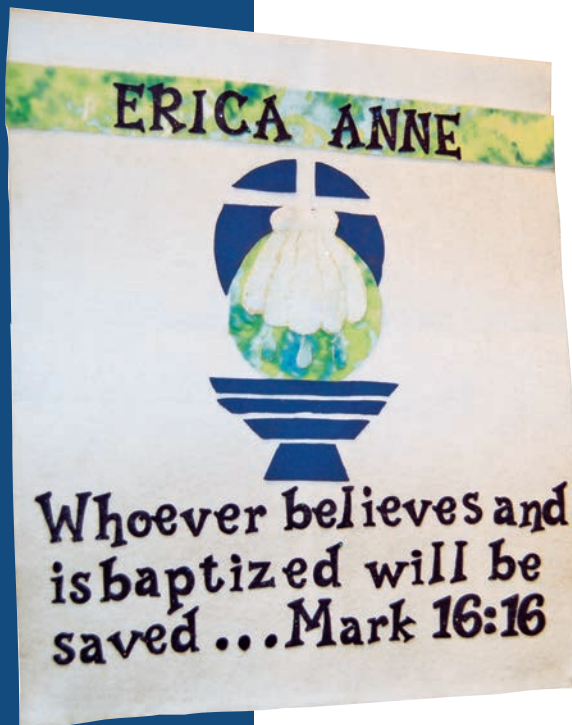


# INTO HIS MARVELOUS LIGHT

By Erica Stephenson,  
with Becky Wehrspann



Being raised outside the church, working in a regimented military career, and living with a Muslim husband certainly could send a young woman into emotional and physical overload. This was the life of Erica Stephenson, as she served her country and her family, yet was separated from God. She shares her story here, in her own words, as a witness to the steadfast love and faithfulness of our Heavenly Father, *who called her out of darkness, into His marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9).

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My sister and I were not raised in the church, at my father's insistence that he would not make that decision for us or force us as he had been by his father. He had no desire to attend church so none of us went.

I rejected the offer of a Bible by my best friend in high school; I felt I didn't need it. But even after my rejection of God's Word, she kept planting seeds of faith and invited me to sing Handel's *Messiah* with a group at her church. It was beautiful. My friend also was involved in the JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps), and I realized the military appealed to me as well. I was not ready for college, and I certainly didn't want to stay close to home. I loved my parents but wanted out of the house as soon as I was able to go. The Army provided that escape. Three days after my high school graduation in 1989 in Rockford, Illinois, I was in basic combat training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

I was first assigned to an aviation support unit at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia, and served in Desert Shield/Desert Storm. I was then assigned to Wiesbaden, Germany, where I found myself at a chaplain-sponsored LIFE



(Living In Focus Everyday) weekend retreat. We were "pilgrims" and were served by sponsors for the weekend. I was completely overcome with the love I felt amongst these Christians. I wanted to be baptized and

be like them. When I asked my sponsor about being baptized, she warned that I had to 'be sure' — it was a decision that I had to make, and something I had to do. How could I do anything to secure my salvation? I just knew that I couldn't, so I chose not to be baptized.

In 1993 I returned to Savannah, Georgia, this time to a Military Intelligence unit where I met my future husband, David. We dated for almost a month and were married on St. Patrick's Day 1994. We were not Christians when we married. I took a pregnancy discharge in 1995 and was a civilian for almost five years, being a mom to two healthy daughters. I missed the military, so I joined the Indiana National Guard to become an officer in 2000. On August 18, 2002, I was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant from the Indiana Military Academy.

When my husband deployed to Iraq in 2004, he became Muslim after his military chaplain — a Muslim Imam — had answers to his questions. I told him I was not planning to become Muslim, and he said that would be up to Allah, not him. He also said he would not require our two daughters to become Muslim, but if we had any subsequent children, he would insist they be raised Muslim (we didn't have any more children). I was supportive of his decision, albeit confused. I was not Christian, per se, but I didn't really know much about Islam, either.

I was deployed to Afghanistan in February 2006. Almost immediately I started attending the general Protestant chapel service at noon on Sundays. It was very upbeat with praise music and singing, and the Chaplain would preach using a PowerPoint® presentation.

Soon Chaplain Eric Ebb invited me to attend the liturgical service. I accepted his invitation and attended my first service on Palm Sunday. I didn't even know what it was, and I really didn't understand the bulletin, which I didn't immediately get on my way into the service. As we were reciting the liturgy, I was confused and had several questions.

