

## Pastoral Interview with Pastor Tim Eding

Thanks to the power of Zoom (which has seemingly become a national treasure for face to face interaction) I was able to speak with Pastor Tim Eding of Leipsic First Christian Church. What unfolded from this discussion was a two-hour long interview in which Pastor Tim told me his life story. He didn't spare me his failures, nor did he flaunt his successes. For instance, he failed to mention his 15 yearlong firefighting career for the first hour and a half! To make up for that I've made sure to include it in the first paragraph. That being said, Pastor Tim's story is one of shocking coherence and symmetry, and I hope to do justice to it (and him) by relaying it to you.

For the first 18 years of Tim Eding's life, I don't believe anyone would have guessed he was called to ministry. Not his family, not his friends, not even himself. By his own admission, he said "I grew up a heathen". While Tim's mother had been involved in the church, and had even had Tim baptized as a baby, that essentially stopped when she married. Tim's father was, to put it kindly, uninterested in the church and young Pastor Tim's own feelings reflected his father's when he told me about an incident at his school's cafeteria. "I was not kind to Christians at all. There was a young man, my classmate when we were in the 10th grade, attempting to witness Jesus to me. I shouted him down in front of a whole cafeteria full of kids. Told him, he wasn't going to turn me into a Jesus freak like he was...I never heard him talk about Jesus again." While this friend was unable to penetrate Tim's heart, someone else did, and in more ways than one. After taking a job at a grocery store, Tim met a young lady by the name of Denise. As it turns out, Denise herself was a Christian, and while contemplating her faith, she decided she couldn't date anyone who wasn't also a Christian. Upon learning of this, Tim decided to do some research. "I read the definition of Christianity; I remember thinking 'I could pretend to be a Christian'." Tim fell in love with Denise, and the feelings were mutual, given that Tim and Denise have been married for 45 years.



1 Pastor Tim and Denise Eding

Denise would prove to be massively influential in Pastor Tim's life in general, and his Christian life specifically. She invited him to camp Otyokwah where he would finally make a quiet, private confession to God for salvation. Tim said that when he arrived, "I was a fish out of water. I had no desire to be a part of this youth program. That evening, a girl from Toledo was baptized and I didn't know what was going on." But the next morning, at Vesper Hill, Steve Binkley, preached and an 18-year-old Tim Eding listened. "He told a story about Jesus going to the cross to die and said, 'If I was the only person left on earth, Jesus still would have died for my sins.' I looked up at the cross on Vesper Hill and in my mind's eye I could visualize Jesus up on that cross and it shook me up." Tim Eding was saved September 23rd, 1974, at 18 years old. But Tim's journey to ministry was arduous. He struggled with accepting his faith because he knew that becoming a Christian wasn't something to be taken lightly. Likewise, he knew that accepting Christ would mean rejection elsewhere.

It was months before he found the strength to tell the friend who he had shouted down in high school. After that, Tim told me he "felt permission to tell anybody". While Denise was excited and supportive when she found out, Tim's closest friends turned their backs on him. Perhaps most crushing was the rejection from his own family. Having myself grown up with an entirely supportive family, this part of Tim's story was particularly challenging for me to consider.

How does someone who's rejected Christianity their whole life suddenly find meaning in it, even when it comes at great personal cost?

Tim's father had been grooming him for political life, and his first year of college had continued on that trajectory, but during that year he was continually feeling the call of ministry. His first attempt to realize this call came when he spoke to his mother. He surprised her by meeting her at work and asked her what she thought of his pursuing ministry. "There are worse things you could do", she said. It wasn't the rousing vote of confidence Tim might have desired, but it was the push he needed to tell his father. Tim's father didn't understand, in the same way that Tim himself hadn't understood. A year prior at Tim's high school graduation party, Tim's father had spoken so boldly to aunts and uncles about his son's political aspirations, about his college potential. And now Tim was threatening to dash those vicarious dreams.

You see, Tim's father hadn't received an advanced education, and according to Tim, his father seemed to believe that his life would have been better if he had. He was himself motivated to political action within his community and he wanted a better life for Tim. "He equated college with financial success. He felt that his life would have been better with a degree. When he realized I wasn't going to be making money in ministry he didn't understand...he didn't know what to do with me." Despite this turmoil, Tim's life was full of joy. Tim and Denise married in December of 1975.

What support he couldn't find from his immediate family and friends, He found in Denise and Home Acres First Church of Toledo (Now Pathway Community Church). Tim described that at this point in life he was "going 100 miles an hour." He worked part time as the youth minister for Home Acres, was a full-time student at University of Toledo, while still working full time at the grocery store. At Home Acres, he found a church family. "They nurtured me. Modeled for me what ministry was. They were so encouraging."

