Why Ed Stetzer Suddenly Quit His Job and Resigned His Church

Today, Wheaton College announced my appointment to a new chair. Their release explained:

> *Dr. Ed Stetzer has been appointed to a newly created chair, The Billy Graham Distinguished Endowed Chair for Church, Mission, and Evangelism. In this role, he has been named Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College (BGCE).*
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> *Stetzer will serve as chair of the Evangelism & Leadership Program in the Wheaton College Graduate School and as publisher of Evangelical Missions Quarterly. He will also provide vision-casting and leadership to existing BGCE initiatives, and will spearhead new initiatives that include the creation of a National Evangelism Leaders Fellowship.*

I'll serve at LifeWay for several more months and then transition this summer.

Making a change is always hard, and we prayed hard over this decision.

Let me share some of the details as to why.

Vision

Larry Theisen recently recounted a conversation we had 25 years ago. Back then, I shared with him my vision to get a doctorate, start a global center, and impact churches to be on mission, planting churches, and sharing the gospel. I was in my twenties then, but I had a passion that I've held for a long time. About 15 years ago I even wrote out a plan to do

it. Now, before I leave my 40s, I want to spend the next decade helping Christians know and engage their culture for the cause of Christ.

When Wheaton College created this new, endowed chair, which included serving as Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, Donna and I prayed, talked, and considered. Then, we decided to go.

LifeWay

First, it has been a great experience, working with quality leaders who have a passion to serve the church. I'm thankful for Thom Rainer and Brad Waggoner, my bosses. Thom has led LifeWay to move into the new millennium. In the last decade as many Christian resource providers have declined or closed, LifeWay has grown.

Second, I have a great team at LifeWay, working in Research, Communications, and Ministry Development. I'm thankful for Scott McConnell, Marty King, Micah Fries, Lizette Beard, Casey Oliver, Kevin Walker, Shirley Cross, Jon Wilke, Carol Pipes, Bob Smietana, Aaron Earls, Lisa Green, Katie Shull, Donna Grace, and Marty Duren.

Third, I have great partnerships at LifeWay and look forward to their continuation. These include The Gospel Project (particularly Trevin Wax) where I will continue as editor of The Gospel Project. Each week one million people use this amazing curriculum. I also look forward to continuing with the team (particularly Daniel Im) now being used by thousands of church planters.

Thom Rainer explained in a note to LifeWay's employees today:

"Dr. Stetzer has made a significant contribution to the ministry of LifeWay, especially in establishing our credibility as a leader in research and advancing our brand as an important voice in the broader media world.

“This transition has led us to a new relationship with Dr. Stetzer where he will serve as a consultant to LifeWay, still offering us his leadership in several key areas of our work. We are excited for the impact he will make in his new role and also grateful that we will have a continued relationship with him.”

So, why am I leaving?

People often ask why someone is leaving. There are a lot of reasons, and probably too many to share here. But, primarily, over the last few years, my ministry has changed.

I was asked to serve on the board of the National Association of Evangelicals, have written textbooks on missiology with MissionShift, hosted the national conversation on race A Time to Speak, and a summit on the global plight of refugees. Yet, I work at a publisher and retail store chain. The opportunities God has opened for me, and for which I am accountable to Him, have become broader than only a publishing focus.

LifeWay has been very gracious to give me space and permission to do these things, and I am very grateful. LifeWay is in a place today that would have been unimaginable ten years ago. Being a part of that positive change has been an amazing journey.

When I approached Thom Rainer about a shift, enabling me to continue serving on a few projects at LifeWay while engaging in a broader role to serve evangelicals, he graciously agreed.

And, that’s where we are now.

What Will We Be Doing

I’ll be sharing more about my new Wheaton team later this week, but let me say a few things about what we are doing. I’ll continue writing books and the blog, speaking, etc.

However, I'll now be working to train pastors and church leaders through our academic programs.

At the Billy Graham Center, we believe the Lord has called us to help lead a new conversation about evangelism and mission for the moment we are in. We will do that through networking leaders, researching best practices, engaging thought leaders in the academy, and strategic ministry initiatives. (I'll explain more about each of these in forthcoming articles.)

Focus

We will be working hard to convene Christians and help facilitate conversations.

For example, we are planning the Amplify Conference this summer with a goal of helping churches learn (or re-learn) how to evangelistically engage today's culture.

I'm also working with Chris Railey at the Assemblies of God and the team from Rural Matters to facilitate multi-denominational conversations on rural church planting. You can email us at bgce@ if you'd like to get an invite to this meeting. You'll have an opportunity to strategize with other leaders who are passionate about needs in America's rural areas.

In the future, we are looking at meetings on Muslim outreach, evangelism strategies, navigating cultural challenges, church movements, and more.

New roles

We will also be adding two team members at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton, so please spread the word. We'll be hiring a Managing Director for the Billy Graham Center (not yet posted). Also, I am hiring an Administrative Assistant (info at this link).

Conclusion

We are excited about the future and serving the church, Christians, pastors, and denominations. I'll have much more to share about our new academic programs, initiatives, and more, in the coming days.

Please pray for us during our transition. It's not easy on Donna and our kids, though Donna and I are convinced this is the Lord. It's also a big change from a business environment to an academic one, which is very different in multiple ways.

But, we are convinced and excited. We will miss our friends, and resigning from the church I planted in Nashville (Grace Church) was heart-wrenching. But we have set our face toward Chicago, Wheaton College, the Billy Graham Center, and serving the church in her mission and witness.

We will see you in Chicago.

P.S. This is the year for the Cubs. {eoa}

Ed Stetzer, *Ph.D., is the Executive Director of LifeWay Research, a prolific author, and well-known conference and seminar leader.*