

Alumni Spotlight: Frederick (Rick) Eschenburg (M.Div. '83)



Current Title: Mission Advancement Leader

Family: Wife, Mariann; Three grown children, and two grandchildren

Favorite Professor: I worked closely with Dr. Royce Gruenler; his impact on my life was transformative.

Favorite Class: The Life of Jesus with Dr. Gordon Fee was electric! People, who were not even in the class, would sit on the steps in the Lecture Hall as all of the seats were full.

Favorite Memory: "Sink Ball" in the men's bathroom in the library. This was real, highly competitive, and a great way to reset after too much time in the books!

What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and where are you serving now?

After graduation I received and accepted a call to Pastor a three-point charge in Franklin, Vermont. Franklin was a small, dairy farming community with 1,000 people and 10,000 cows. I served Franklin, Highgate, and East Franklin for 10 years. These were three very different communities, connected through me as their pastor. I never realized how formative Vermont was for the type of pastor I was becoming and the type of pastor I would be in ministry. I also earned a Doctor of Ministry, focusing on Marriage and Family, from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer Theological Seminary) in 1992.

In my nearly 40 years of ministry, I served churches in Holland, MI, Virginia Beach, VA, and New Era, MI in addition to my first three in Vermont. 2021 was a big transition year for me: I stepped down after ten and a half years as Senior Pastor of New Era Reformed Church in New Era, Michigan, which is a small, fruit and asparagus farming community with a village of 491 people. I now serve on the leadership team for [Reach the Forgotten Jail Ministry](#), a statewide jail ministry serving 35 county jails in Michigan.

What did you love about pastoring rural churches? What are the particular joys and challenges of serving a rural church?

I learned very quickly that rural pastors are just as busy as urban and suburban pastors. The difference that I noted and loved was that in rural ministry your busyness revolved around direct care and ministry with the people in your community. I have always believed that **people are most important**, and rural ministry afforded me the opportunity to spend time in this regard. The challenge of rural ministry is the constant financial challenge and strain on sustaining ministry in rural and many times impoverished areas. These also tended to be communities that were often overlooked by their state budgets as well. This only reinforced the importance of this work for my wife and me.

What do you love about your current work? And what are the particular joys and challenges of being a chaplain in your context?

The Jail ministry is intentionally called *Reach the Forgotten*. Those in our county jails are forgotten and would certainly be on Jesus' list of *the least of these*. Many of these inmates find themselves

in in a place they never dreamt of or envisioned they would be. They are thirsty and hungry for human contact and for real hope. We can offer that through being present and offering them Jesus Christ. One way to change the recidivism of inmates is to change the culture of the jail. We do that through education, spiritual formation, discipleship work, and reminding them that no one is beyond God's reach. Obviously, there are layers of challenges. Some of the cultural perception of inmates in the criminal justice system is warranted, but not all of it. There are ways that we, as local communities exacerbate the problem as we perpetuate stereotypes and do not lean into ministry for those in these situations. Finding financial resources to do this work is always a challenge.

How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

Gordon-Conwell challenged me with doing the work to discover truth and then the application of that truth, and it taught me that the text has a context is relevant and applicable in our current North American socio-political-spiritual confusion.

There was an acceptable diversity at Gordon-Conwell. We were not all in the same place of understanding, yet we recognized that we stood together under the banner of Christ. We offended one another, we disagreed and at times hurt one another, yet in the context of authentic Christian community we were challenged to figure it out as the Body of Christ. This continues to guide me and challenge me as I strive to walk humbly with God, practicing justice and loving mercy. One example, that is still a vibrant memory, was Dr. Dean Borgman's class, *Racism Confronts the Church*.

As a participant in that class, I remember one incident when we (as a class) collided with Systemic Racism before we even understood it as a term. It was a painfully powerful moment, yet we were challenged to work it out in community and the fabric of our relationships.

What has been Gordon-Conwell's biggest impact/influence on your ministry?

I think the above question answers this as well. Okay, one other personal anecdote: As a first-year student I met Dr. J Christy Wilson in the hallway of the Kerr building. Even though I knew who he was, we had never met, and I was one of 600 other students. He greeted me by name, asked how Mariann, my wife, was doing as we made the transition to seminary. I was surprised, and I'm sure stammered through some unrecognizable response. Later, as I got to know Dr. Wilson, I realized he had a discipline of praying over the students as he went through the seminary picture directory. I have maintained a similar practice in ministry to this day. Just pray.

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are just entering pastoral ministry?

Love the people God has asked you to steward. They will bite you; they will bruise you; they will lay their lives down in the name of Jesus with you. They are just like you. Love them as the Father loves you. Pray for them and pray with them, out loud. You will be amazed at how God will move hearts and engage them for Kingdom work.