

Transitions That Have Shaped My Journey

A Fellows Feature

by James Eckert
2001 Fellows Class

This has been a very good year, as was the previous year. This is certainly not a remarkable statement—except that in these two years I have been retiring from my second career as a partner in a consulting engineering firm that I helped to found in 1988.

The articles I read and the “pop wisdom” I heard warned that entering retirement was supposed to be traumatic. Instead, I have experienced an easy transition, because, once again, I have seen that the Lord has been preparing me for this new season of life. Looking back over the forty-two years since I trusted my heart to Christ, I can point to numerous times when discouragements and failures have been but a part of transitions that God has worked into my journey to prepare me for new directions and opportunities to serve Him. For me, calling has not been a single discovery, but a gradual uncovering along the way.

The Early Years

I grew up in a small Pennsylvania town with a big dream of going to the Naval Academy. Coming from a family where college was not the norm, this was considered a long shot. But God provided the opportunity, and I entered the Academy in July 1959.

My passion was submarines, and I took extra courses in nuclear engineering to better prepare for my career goal. However, on returning from my first class submarine cruise, I failed my commissioning physical due to poor vision. This not only disqualified me for submarine service, but also for the line, the main stream of the Navy. This was a time of great discouragement; my plans and four years of effort were scuttled simply by poor vision.

After reconciling myself to this new reality, I began to look at other options and discovered a small number of commissions into the Navy’s Civil Engineer Corps. I soon realized that this was a natural fit for my academic strengths and would open new opportunities for a Navy career.

The challenges and experiences of the next twenty years were very different than I had planned, but God was shaping me for His plans as I realized that I was more drawn to engineering than the military officer aspects of my career.

Early in my career I completed my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in civil engineering, and went on to

serve as resident engineer in Sattahip, Thailand, with the “Seabees” in Vietnam, and as an engineering instructor at the Naval Academy. I then pursued an engineering doctorate at M.I.T.; however, after finishing my course work, a change in my educational goals coupled with the Navy’s urgent need for an officer of my rank and background in Boston ended that time of study. This again was a great discouragement, but now I was learning to trust God’s hand in my life.

After a year of duty in Boston, I was sent to Washington, D.C., and ultimately to an exchange duty with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This duty assignment was extended twice, so that the last six years of my Navy career were providing consulting geotechnical engineering support for coastal engineering projects around the country. Thus when I retired in 1983, I was very well prepared for my next transition, a career in consulting engineering with specialities in geotechnical and coastal engineering—God was again engineering my transitions.

Looking back over my career in the Navy, there were many rich opportunities to serve God, to be mentored by mature Christians, and to learn to mentor younger believers. I helped establish a regular worship service for the American community in Thailand, served three years as Officer Representative for Officers Christian Fellowship (O.C.F.) at the Naval Academy, and led Bible studies in many settings. One of the greatest joys in my 63 years has been the role I have been privileged to play in the lives of young men first at the Naval Academy, through O.C.F., and among the young engineers in the Navy and then in our consulting firm. These were treasured opportunities in which God allowed me to be Christ’s witness simply by being willing to talk when and where He prompted me.

My latest—but not last—transition is to retirement from engineering and a new season of my journey. This transition actually began in 1998 when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. During those weeks of tests, surgery, and recovery, I spent a lot of time reflecting on my life and realized that many of the things I had striven to achieve did not satisfy the deeper needs of my heart. A second bout with cancer in 2000 took that reflection a great deal deeper.

So, when my wife, Cynthia, and I went with C.S. Lewis Institute to Oxford in 2001, I had been prepared

for a new transition in life. My present return to health was clearly a gift from God; I found myself pondering on His purposes and plans for extending my years on earth. I was especially challenged by Oswald Chambers' writings on what it means to "finish well" life's journey.

In July 2001, at Oxford and some quiet dinners with Tom Tarrants, we explored what God had been teaching us, and where we were in our spiritual journey. Two realizations came from that time: First, being a "left brained" engineer, I have naturally gravitated towards a more intellectual faith and have lagged in allowing the Holy Spirit to develop a vital biblical spirituality in my own heart. Second, I received a quiet affirmation that God was leading me to be more involved in mentoring men.

Having served for several years on our church's session, I have watched up close men struggle in their walk of faith and have felt a continuing burden to mentor, equip, and disciple men in applying Christian principles to their lives. Many men in churches today are not from Christian families and came to Christ during their college years or later. Thus the mentoring that a Christian father would have provided must now be provided by Christian men around them.

As a mentor, I have learned that I do not have to have all the answers—I haven't even found all the questions. Instead, I just encourage, prompt with questions, support with prayer (an area which is a work in progress), and stay out of the Holy Spirit's way. Jim Houston's book, *The Mentored Life*, says mentoring is not a formula but a heart attitude. It just takes a heart that is willing to be inconvenienced for others—another work God is doing in my heart. God has also used the mentoring of others to deepen me spiritually in my walk with Him.

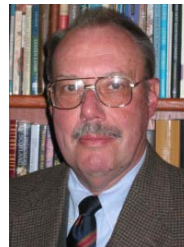
One verse that has impressed itself on my heart is Paul's statement in Acts 13:36, "For when David had served God's purposes in his own generation, he fell asleep...." This passage speaks of David's death, but it says even more about his life and how he had faithfully served God. It brings me to ask, "What would it look like for me to 'serve God's purposes in my own time?'"

Recently when asked to work with this year's C.S. Lewis Senior Professional Fellows Men, I was pleased to sign up. When we laid out the syllabus for the year, we shaped it intentionally to challenge a group of men already steeped in life, strong in their faith, successful in their professional careers, and soon facing transitions in their lives and careers. We wanted to ask the question, "What does it mean to finish well?" In other words, "What do you want to do with the rest of your life?" For these men this is one of life's crucial questions. It is the reason many men struggle with retirement; they have not yet found a satisfying meaning to their lives, or the prizes that they have grasped for are fleeting. I recently read an article on Sam Ericsson, founder of Advocates International. It ends with the quote, "If I died today, I would die the most fulfilled man on the planet."

His satisfaction isn't defined by the distance he has traveled or the accolades earned, but by how faithfully he has followed the Lord.

Years ago, a former mentor in my life sent me a postcard; it was his last communication to me before he went home. On it he wrote a question that has regularly challenged me in the intervening years: "Jim, are you still in God's hands a good instrument?" I believe that "finishing well" is to be able to answer "yes" to that question.

His question reflects the theme of II Corinthians that our sufficiency for any task is a gift from God. Paul says it well in 3:5 (ESV) "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God who has made us competent..." I marvel at how He has shaped and equipped me by the transitions of my life, and I look forward to what is next.



Jim Eckert is a native of Tyrone, Pennsylvania and a 1963 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. He served 20 years in the Navy's Civil Engineer Corps, along the way earning his B.S.C.E. and M.S.C.E. from University of Michigan and taking post-graduate work at M.I.T. His service included posts in Thailand, Vietnam, and teaching at the Naval Academy.

In 1983, he retired from active duty and pursued his career in geotechnical engineering. In 1988, Jim and two others founded a new firm, Engineering Consulting Services, Ltd. (ECS). Jim retired in 2002 as Senior Vice President and Chief Engineer.

Jim and his wife, Cynthia, have four grown children and five grandchildren. They have been members of Reston Presbyterian Church for 24 years where they have served in various leadership roles. Jim also serves on the C.S. Lewis Institute Board of Directors and the boards of other non-profit organizations.

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