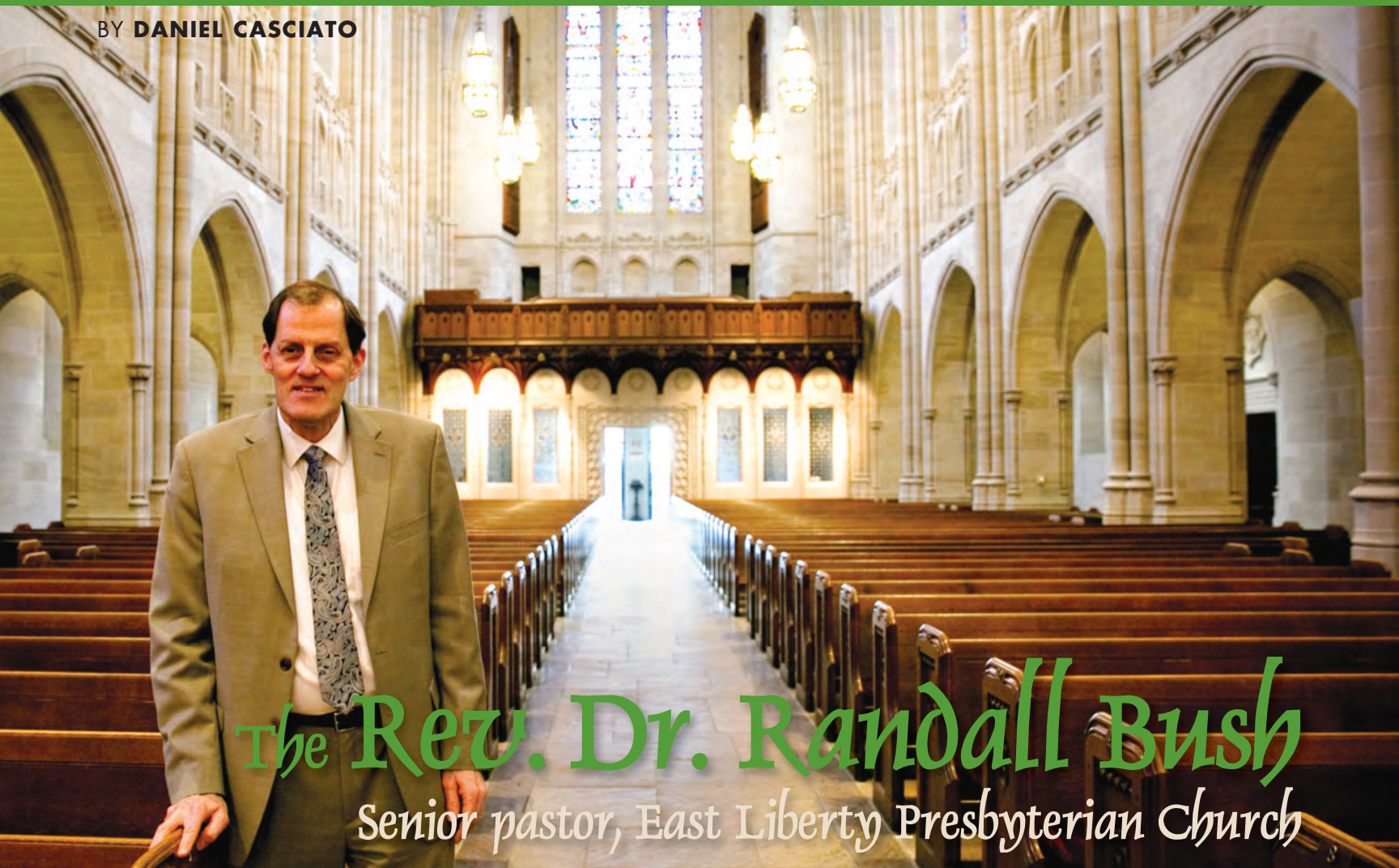


BY DANIEL CASCIATO



## The Rev. Dr. Randall Bush

Senior pastor, East Liberty Presbyterian Church

*The spiritual leader of a historic East End congregation shepherds it into a third century.*

Bush poses in the soaring sanctuary of his church, known to many as The Cathedral of Hope. Photo by Melody Farrin.

