pastor, almost every minute of it. It's a difficult life because it's a demanding life. But the rewards are enormous—the rewards of being on the front line of seeing the gospel worked out in people's lives. I remain convinced that if you are called to it, being a pastor is the best life there is. But any life can be the best life if you're called to it.

How did you become a pastor?

I think I was attracted to the intense relational and personal quality of this life. At the time I decided to become a pastor, I was assistant professor at a seminary. I loved the teaching, but when I compared it with what I was doing as an associate pastor, there was no comparison. It was the difference between being a coach in the locker room, working out plays on the chalkboard, and being one of the players on the field. I wanted to be one of the players on the field, playing my part as the life of Christ was becoming incarnate again in my community.

That's interesting, because if there's one life that many pastors idealize, it's the academic life.

That's strange, isn't it? When people say, "I don't want to be a pastor, I want to be a professor," I say, "Well, the best place to be a teacher is in a congregation." Everything I taught during my tenure at Regent College was first developed and taught in my congregation. At Regent, of course, I embellished it. I put in footnotes. But the motivation of the people in the classroom was different from those in the congregational setting: they were looking for a degree, whereas in the congregation, people are looking for how to live the next day.

Many people think there's a crisis in ministry today—a crisis of morality or of morale. How do you see it?

My sense is that many people take on the role of pastor without ever learning it from the inside out. As I said, I do think for those who are called to it the pastoral life is really a good life. Not an easy life, but one full of resonances with everything else that's going on in creation and in history.

I get the sense these days that many of my colleagues have external rewards in view. How do I become a good leader? How do I get published? How do I do this? How do I do that? Those are questions that are beside the point.

We’re not a market-driven church, and the ministry is not a market-driven vocation. We’re not selling anything, and we’re not providing goods and services. If a pastor is not discerning and discriminating about the claims of his or her vocation and about the claims of a congregation, then the demands or the desires of the congregation can dominate what he or she is doing—and that creates the conditions for nonpastoral work.

And then you can lose your morals and your morale, because you’re not working at anything that has any biblical order to it. One’s experience lacks, if I could use a fancy word, any trinitarian inclusiveness or integration.

If you look at the numbers and money, American churches in some ways are the most successful churches ever. And yet, I think it could be argued, we’re at probably one of the low points because of the silliness and triviality that characterize so much of church life these days. This is one of the reasons I think pastoral work is best handled in a fairly small setting.

What do you mean by "fairly small"?

Somewhere between 50 and 500 people. The only way as a pastor to be discriminating and aware of the deeply ingrained idolatrous nature of human beings is by learning to love a particular group of people in one place over time. They’ve got to know you are on their side even if you don’t give them what they want you to give. They’re not going to know that just from hearing you from the pulpit. You can only convey that to them by being with them, by listening to them, by feeling their pain and suffering, and even by sharing their wrong ideas, but all the time giving witness, whether verbal or silent, to the work of the spirit.

If you’re just confronting them all the time, you lose all pastoral sense. I often use the word “story” or “narrative,” as a way of understanding pastoral life. The pastoral life is best lived when it is experienced as participation in an unfolding narrative. You can’t do the discerning or the criticizing from a standpoint outside the narrative that is the life of the congregation. It has got to be done from within the story. The pastor must understand himself or herself to be one of the people there.

Of course, we’re part of the sin in the congregation’s story as well. But hopefully, as pastors, we are so well formed by the biblical story of redemption and forgiveness as not to be overwhelmed by the story of the congregation.

How did you achieve this kind of narrative correspondence with people? What practices were essential to that kind of engagement?

Nothing fancy. I spent a lot of time with them. I was in their homes. I would go to their workplaces and see what they were doing. My kids played with their kids.

I always preferred to go to people's homes, because then I was on their turf. If there was a special problem, then it was easier to have them come to my study. But I always went to their homes when I could. To tell you the truth, I hated doing that, since I'm shy and introverted—it was never easy for me. But once I got there I was fine.

I did a lot of home and work-site visitation because I wanted to be their pastor—and I couldn't be their pastor if they encountered me only on my turf, in the place where I was the authority.

You're describing a pastoral life that doesn't fit squarely into the round hole of what we have come to call "the professional life," which is premised on the division between public and private, work and family, the personal and the social. There is a definite "boundary ambiguity" to the way of life you are describing. For many pastors, it's this "boundary ambiguity" that constitutes the unambiguous downside of the pastoral life.

I grew up in a small town and my dad was a butcher with a shop in the middle of town. Between that shop and our home, in a sense, there was no boundary. So I had modeled for me a way of life in which work and home were not distinct things. My dad addressed everyone who came into our shop by name. At one point I realized that I'm doing as a pastor just what my dad had done as a butcher.

I also remember early in my ministry listening to colleagues who often seemed irritated and angry with their congregations, as if the congregation was the enemy. I remember making a conscious decision to not adopt that view. The congregation is not the enemy. They are my friends. I am their friend. We are in this together, even when we don't like each other very much.