At the age of 27, his breakneck pace carried him to two churches in western Ohio, Sugar Ridge Church of God and Olive Branch Church. Tim pastored both churches simultaneously while finishing his degree at Winebrenner Theological Seminary. "I was a city boy and they were as rural as rural could be. They were encouraging and they loved me as I love them." Tim told me of humorous occasions where church congregants would hide toy mice in the church to scare Pastor Tim (who was deathly afraid of mice). "They took this green kid and loved me. I couldn't have started in a better place." There was a genuine fondness to the way Pastor Tim spoke about these two churches. But as we continued on with the interview, I asked about how

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2 Pastor Tim and Denise, along with their children, and their grandchildren.

pastorship had affected or changed his family dynamic. "I was so busy, and so focused that I missed a lot of my boys growing up. My poor wife was in the middle of a corn field, longing for adult conversation." Pastor Tim's 100 mile an hour lifestyle was taking a toll that went unnoticed for some time, and which, I would argue, isn't talked about enough. While at a Billy Graham crusade, he became convicted that he was messing up his family life. "I had a breakdown." He told me about how he had prioritized his ministry work over his family, and when Denise would speak up about it, he confessed that "I would put my wife in this horrible guilt trip." After

understanding what he had to do, Tim spoke earnestly with Denise, and changed course. In a profound statement that had me swallowing back tears, Tim said “My first ministry is to my wife and my three sons and then to my church.”

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Pastor Tim next told me about one of the defining moments of his pastoral journey, which was a church plant in the Columbus area called “Sonlight Community Church.” (I’ve always appreciated a good pun). It was one of three Churches of God church plants in that area, and unfortunately, all three had to close eventually. Despite all the fancy marketing strategies they employed, despite all the adversity the church overcame at its start, it still closed down. As if this wasn’t disheartening enough, both Tim and Denise lost their other jobs at this time. In retrospect, I asked Tim how he managed to view all of this with a silver lining. “I refuse to listen to the people who said it failed”, he told me with sincerity. “The

thing I took away, even though we had to close, I know 89 people who gave their life to Christ.” Pastor Tim has an infectious positive attitude, and I found myself agreeing. “We closed the church in June, lost our jobs in August. We had 3 young boys, expensive rent. But we trusted in God. We never missed bills or rent payments...We would come home, and someone would have put a check in the mailbox or in the door. God never took his hand off us.” Pastor Tim described this whole experience as “failing forward” (borrowing the term from author John C. Maxwell). This church plant had taken Tim and his family from the country churches that they loved for the promise of pushing forward the kingdom. When Sonlight closed, it had Tim reconsidering his calling altogether.

Yet, Tim and his family persevered as they looked for another church to pastor and serve. At the time, the Churches of God General Conference had almost no openings. Kris Cupp, a friend of Tim’s at the CGGC (and the current Director of Strengthening Churches), told him about her church in Leipsic that was looking for a pastor. The only problem was that it was not part of the CGGC. Upon hearing this, Tim turned it down. He explained the situation to Denise who asked, with wisdom, “what did the name of a church have to do with the Kingdom of God?”

In September of 1994, Tim preached a trial sermon at Leipsic First Christian Church. The church then met without Tim to vote on whether or not he would be their pastor. Tim was warned by a friend that if the vote didn’t go in his favor, to not take it personally, because the church was likely to be partial to people from their denomination (Disciples of Christ). Tim patiently waited for the vote to be over. He described it as being somewhat agonizing, but it was worth it. The result was unanimous, 100% of the members had voted in favor of Pastor Tim.

It is here that Tim has stayed and served faithfully. Leipsic is where he and his family call home. Although, Tim has continued to serve the CGGC through many commissions, the Executive Board, and being the President of the Great Lakes Conference for the last 4 years (at time of writing). He told me that despite Leipsic having numerous other churches, he feels like he pastors the whole community in one capacity or another. For 15 years Tim was part of Leipsic’s Fire Department as a firefighter. And while he no longer fights fires, he still serves the department as a chaplain. As incredible as that is, other people openly questioned how a pastor could be around firefighters (who, in this case, were apparently comfortable with profanity). Tim told me that “I think Jesus would have been part of the fire department.”

Pastor Tim’s almost boundless optimism covered over one other significant aspect of his life, which is that Pastor Tim has Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia (HSP). I am, of course, not an expert, but Tim’s description is that HSP has severely limited his mobility. For instance, he drives with hand controls rather than pedals. Likewise, he tends to preach while sitting down.

Yet he refuses to be wheelchair bound and Leipsic FCC has been immensely supportive, having funded a building project to put an elevator in the church. Despite his mobility challenges, you're unlikely to catch Pastor Tim feeling sorry for himself. When a prophetic woman told him that he "would be healed if only he had more faith", Pastor Tim responded by saying "God has healed me in many ways already." Likewise, Tim held confidently to the fact that whether it's in this life or the next, he would walk again unaided. Have I mentioned his optimism?

Lastly, I asked Tim what the Gospel meant to him. I will leave you with his response below. Thank you for reading and thank you Pastor Tim Eding for being so gracious with his time.

"It's the good news of Jesus Christ. Especially in today's day and time, it's news that needs to be proclaimed. With the fact that there are so many people without hope. They don't see a future. If it hadn't been for the gospel, the good news, it would be so devastating to not have any hope at all.... Jesus Christ has come, died for our sins, resurrected on the third day and offers eternal life for all who believe.... It's pretty simple, Jesus lays it right out for us."