

The Epistle of Edward P. Harding, Jr.

To the People I Loved and Served:

I am Ed Harding. On December 7, 1960, I came into this world to Edward and Ella Jones Harding, hailing from Garysburg, North Carolina. My birth at Lincoln Hospital in Durham, North Carolina, marked the outset of my journey, characterized by the resilience and defiance of adversity during a period marred by racism and segregation.

Thankfully, my sister Yolanda and I were shielded from the corrosive effects of racism and its dehumanizing influence. We were surrounded by a tight-knit community comprised of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives, as well as members of our church and school who, though not biologically related, embraced us as family. Their collective role was to protect us from the pervasive reach of racism.

I received my education in the public schools of Northampton County, North Carolina, where our supportive community extended its influence. Many of the individuals who taught us during regular school hours also served as Sunday school instructors. It was comforting to know that I was never alone; whenever I stumbled, a member of my community was there to lend a helping hand and guide me back on my feet.

During the summer between my eighth and ninth-grade years, unable to secure summer employment due to my young age, I enrolled in ninth-grade English summer school. Upon entering my ninth-grade teacher's classroom, he handed me the ninth-grade English textbook I was supposed to use. I replied, "I've already completed that course over the summer." To which my teacher responded, "Well, Ed, you're now in tenth grade." Consequently, I accelerated my studies and graduated from high school in just three years instead of the typical four.

Leaving high school at the age of 16 stirred up some apprehensions and uncertainties within me. However, upon stepping through the doors of NC A&T State University, I encountered a realm of opportunities that had previously been beyond my imagination. One pivotal figure in my journey was my humanities teacher, Dr. Robert Levine, who not only imparted academic knowledge but also taught me the art of tying a tie. Inspired by his guidance, I made it a habit to wear a tie to class every day and carried a briefcase, embodying a sense of professionalism and dedication to my studies.

During my time at A&T, I became involved in various honor societies and eventually pledged to the Beta Epsilon chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Despite being an accounting major, the plethora of opportunities at A&T left me with more choices than time could accommodate. Ultimately, I decided to begin my career journey at the Atlanta office of Cooper's and Lybrand, a prominent public accounting firm. Later, I relocated to Pittsburgh, where I accepted a position within Mellon Bank's internal audit department.

Clearly, not destined for a career in accounting, I heeded the call to ministry and enrolled in the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Seminary life unfolded the teachings of the Bible in profound new ways, expanding my understanding and perspective. One of our esteemed professors, Dr. Ronald Edward Peters, who visited monthly to instruct on urban education, made a significant impact on me. Upon preparing my resume, I entrusted it to Dr. Peters, requesting him to forward it to any church in search of a candidate. Unexpectedly, he presented it to his own congregation, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Massachusetts.

I embraced the opportunity to serve as the youth pastor at The MLK, Jr. Community Presbyterian Church. Despite my Baptist background upon arriving in Springfield, I found my allegiance shifting not to any specific denomination but to the earnest faces of the children who greeted me eagerly on the steps as I made my way to the interview at MLK.

Their simple question, "Are you going to be our youth pastor?" left a profound impact on me. I initially couldn't commit, as I was heading to the interview at that very moment. Yet their hopeful response, "We hope so!" resonated deeply with me. It dawned on me that my loyalty wasn't to a particular denomination but to the community and spirit of this church.

Had those children belonged to a different denomination, be it Episcopal, Methodist, or any other, I would have followed suit. Their Presbyterian affiliation led me to pursue the necessary steps, including ordination exams, to become Presbyterian. Serving that youth group brought me immense joy and fulfillment, marking a pivotal chapter in my ministry.

I often encouraged our church families at Northeastern Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, and Prince George's Community Church ("PGCC") in Temple Hills, Maryland, to refrain from giving disapproving looks when babies cried during church services. Instead, I urged them to recognize that a crying baby signifies a thriving and growing church community. The infants of PGCC have since blossomed into accomplished young adults, many of whom have excelled academically at prestigious institutions such as Spelman, Morehouse, Howard, Hampton, and the illustrious North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, renowned for its vibrant homecoming celebrations.

Serving in God's kingdom among His people has been profoundly fulfilling. I've been privileged to shepherd congregations, proclaim the gospel, and offer hope to those in despair. I am eternally grateful for that privilege.

Allow me to conclude with one of my favorite stories, depicting a young man's journey of passage:

His father leads him into the depths of the forest, where he is left alone, blindfolded. Tasked with surviving the night, he must wait until the morning sunlight pierces through his blindfold before removing it. He is forbidden from seeking help from anyone, no matter the circumstances.

The boy trembles with fear as branches snap and leaves rustle, hinting at the presence of lurking beasts. Despite the howling wind and rustling earth, the boy steadfastly keeps his blindfold in

place throughout the harrowing night. As dawn breaks, he cautiously removes the blindfold, only to find his father seated beside him on a stump, bow and arrow at the ready, vigilant against any approaching threat.

Deuteronomy 31:6 reads, “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.” (ESV). This is a verse that encourages strength and courage in the face of challenges or adversaries. It reassures believers that God is with them, providing support and protection. The verse emphasizes that there is no need to fear, for God will never abandon them. It serves as a reminder of God's constant presence and faithfulness, even in difficult times, and encourages trust in His guidance and provision.

That is my testimony. God has been everpresent. In times of need, He provided support and protection. In moments of longing for comfort, He offered solace. In my union with Karen, He blessed our marriage. Upon the arrival of Tuere and Buddy, He rejoiced with us. When we welcomed Jordan, Justice, and Journey into the world, He blessed their births. Through sickness and health, in moments of joy and sorrow, His presence remained unwavering. He never abandoned me. Never.

My prayer for you is that you, too, will be reminded of His constant presence and faithfulness, even during difficult times. Ultimately, I encourage you to trust in God's guidance and provision.

And now, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26).

With Eternal Love,
Pastor Ed Harding