If there was any substitute for having boundaries, it was knowing when and how to ask for help. Some advice I have remembered well is this: "The two most powerful words in the world are 'help me.'" So I asked my congregation to help me.

I did have needs. One of my strong needs is the time and space for solitude. So I didn't feel uncomfortable about locking my door or making set hours for study or for when I would be available for calls.

Asking for help was a regular part of my conversation with the congregation. Twice a year I would go on retreat with my elders and deacons, and I would share with them what my needs were as a pastor. I'd say: I want to help you live your Christian life, but I need your help too. This put us more on an even playing field, and they developed ideas and strategies for how to accomplish our common aims.

For example, they knew that writing was important to me. One day they had a private meeting in the session and came back and said, "We want to give you six weeks a year just to write." Well, I never would have dared to ask for that. That was pretty generous. We learned to take each other seriously, and that made all the difference for how we worked together. This approach is a whole lot more effective than the more contractual approach that is so common these days. For the most part, I never felt hassled or pushed or had demands put on me that were inappropriate.

To live this kind of life—which I wanted to do and my wife wanted to do—you do have to be wise and careful, so that you aren't exploited by neurotic or even psychotic people. You can't be naïvely open all the time to everybody. There's got to be some protection. But that being said, from the very beginning of my pastoral career I reacted against the professional model of keeping the boundaries clearly defined. I found other ways to protect myself from exploitation.

Such as?

Well, the major one was keeping a Sabbath. Monday was a Sabbath. My wife and I would spend the day in the woods quite regularly. I told my congregation what I was doing. About every three years I'd write a pastoral letter explaining "why your pastor keeps a Sabbath." In time they started to see me as a person who had needs, which I was taking care of. And they started to recognize and respect the fact that I was not simply someone who was available to them all the time, but someone who, on Mondays, was out in the woods watching birds. I think this helped create a sense of identity which transcended their need of me.

Another protective pattern I developed was this: If somebody called to ask to meet with me, and I sensed it was not a crisis, I would say, "Could we do that in three

days?” Or, “Could we do that next week?” I’d set up an appointment. That kept me from overreacting to the needs of my congregation.

How has the pastoral life shaped your family life and how has family life shaped your pastoral life?

I think the most significant influence on my pastoral life has been my family. Early on I determined that I was never going to treat my parishioners better than I treated my family. So it was in the context of our family life that I learned forgiveness, grace and discernment—all the things that influenced everything I did in the parish.

The life of the parish did not shape our family life as much as our way of being a family shaped the life of the parish. The influence went from the family outward rather than from the parish inward. As I see it, my kids were lucky. They had 20 uncles and aunts and grandparents. It was a wonderful place for them.

We often had people living with us—runaway kids, abused women, people who needed a place to live for a short time. The unintended consequence of this effort on our part was that it became a witness to the congregation of the practice of Christian hospitality. It took about ten or 12 years of living this way before the congregation began to practice this same kind of hospitality. Without me ever saying anything, they started doing it. How we live as pastors can have a real impact on our congregations—for good or for ill. All too often our family lives appear just as hassled and harried as everyone else’s. But then we just contribute to the general ill.

What you’re describing makes me think that we need to begin thinking about such a thing as "the vocation of the pastoral family." For example, in your case, it’s impossible for us to understand your life as a pastor apart from your life as a husband and a father.

That’s true. Without that context, you wouldn’t know anything. And Jan has functioned as a pastor. I mean, there’s a pastoral quality to her life. It’s a shared life and we both liked it.

But I don’t think we could have lived this kind of a life in a large church. There must be ways to do it in a large church, but I haven’t worked that out. If the gospel is basically relational, if what we know of God through the Trinity means that knowledge of God is fundamentally incarnational, then shouldn’t pastoral life have an incarnational cast to it? Shouldn’t it be intensely relational?

There is a lot of talk these days about communication, understood mainly as a technology. In this case, people are not talking about conversation. They're talking about getting out words that are either motivational or informational.

One of the advantages of being in a place a long time is that you realize that the most important stuff you do doesn't feel all that important when you're doing it. That is what it means to be a witness. Your life speaks when you're not looking or speaking. As a pastor, you're a witness—but you're mostly a witness when you don't know you're being a witness.

In *Under the Unpredictable Plant* and in other books as well, you have written of the necessity of staying in place over time in order for the pastoral life to develop the kind of capacity for "witness" that you're describing. You talk about the pastoral life as requiring a "vow of stability."

I don't want to sound dogmatic about this because there can be so many exceptions. Some congregations are truly neurotic, and you've got to get out to save your life and your family's life. There are circumstances that change, illnesses, different seasons—these realities need to be taken into account. But, all other things being equal, the longer you can stay the better.