**D**espite earning a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and being ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1989, the Rev. Dr. Randall Bush never dreamed he'd become a pastor. A native of Kansas City, Kansas, he had been a piano performance major at the University of Kansas who planned to work for a church program or ecumenical organization. But after serving as a hospital chaplain one summer, his eyes were opened to congregational ministry. Three years in Zimbabwe communicating the Gospel to a new culture solidified his calling.

Upon returning to the United States, "Pastor Randy," as he is often called by parishioners, became pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Racine, Wisconsin. During his time there, he earned a doctorate in theology and ethics at Marquette University, married Beth Johnstone, and celebrated the birth of their two children, Ian and Charlotte, now grown.

In 2006, he moved with his family to Point Breeze and assumed the role of senior pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian Church

(ELPC), whose soaring Gothic Revival home is nicknamed the Cathedral of Hope and whose congregation celebrates its 200th anniversary in May.

*Shady Ave* recently chatted with Bush to learn more about him, ELPC, its bicentennial plans, and his favorite places in the East End.

### What do you enjoy about playing piano?

Studying music and performing uses the other half of my brain, as opposed to the administration and reading that goes with being a pastor. Music is a spiritual discipline and I love the way it connects people across boundaries. Music and theology are attempts to express something fundamentally inexpressible. Music is this marvelous engagement with an initial creative act that lets you be a co-creator in learning, mastering, and performing it.

### What excites you about East Liberty Presbyterian Church?

I'm grateful for the diversity, energy, creativity, and passion of the congregation. We're a multiracial and multicultural congregation

of about 900 members. Nearly one third are people of color—African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American. That adds vibrancy to our worship and congregational life.

This congregation is open to new ideas and initiatives, especially if we're responding to community needs and important issues like immigration, racial justice, economics, and defining relationships. We do it in a way that's both faithful and respectful. Having that dynamic around all the time excites me.

Lastly, we're a creative church, open to having brass in the worship service, jazz musicians, individual soloists, and choirs, as well as traditional and contemporary music. As a piano major, being part of a church with a strong music ministry and open to a variety of artistic and musical forms is energizing.

### What's something important you've learned about ministry?

Great things are possible if you don't care who gets the credit. We're always better together than we are individually. That's true

in terms of individual people as it is individual congregations. Finding ways to build bridges and cross over bridges to others and other congregations keeps faith life and congregational life vital and relevant. Without vitality and relevance, no church can grow or thrive.

### What influences have shaped your understanding of ministry?

After graduating from seminary in the late 1980s, I was drawn to [the work of] some theologians, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. After serving the congregation in Zimbabwe, I was struck by the entire anti-apartheid movement and the wisdom of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

As a music person and later as a pastor, I've been attuned to the leaders of the LGBT movement and the call for inclusion and welcoming of all people. Feminists like Rosemary Ruether and Phyllis Trible, as well as holy women like Julian of Norwich and Saint Teresa of Ávila also shaped my understanding of ministry.

### What is the role of your church in the East Liberty community?

It has played an important role that has changed over the years. For the majority of its 200 years, our church was an established, largely affluent, Presbyterian congregation. But as the neighborhood changed in the late 1960s and '70s as the result of an unfortunate redevelopment plan and the relocation of many people to the suburbs, the church made a conscious decision to remain—and to remain relevant.

The church opened its doors to a men's homeless shelter, soup kitchen, and food bank, and offered programs reaching out to single mothers and those in need of support through social services. It also reached out to creative worship experiences and welcomed in 12-step groups and a variety of community partners.

Today our role is to continue to be an advocate for a healthy, diverse East Liberty and to be a place where people can gather for a variety of programs, meetings, and community-building events. It's important for us to work on diversity and justice issues and to be constantly engaged with our community and its needs.





The sky-scraping central tower of East Liberty Presbyterian Church is a neighborhood landmark.

**What are some of the ELPC's challenges?**

Many people today are not actively involved in any church or have fallen away. Maybe they don't feel welcome because of their age, economics, or sexual identity. Or maybe some don't feel the message, ministries, and rituals have direct bearing and application in their lives. When people come through our doors and see something that intrigues them or that they like, we need to encourage them to ask questions and help them understand our faith. To address this, we provide classes and adult education Bible studies that are safe places for people to learn and ask questions.

