

The Evangelical Congregational Church
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
National Conference 2018

I greet you to the sessions of the 2018 National Conference of the Evangelical Congregational Church. As you prepared to attend Conference you probably believed you would see me here. Like going to church on Sunday morning; you expect to see the pastor. I suppose it's rather important for the pastor to be present most Sundays and the bishop to be present at National Conference. As you came to Conference you no doubt thought you would see a number of friends and colleagues. When I was a pastor preparing to come to Conference, one of the things I looked forward to most was being able to see and talk with lots of people I hadn't seen since last year. But as we prepare for worship in our churches or as we prepare for Conference do we ever think about meeting God? Do we expect to see him and hear him? I hope so. Jesus said, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) We are way above that quorum; our Lord is here through his Holy Spirit. I pray we hear his voice during our worship, our fellowship, and even in our business.

This year we gather under the theme "ALL IN" based on 2 Corinthians 5:15 "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them."

One of the realities of life and ministry, and of life as the church, is that our culture has developed into a culture of choices. We demand choices; so many choices that we are perhaps the most distracted generation in history. Our attention span grows shorter not from year to year but moment by moment. For so many in our American culture life has become a blur of choices and a lot of people think they just don't have time for faith or church. It can lead us to wonder is it even possible to be "ALL IN." Faith and church are just another choice among a myriad of choices. How can I honestly be "ALL IN" with so many choices vying for my time and attention?

That's not a question limited just to the casual or regular church attendee however we define casual and regular today. It's a question each one of us, pastors and lay leader alike, must deal with in our own lives. People wonder how we have time to "do church" when we consider all the other things we have to do? But that question is coming from a mistaken perspective. It's not about how we "do church." The question is whether or not I am committed to "be church" every day and everywhere; not just on Sunday in a building with a steeple on it. Following Jesus, discipleship, is not just another thing to do. It is something to be. It is accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord and growing to know him better and love him more. It is living a transformed life every day as we do all the things on our "to do" list.

We often talk about discipleship like it's optional. Many see the Christian life as: 1. Get saved and 2. Go to church. Now, obviously, we are the *Evangelical* Congregational Church. We fervently believe in, boldly preach, and opening share the Good News about Jesus. Salvation is through personal faith in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ alone. We believe in the importance of being an active part of a local body of believers – the church. But we also understand that Jesus gave each one of us the Great Commission to "go and make disciples." It's not an option. We are called to faith in Jesus, to life in its abundance now, to join God in where he's at work in the world today.

Disciple-making is vital not only because it is the commission Jesus has given to every one of us, though that's reason enough; but I think we can make an argument from Judges 2:10 regarding the danger of not stepping up to the task of discipling the next generation. Joshua, the successor of Moses, and servant of the Lord dies and is buried. "After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel." One commentator notes the generation "did not know God in a vital way." You want another definition of discipleship: how about knowing God in a vital way. When we think about discipleship and spiritual growth are we thinking "know stuff" or "know Jesus"?

As Ben Sternke, church-planter and co-founder of Gravity Leadership, put it, "We respond to the gospel of the Kingdom by trusting Jesus, not just for forgiveness for sins, but for *everything*." That, my friends, is being "ALL IN."

When I think about personally being "ALL IN" I am particularly aware of the demands and expectations on our pastors. How do we do that in healthy ways? We must be "ALL IN" but we can't lose our wives and families or destroy our own health in the process. I don't think that's what Jesus expects. I've said it before; ministry is hard work. Spiritual warfare is real.

Satan's strategy is clear: get the pastor or his family to run off the rails and the result is pain, hurt, and distrust throughout the congregation. Jeff Byerly, our Ministerial Development Associate, and appropriate District Field Directors, and I have had to respond too many times to pastors and their families who are struggling with spiritual battles. They are wounded; some deeply wounded. Reaching out to these pastors,

their families, and congregations has taken a lot of time and energy. While restoration is always the goal of biblical discipline and accountability, that can be a long and difficult road for all affected by the battle with sin. Please join me in praying for all of our pastors and their families. Being a pastor is a challenging and too often lonely calling. The book *"For Ministers About to Start ... or About to Give Up"* by Travis Collins reports that 33% of pastors say being in ministry is "an outright hazard" to their families and that 75% of ministers experience "severe stress causing anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear and alienation" during their careers. The changing face of our culture, the congregational finances, growing government and media oversight, and the increasing expectations and demands placed on pastors by others and ourselves makes being a pastor at this time in history even more challenging. Our pastors and leaders need friends, coaches, trusted brothers and sisters with whom they can share their struggles.

So what does a healthy "ALL IN" look like for a pastor? Let me share three quick ideas:

1. It begins with an understanding and surrendering to the truth that this is God's work and his responsibility. You've heard it before "There is a god. I am not him." I am the steward, not the owner.
2. It means creating margin in our lives; healthy boundaries. I'm not going to tell you where those boundaries are, I am a fellow sufferer. But I will say we need to figure this out. I am thankful to hear of churches who are going beyond the conference suggested minimums for vacation time and churches who are giving their pastor a sabbatical. Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, states "In the 2000s we seldom hear about workaholics but know all about digiaholics." We can't unplug. Perhaps we need to take a regular Sabbath from electronic communication. Can we do that? Can I do that? Leith Anderson asks "Can we trust God enough to look up to him more than down to a phone?"
3. Take care of your soul. C.S. Lewis wrote, "You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body." Yet how many of us, particularly in vocational ministry are so focused on taking care of everyone else that we neglect to take care of our own hearts? It's obvious and it's counterintuitive. We say, "I'm the pastor, I need to take care of them." But like they tell you during those pre-flight safety instructions you can't take care of the people you're sitting with, even children, if you pass out because you didn't put your oxygen mask on first. I don't know what it looks like for you, but I must allow my Shepherd to restore my soul.

