
Pro Rege

Volume 47 | Number 1

Article 7

September 2018

Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly: A Biography of the Honorable Vernon J. Ehlers (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Van Der Slik, Jack R. (2018) "Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly: A Biography of the Honorable Vernon J. Ehlers (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 47: No. 1, 44 - 46.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol47/iss1/7

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Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly: A Biography of the Honorable Vernon J. Ehlers. Julia R. LaPlaca. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Calvin College Press, 2017. 128 pp. ISBN: 978-1-937555-98-6. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs emeritus, University of Illinois-Springfield.

Julia R. LaPlaca merits appreciation for this straightforward account of the life and career of Vernon J. Ehlers. Coming from a modest Midwestern American upbringing, Ehlers pursued an active and energetic Christian life that led to substantial accomplishments both as an academic—Ehlers earned a doctorate in nuclear physics in 1960—and as a politician. Among his other achievements, Ehlers served for nearly two decades as a member of the US House of Representatives for Michigan's third district (1993-2010).

What I find captivating about Vern Ehlers, whose life spanned from 1934 to 2017, is that he shared in most of the mundane bits of life experience that readers of this review have enjoyed. Ehlers repeatedly went the extra mile to learn, serve, teach, exhort, encourage, and lead those around him to a higher level of human service.

Moreover, while in a mode of consistent personal modesty, he authentically modeled a life of Christian servant-leadership. Ehlers pursued the Christian life, both within the shelter and nurture of a Reformed Christian heritage and beyond—in the realm of partisan politics at the state and national levels. He also delved into experimental nuclear research and innovation at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in California. He was a deeply engaged physics professor at Calvin College. He stepped into elective politics as a Kent County Board member. He fulfilled public office opportunities in the House and Senate of the Michigan Legislature. His career culminated as a member of the US House in Washington D.C.

Drawing upon LaPlaca's narrative, let me briefly sketch some significant points in Ehlers' life and work. Vernon was, to put it provincially, a "PK" (i.e., preacher's kid), so he always had to put up with that special scrutiny that preachers' kids grew up with before and after World War II. The son of Dutch immigrants, Vernon's preacher-father served in Christian Reformed congregations in mostly small-town ministries: Platte, South Dakota; Edgerton, Minnesota; Celeryville, Ohio; Hamilton, Ontario. In addition to being a closely watched PK, Ehlers suffered with asthma from his

childhood onward. But he turned a health liability into an asset by being a self-motivated reader who early on discovered the treasures gained through the open door of his local public library.

In the mid-1950s there was really only one college for a bright and inquiring CRC PK to attend: Calvin College. And so he did. Impressive results in his admission exams led to a recommendation that physics should be in his curriculum. It became his passion. But Calvin's courses and laboratories for physics were severely limited. So Ehlers completed his undergraduate degree at the University of California, Berkeley, a premier school for advanced physics. He caught on with a leading professor, William Nierenberg, a pioneer scholar who studied radioactivity in the nuclei of atoms. Ehlers completed his doctoral degree in 1960 and stayed on to author or co-author more than a dozen cutting-edge articles in the prestigious academic journal *Physical Review*. In the Lord's timing, after Ehlers' mentor Nierenberg moved on to other physics interests, a Calvin College faculty friend urged Ehlers to join the Calvin physics department as a professor. He accepted, bringing his family to Grand Rapids in 1966.

This move back to Calvin sharply changed Ehlers' life. Instead of doing cutting-edge experimental physics, he turned to undergraduate teaching and used modest resources for physics research. Taking command of a wide range of courses, he also engaged with the liberal arts faculty in a variety of committee and campus activities. He chaired a prickly faculty committee to refine procedures for faculty governance, one of those perennially chafing matters that plague relationships between college administrators and professors (as those who have "been there" can best comprehend).

As well, engaged in his inner-city church, Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, he worked with and through his congregation and the denomination at issues like affordable housing for poor people and world hunger, contributing to denominational publications: *And He Had Compassion on Them* (1978) and *For My Neighbor's Good* (1979). As LaPlaca puts it, "Ehlers saw the

potential to do good in so many places. Unlike most physicists, he didn't pour all his efforts into one concentrated research subject. In good liberal arts fashion, his energies were far-flung" (37).

Ehlers caught the public-policy interest bug at an American Physical Society (APS) meeting in 1972. A presentation by a research chemist-turned-congressman included a call for scientists to connect with public issues and politicians to make the world a better place. Ehlers caught the vision and offered his expertise not only to his hometown but also to the nationally eminent Representative Gerald R. Ford. For Ford's benefit, Ehlers chaired a group of local scientists who for several years counseled Ford regarding science-related policy issues.

In 1974, Ehlers waded into partisan politics by running for a Kent County Commission seat. The main issues, as LaPlaca puts it, included "environmental standards, better management of the county jail, revenue sharing, and solid waste disposal" (40). He served on the County Commission from 1975 to 1983, and in three of those years he chaired the commission. To this day, LaPlaca reports, his legacy "lives on in the tangible recycling infrastructure he helped implement" (43).

Ehlers' life changed in 1982, when a vacancy in the Michigan House of Representatives opened up because of a move by Paul Henry, previously a Calvin political science professor, from the House to the Senate. Ehlers ran for State Representative, while benefiting from Henry's endorsement, and won the position. He became a full-time legislator, giving up his professorship. Two years later, when Henry moved on to the US House of Representatives, Ehlers ran for Henry's vacated Michigan Senate position.

