

EMORY

Eulogy written by St. Stephen member Ron Hartung, delivered Sept. 7, 2024, at Emory's memorial service at First Presbyterian Church

At St. Stephen Lutheran Church, we've said sad goodbyes to Emory Hingst before. It was 25 years ago, when he retired after 23 years as our pastor. Our hearts were breaking, because we were losing both Emory and his adorable bride, Ann. We had a boffo sendoff for them, including a concert at Ruby Diamond to raise money for nonprofits that Emory loved.

Look at all the overlapping constituencies represented here today. How many of you are St. Stephen people? Grace? First Pres? Faith Pres? How many of you knew Emory from Daystar, Habitat, Ten Thousand Villages, Luther House, CROP Walk, civil-rights marches, Texas? How many of you had the pleasure of talking with Emory, having him laugh at your little jokes, and feeling like his best friend? Emory treated everyone like a best friend. He radiated the word "Welcome."

I met Emory in the late 1970s. I was a lapsed Catholic with absolutely no interest in congregational life. I was pitiful. I'd accompany my wife and young son to church on the occasional Easter, silently snickering at what I regarded as corny customs and boring lyrics. Yet there was something about this Texas pastor. He didn't preach down to us. He was one of us. He enjoyed people. He laughed out loud. He sang with warmth and power. He practiced what he preached, and by his example he taught a stream of interns. One of them said her favorite piece of advice from Emory, on one of her 50,000 trips into his office, was this: "You can do anything you want as long as you love your people and be there for them."

Emory was there for everyone. Well, almost everyone. Not everyone shared his unapologetically liberal worldview. Emory definitely had a heart for social justice. And he wasn't afraid to shake things up sometimes – to the chagrin of the more conservative Lutherans who eventually bailed out of St. Stephen. Before he retired, he led us in becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation, which means that we specifically reach out to LGBTQ people – many of whom have been made to feel unwelcome at other places of worship.

Emory spoke of a God whose nature was to love us, not punish us. He reminded us of all the blessings we had – and invited us to share some of our surplus with those who had less. He took our breath away by saying, more than once, that God loved you and me NO MORE THAN God loved ... Ted Bundy! What? He opened my eyes and my heart. He changed my life. I'm still at St. Stephen, where every nook and cranny reminds us old-timers of Emory.

Like most of you, we at St. Stephen have Emory stories to tell. His famous sweet tooth at our potluck luncheons. His willingness to be goofy during our talent shows. His tendency to preach just a bit too long. His human-ness. Even when he'd get in a jam, it seemed that things always worked out for him. One time he led us in a Saturday mini-retreat – then realized, shortly after lunch, that he'd forgotten about a wedding he was supposed to officiate. The clock was ticking – AND he was way underdressed. I think he had a spare shirt, tie and sportcoat in his office, but ... what about pants? Luckily, Jerry Ellsworth was at the retreat, and Jerry never dressed casually. Plus, thank God, Jerry and Emory were the same size. So Emory changed into Jerry's pants and got to the wedding just in time.

I'm sure you've read Emory's obituary. What a list of accomplishments. But he never ever bragged. He couldn't even accept a compliment. When you thanked him, he said: "Rather, we should thank you!" Which made us love him even more. But it was no act. Inside, he was not nearly as confident as people would have guessed. Once I asked him to list his best pastorly traits. He came up with:

- "Jack of all trades, master of none."
- "Trust my gut," or, "Trust the Holy Spirit."
- "I'm not the best listener, but I'm not the worst."
- "I talk too much, but sometimes I have something to say ... and at least I know I talk too much."

Not exactly a self-promoter, was he? A few years ago, Ann and I interviewed him for a booklet we put together. Here's one portion that I think you friends of Emory will appreciate. He said: "I don't feel equal to most people. Deep down. I can rationalize it and say, 'I'm up to snuff with most people.' But to be honest, I'm just BEWILDERED why people accept me at what I do." Then he said that, to cope, he used to host lots of parties. Here's how he put it: "When I have a lot of food and drink around for guests, I feel safe, because I don't have to talk if I'm the host. I've done that all my life. That's my specialty, right there. I did that in high school and college. I got to be with these people who were better equipped than I was – smarter, respected, whatever. And I could be their servant. And they'd think well of me. It covered up that I didn't know anything, but they didn't know that!" That modesty carried over when you asked him how he thought he'd be remembered. In those same interviews, Emory suggested this epitaph for himself: "He always thought he wanted to do God's will, but never got around to it."

Emory clearly thought way too little of himself. We, on the other hand, can't say enough about him. We all realize what a blessing it was for Emory Hingst to be in our lives for so many years. I like to picture him back when we were all so much younger, when he was still pastor at St. Stephen, in our old sanctuary, at the end of a worship service, face dripping wet, hands raised in benediction, grin stretched wide. When this man told you that God loved you, warts and all, you just had to believe. Amen.