Another challenge is how to perform worship services, baptisms, weddings, and funerals and use language of the faith that communicates to people who aren't familiar with that language. Our Sunday morning worship service is shaped by history and tradition, so it might feel formal or foreign to someone who didn't grow up in the church.

A final challenge is recognizing that people communicate with Mass differently now. Social media, 24/7 cable news, podcasts, and smartphones are different ways of engaging with the culture than the more traditional,



This 1932 photo captures the groundbreaking ceremony for the church, which is the fifth East Liberty Presbyterian Church building to occupy the site over the past 200 years.

familiar cycle of a Sunday morning, one-hour church service. How do we translate a largely hearing-based service to a more visual community? While we do have an active social media presence and stream our services, that's an ongoing challenge.

**Describe an experience that made you think, "This is what faith is all about."**

Someone in our Sunday adult education class once suffered a stroke and was hospitalized for a while. The class found ways to support the spouse, arrange for meals, and check in with the family. It was an active caregiving that, as a pastor, I didn't have to coordinate or organize. That type of organic response from people who may not consider themselves strong friends or acquaintances, yet have a willingness to support one another, is one example of faith.

Two other examples came from times of tragedies. After the shooting of Antwon Rose II [in June 2018], there was a large rally outside of our church. It happened on a Sunday after worship, so we were able to move from our worship time and join the rally in progress as a way to show solidarity.

Another example was after the Tree of Life shooting [October 2018]. I performed a Jewish and Presbyterian wedding last June with a member of the Tree of Life congregation. That couple contacted me after the shooting and asked if we could find a room in the church on Sunday afternoon for about 40 people to gather, check in, and discuss funeral obligations. Over 200 found their way to our church. People from ELPC volunteered to set

up chairs and gave them their privacy. This was another strong act of faith. We had built these relationships and their members felt comfortable coming into our space in their time of need. We could show that love and support by opening our doors.

**How will you commemorate the church's 200th anniversary?**

Our main celebration is Sunday, May 19, at our 11 a.m. worship service. We will have new musical pieces, and our choir and instrumental group will perform special music that day. We have invited prior staff and employees to join us as well. On Saturday, May 11, we will have a banquet event at the ELPC Social Hall to celebrate our history in a more social setting. Earlier in May, we will have several community-based events including a talent show and potluck.

Part of our recent renovations is adding lights in our tower so the tower and whole church will be illuminated. We're planning a Light Up Night on May 4 and a community celebration on May 10, with a community ice cream social and tours of the church, inviting the neighborhood to celebrate with us.

**How has your church grown since you became pastor?**

It's been a steady growth, averaging 40 to 50 new members annually. The worship attendance has increased nearly 40 percent, and congregational giving has more than doubled over these last 13 years. Those are all signs of health and vitality.

It's partially occurred because we strive to reach out to people and engage them through worship, spiritual life, spiritual programs, Christian education, and mission activities. We talk about important justice issues, and for millennials and younger people that's a critical component for any faith community.

Going forward, I hope we continue to follow what we call radical hospitality. We want to be a church that inspires people within the walls as well as outside the walls to volunteer and make a difference for wherever God has placed them. The church is at its best when it's empowering people to do good work the rest of the week, not just for an hour on Sunday.

**Where are your favorite places to relax in Point Breeze and East Liberty?**

One of my exercise routines is walking from my house to Frick Park, around the bowling greens, down through the park, and back. I also love The Frick museum and often pop in there even if it's for 20 minutes to see one or two paintings.

When I'm at the church, the library is a great refuge. And I enjoy walking around Highland Avenue. It gives me great joy to see the changes, diverse people, and vitality. It's something to celebrate, because for many years people were hesitant to come to East Liberty.

*For a history of ELPC, a complete listing of church programs, and details of the anniversary celebration, visit [cathedralofhope.org](http://cathedralofhope.org).*

**Celebrating Two Centuries**

East Liberty Presbyterian Church  
200th Anniversary Public Events  
at Penn & Highland avenues

**Tower Light Up Night**  
May 4, 8 p.m.

Be there as new exterior and tower lighting is displayed for the first time.

**Community Celebration**  
May 10, 5-7 p.m.

Enjoy an ice cream social and tours of the church.

**Worship Services**  
May 12 & 19, 11 a.m.

The ELPC choir and instrumental group will perform special music, including new pieces composed for the event.