Now it can happen that a long pastorate just puts you to sleep. That's not good for either the pastor or the congregation. Hopefully, in those circumstances, a bishop or some church leader will step in and say, "Get out of here fast!"

But those situations are still the exceptions. Dwelling in one place over time makes all the difference. A place is what allows stories to develop. Even when people would leave—go to California or Texas—they maintained a connection with our congregation in Baltimore. Over the years, the congregation dispersed because of the way companies move people around, but for the most part these folks never lost that connection with me or my family or with others in the congregation.

You write about wanting to leave your congregation at different times and even trying to. But you worked through those times and now are obviously grateful that you did.

I think the primary reason for wanting to leave was boredom. After one episode of boredom, I realized that the boredom was my fault. I wasn't paying attention to things. It was like I was walking through a field of wildflowers and not seeing any of

them because I'd seen them 500 times before. So I learned to start looking. For me, writing helped me see what I was missing. My writing became a partial cure for the boredom, because it made me look more closely.

Another cause of my unrest was—I'm ashamed to say it—ambition. I was in an obscure place and nobody seemed to be noticing me. I just thought, "Well, I'm 40 years old—I'd better make a move so somebody notices me."

Is ambition a bad thing? You've written a score of books over the years—that strikes me as an ambitious endeavor.

In the best sense, ambition is wanting to do your best. But sometimes ambition can be simply the need to be noticed. And I think, in me, there was that kind of ambition in my restlessness. But fortunately I had a good spiritual director who punctured that balloon. Then, after I was about 42, I was OK. The issue never really came up again. I was saved.

It seems a real challenge to discern when that restlessness is just part of the journey one is on and when it's a sign that one is on the wrong path.

It is a challenge. Our capacity for self-deceit is enormous. I wouldn't trust myself to make those decisions. That's why it's important to have a spiritual director.

I think there are people who can be pretty good pastors for ten years and then realize that this is not their vocation. Such a decision has nothing to do with success or failure. Some people do a really respectable job, and may be gifted as pastors, but they are never really given to it—their heart is never in it. They're following somebody else's directions, doing what their parents wanted them to do, or what their professors wanted them to do. In such cases getting out is the honest thing to do, and should be done without guilt.

Spiritual direction is a prominent theme in your work and in your own experience too. How do you understand the role of a spiritual director?

I'm a little bit uneasy about the professionalization of spiritual direction. Granted, the training and counsel can help us do this work better. But basically it's not a specialized thing. It's very much a part of the Christian life and should be very much a part of the pastor's life. In my view, spiritual direction is a conversation in which the pastor is taking the person seriously as a soul, as a creation of God for whom

prayer is the most natural language.

This kind of conversation is not problem-centered. If you have a problem—an intense, tangled, emotional problem—there are counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists to help you. That's good and important work. But most of the time people don't have problems—though somehow in our society we don't give careful attention to one another unless there is a problem. If I don't have a problem and yet I have this sense that something is going on in my life and I have questions about what God is doing—what am I to do? I should be able to call up my pastor and say, "I need to talk to you." But usually people feel like they have to come up with "a problem."

If they're lucky, they have a pastor who is alert to what's really going on—which is usually not much more than ordinary life and the yearning to live it fully, maturely, with some intensity. "Ordinary" doesn't mean mediocre or complacent. Ordinary is capable of intensity and is worthy of attentiveness and commitment. I get worried that the popularity of spiritual direction will take it out of ordinary life and put it more in the category of problem-solving.

As you note, there are now a lot of programs training pastors to be "spiritual directors." You seem to be saying that the pastoral life itself is a school for spiritual direction.

Some of us have a lot to learn about listening and discernment. If those programs develop those kinds of skills, they serve an important purpose.

I have two basic definitions of spiritual direction. One is you show up and then you shut up. It's important that people have a place they can come to and know that you're going to be there with and for them. The other is that spiritual direction largely involves what you do when you don't think you're doing anything. In other words, you're not trying to solve a problem. You're not answering a question and it doesn't seem like you're doing anything. It takes a lot of restraint and discipline for a pastor not to say anything, not to do anything. But the pastoral life is an ideal school for learning how to do it.

The significance of everyday life is a theme in much of your writing.

I should explain that I grew up in a Pentecostal church that emphasized extraordinary experience—it was the church of miracles, ecstasy, epiphanies, and a

great deal of manipulation in order to promote those kinds of experiences. As a result, the Christian life became a kind of scrapbook of extraordinary experiences. I knew I didn’t want to go in that direction. That approach to the Christian life doesn’t produce mature people.

So when I became a pastor I didn’t want to do anything that would distract attention from what was going on in somebody’s family room at five o’clock on Thursday or in her workplace at two o’clock on Monday.

A central challenge of the pastoral life is to take people seriously just the way they are and to look at them, to enter into conversation with them and to see the glory that takes place right there, in that person’s world, the glory of God present in them.