A door had been opened for me to ask the chaplain my questions and for him to



*Baptism and Confirmation with Master Sergeant and Elder Terry Gibbens and Chaplain Eric Ebb in the Enduring Faith Chapel, Bagram, Afghanistan, 2006*



*Erica, back row, second from the left, with professors and Deaconess students at Shepherd of the City Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 2012*

provide answers. He used a white board and provided a very broad generalization of doctrine for Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and 'everybody else.' It was eye opening to me. I wanted to learn more about Lutheranism since they don't go through anyone to get to Jesus. (I later found out that my father considers himself Lutheran, but he simply doesn't attend church. I continue to pray for him.)

When Chaplain Ebb was catechizing me, I asked if I could be baptized. He said, "Of course!" and asked when I would like to do it. We were on track to complete my adult confirmation class about October 29, which was the celebration of Reformation in 2006. I thought it would be fitting for me to be baptized the same day as I would be confirmed into the Lutheran faith, and he agreed.

I was the first person to be baptized with the custom-made font in Afghanistan. The Muslim carpenter who constructed it was only given a photograph and did not realize the fonts are usually taller; I simply knelt for my baptism, which seemed fitting. I was confirmed and received several gifts from donor congregations. How wonderful and blessed I felt to be loved so much from people whom I had never met. I was provided a confirmand's stole and a baptismal candle, and we conducted a 'changing of the dog tags' to reflect my proper religious affiliation.

When I returned to Indiana in 2007, I was in search of a home church. I visited several, but the commute was too far, or there were not many children, and I wanted my daughters to find Christian friends. Then I found Concordia Lutheran Church in Greenwood. I visited once and never left. It was home as soon as I entered the door. The next step was inviting my husband to attend church with me. He would go periodically, and even stood up with us when our children were baptized into the Christian faith.

Days before his second deployment to Iraq, he asked to speak to Pastor John Flamme, so I arranged an appointment with him that morning. After a lengthy office visit, David and I went home. On his way to the airport, he prayed and confessed Jesus to be his Savior. I was ecstatic and overjoyed.



I became active in many church activities. I joined the choir, a Christ-care group, and weekly Bible study. Within a few years, I was asked to serve on the board.

About five years later, I was at my Annual Training for the National Guard. I was considering enrolling in a Master's degree program to become more competitive for rank amongst my peers in the military. I found out that Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, had an online Master's degree program. It required me to be on campus for two weeks in the winter and two weeks in the summer, but the fall and spring quarters were conducted online.

During my admissions interview with Dr. Deaconess Lumley, I was clear that I wasn't planning to become a Deaconess, but simply interested in learning more about my faith and becoming more competitive in the military. She said something like, "We will see." Now I am as much a Deaconess as I am a mother, wife, soldier, or daughter. It really changed me — God really changed me, and it is only for the better!

The two-week 'intensives' on campus were aptly named. One similarity between my military training and the education I received from the Seminary is that both are 'like drinking from a fire hose!' I was petrified when I first arrived but thoroughly enjoyed my time on campus, even though I had no idea what to expect. Although I met the prerequisites of an adult student, I was so new to being a Christian that I felt ill prepared in my lacking depth of knowledge of the Bible compared to the other lifelong Lutheran women in the class.

While the Deaconess training was wonderful, it was overwhelming at times as well. I believe Satan attacks those whom he has lost more diligently than others, and especially people going into ministry. I certainly felt overloaded, especially when I tried to shoulder the burden myself.

I am often reminded either by my Christian friends, a devotion from the *Portals of Prayer*, or from the daily LWML Mustard Seed devotions that I do not have to shoulder life by myself. I am a beloved child of God, and He wants me to lay my burdens at His feet. It never ceases to amaze me when I read from the *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, or one of the many

devotionals that I own, that I am shown exactly what I needed to see. Psalm 91 really speaks to me life. *I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, I whom I trust* (Psalm 91:2).

I am so thankful for my Christian sisters and brothers who pray for and with me. I have never known love like that. It is truly amazing. God is so good, and I am so thankful that it is what He did and not what I must do to know that I am saved by grace through faith in Him. Sometimes I want to shout it from the rooftops, and then I remember that I am Lutheran and we are not that boisterous! But I do not fit into that mold — I am extremely outgoing, rather enthusiastic, and make fast friends whenever I visit another church. Our loving church family amazes me.

My Deaconess training is a part of me now — I am called to serve as Deaconess part-time at Concordia Lutheran Church in Greenwood — and I can no more separate it from myself than I could separate myself from being a mother. Although I do not officially use my Deaconess training in the military, it has shaped how I deal with my subordinates, peers, and my superiors. I am able to provide a listening ear, pray with people if they desire, and I have even been asked to bless the meal for our Christmas luncheon at work.

I have been traveling recently and am back in the Middle East for what may be my last deployment. I never know what the military or the Lord has in store for me. Q

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David and Erica Stephenson, and their two daughters, attend Concordia Lutheran Church, Greenwood, Indiana.