But the 1985 State Senate election was a tense one, pitting two former Calvin faculty—Ehlers as the Republican candidate, and Democrat Stephen Monsma—against each other. These two fine Christian candidates managed to compete honorably and fairly, but their partisan supporters perceived the race as one with high stakes. A *Washington Post* article described the race as "tinged with racial overtones" (46). But the candidates themselves never let the contest become personal. They shared the view that, as Christians, they could run on the issues, not on distortions. They differed on specifics, but both offered their Christian perspective on justice through politics. Ehlers

prevailed with a 55 to 45 percent election margin. In office, he applied his expertise regarding natural resources, environmental policy, education, and energy. With his quick mind, he mastered issues with scientific insight.

In God's providence, Paul Henry's life was cut short by a cancerous brain tumor. In the special election that followed, Ehlers was elected to fill Henry's spot in the U.S. House of Representatives in December 1993.

Ehlers entered the US House at a propitious time. Republicans were in the minority, but an upstart academician-turned-politician, Newt Gingrich, was fomenting a partisan takeover. Gingrich engaged Ehlers in the campaign for a Republican congressional majority in the November election. A historic shift brought the Republicans majority control of the House. Ehlers' reward was more work. In the sessions following, Ehlers had four committee assignments (while typical colleagues had just one or two). He served on Transportation and Infrastructure, Education, House Administration (eventually the chairman), and the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress.

LaPlaca elaborates on some of the votes on tough issues that Ehlers had to make. After deep scrutiny, Ehlers supported the Bush administration's War in Iraq, and he explained his rationale to his constituents in a column for the *Grand Rapids Press* (October 11, 2002). He had the courage four years later to publicly acknowledge that his vote was based upon "faulty evidence of Iraq's ability to produce nuclear weapons" (59). In 2008, Ehlers supported the controversial economic stabilization legislation that included a bailout of the General Motors Corporation. Although he did not like the entire scope of the final bill, he justified it as being in the best interest of his constituents.

LaPlaca details a career-long effort from Ehlers to protect the environment and to save energy. He led the way to pass the Great Lakes Legacy Act in 2002 and its reauthorization in 2008. But LaPlaca also traces in some detail a well-intentioned, hugely laborious task that Ehlers undertook at the request of Gingrich. Although it did generate a substantial report—"Unlocking Our Future: Toward a New National Science Policy, 1998"—and a "sense of the House" action of approval in concept, the report resulted in no new policy enactments. Prompted as it was by Gingrich, his resignation

from the speakership occurred shortly after Ehlers' "Unlocking" report appeared. Ehlers' scientific expertise notwithstanding, the work received no help from the incoming Speaker, Dennis Hastert, and, as LaPlaca says, "the project dwindled" (86).

Ehlers was a class act in the House, and nothing revealed that better than the dignity with which he stepped aside. Perhaps he sensed decline within himself in 2008, when he voluntarily stepped away from his ranking position in the House Administration Committee. At the time, he asked Minority Leader John Boehner to pick a replacement. In early 2010, then 76 years of age, Ehlers announced that he would not seek reelection. As LaPlaca quotes him, "Some people stay too long. I wanted to go out while I was still a strong leader playing a valuable role, not forced out by health or age" (99).

After Ehlers' death, the newsletter of the American Physical Society, of which Ehlers was a long-term member, quoted a past APS president this way: "Vern was the first Ph. D. physicist in Congress and he did us proud. As they say, you only get one chance to make a first impression, and Vern made a good impression for the physicists who would follow. He was bipartisan, low key and wise" (David Voss, *APS News*, August 23, 2017).

LaPlaca has gifted us with an uplifting account of the academic and political accomplishments of a mild-mannered Christian who used the full range of his God-given abilities. Perhaps it is an early view that will evoke a deeper, more analytical and critical analysis sometime in the future. A more acute partisan scrutiny would—from either political side—judge him as too moderate, too flexible, too open, and too captive of scientific rather than partisan criteria for making public policy. Moreover, there are many controversial issues on which he had to vote yes or no, up or down, that are not

considered in La Placa's book.

On the other hand, it is well to be reminded that a lawmaker cannot register a rollcall vote as "60% yes and 40% no," as Ehlers might have wished to do when voting on the use of force in Iraq. My point is simply that Ehlers' choices on a wider variety of challenging issues could well merit more penetrating scrutiny.

Let me contribute an anecdote about Ehlers as a straight shooter. The story comes not from LaPlaca but from a highly regarded neutral source of political inquiry. Ehlers was named to head a three-member task force to look into a 1996 election challenge from a losing Republican incumbent, Robert Dornan of California. As my source says, "Ehlers looked over the evidence and announced that it showed 'a large amount' of vote fraud but not enough to vacate the seat. That may help explain why Speaker Dennis Hastert bypassed him [Ehlers] and selected Bob Ney to chair the House Administration Committee after the 2000 election" (*The Almanac of American Politics 2002*, p. 785).

To complete this review on a light note that confirms Ehlers' sensible congressional demeanor, consider this anecdote. It is an ironic follow up to what happened after Ehlers was passed over for the House Administration Committee in 2000. As chairman of that committee, Robert Ney (R-Ohio) had used the committee's authority in 2003 to order "House cafeterias to change the name of french fries to 'freedom fries' as a rebuke to France for not supporting [the US in] the war in Iraq." But in 2006, tainted by a campaign finance scandal, Ney retired from the House. The House Administration Committee's new chairman, Vernon Ehlers, "quietly changed the menu name for fried potatoes to french fries" (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, August 14, 2006: p. 2247). A good man, that Vern Ehlers.