These same three things can or should equally apply to every lay delegate and local congregational leader. We need individuals who are "ALL IN" so we can have churches who are "ALL IN". I often chuckle to myself when I have people talk to me and complain that the church isn't doing this or that without ever understand that *they* are the church. Oh, how I pray for healthy local churches!

Please note too that when I say health churches, I don't mean large churches. We need large churches and we need small churches. Each and every local body of believers is important to the Lord's strategy of reaching our neighborhoods, communities, and the world with the Good News of God's wonderful grace. Each one has its unique strengths and weakness, challenges and opportunities.

I can tell you finding bi-vocational pastors who live in a reasonable commuting distance to open congregations is a growing challenge. A few years ago one denomination declared that a local church needed an income of at least \$150,000 per year to maintain a minimum full-time pastoral assignment; anything less than that and they simply would not be assigned a full-time pastor. We are not that kind of denomination and I am not advocating that we should be; but more and more churches are looking for bi-vocational pastors who work a secular full-time or part-time job and are, therefore, not able to relocate to live within a reasonable commuting distance to the church. When I look at the total income as reported to the 2017 National Conference, 65 of the 95 churches that submitted annual reports had incomes under \$150,000. This is a trend which will continue to challenge us. (Yes, one-third of our churches did not submit an annual report.)

Pastors who are serving in healthy congregations are increasingly unwilling to leave that situation for another congregation (even if it appears to be healthy). This is a good thing; pastors are putting down roots and getting involved in their local community, they're buying homes, wives often have more than jobs; they have careers that often provide the family's health insurance and other benefits. That means that it is becoming more and more challenging to ask a pastor to leave a healthy situation for a church that may be larger but less healthy or in need of a revitalization. I pray for pastors who are called to take up the challenge of moving to a church and leading a revitalization effort; turning that church around and restoring it to health and vitality. That leads me to the third issue the Stationing Committee sees.

Not only do I need to pray for pastors to lead in church revitalization, we need to pray for members of local congregations to want to see their church change and be restored to vital missional ministry. I am increasingly frustrated by individuals, some even congregational leaders, who simply want the Stationing Committee to find someone to fill their pulpit and perpetuate the way they've always done things. When one of our Stationing Elders met with a Pastoral Relations Committee to talk about an alternative for the future of their church he was told "no ... when there's three people left we'll give you the keys and you can do what you want with the building." A PRC member at another church, in their

meeting, told their Stationing Elder the church is struggling “Because God isn’t doing his job.” Please hear me when I say these are exceptions to the conversations most Stationing Elders have; but that attitude breaks my heart and one comment like that is too many as far as I’m concerned. If you think the Lord takes these kinds of attitudes and statements lightly, I encourage you to read the second and third chapters of Revelation.

Gary Brown asked a key question during our Stationing Committee Retreat: “Are we in the business of servicing people’s nostalgia?” Ed Stetzer, the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College and Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, has written that too many Christians today have replaced the Great Commission with the Great Nostalgia. That will not only be fatal to local congregations, more importantly, that could be eternally fatal to the people living all around the church who need Jesus.

I’m honestly not sure how to deal with those local leaders or the congregations they represent. The good news is we really have a difficult time finding pastors for those kinds of churches because most of our pastors don’t want to simply put in time until a church closes. They want to see people reached with the Gospel. Praise the Lord for that! We have a statement in the *Discipline* that describes the process for dealing with an unstationable pastor. But what do we do with a local church, when because of their attitude, is unstationable? A number of years ago we said not every pastor is guaranteed a church; does a similar statement apply to local churches? That’s something we’re going to have to work through in the years to come.

I do not believe the reason Jesus came to earth, born of the virgin, lived, died, rose again and ascended into heaven was so we could maintain our little chapels of nostalgia until the last person turns out the lights. America is full of closed churches, large and small. No church can simply continue as we have in past generations simply because that’s what makes us comfortable and happy. No church, large or small, can just continue to “do church” the way we always have. We’ve proven over and over again that it does not work and when we do it, we are, in fact, ignoring God and his word. We serve a creative God and I think he expects his church to be creative in meeting the needs of ministry in the 21st Century. Please hear what I’m saying and what I’m not saying. I’m not saying that small churches should all close or merge. There definitely is a place for healthy missional small congregations. I’m not saying that every church has to be a large church, but if we chose to put maintaining our traditions over reaching people with the Good News about Jesus, we’ve missed the whole point. If we’re asking the Stationing Committee to simply maintain our nostalgia, or our current level of dysfunction or un-healthiness, we are finished no matter how many people show up on Sunday morning. We’d be better off becoming a house-church and pouring time, talent, and treasure into community ministry rather than into maintaining a 125 year old monument to generations long gone. Too many churches today, EC and non-EC, (yes, many others share our problems) have saved our pews and dead aunt Bessie’s stained glass window while we’ve lost our children and whole generations of people who need Jesus. (I’m not sure if this is preaching, prophetic, or just a rant; but I feel a little better now.)

Ministry is hard work; it’s often dirty work. There is no magic in ministry, ministry is simply service. In Greek the word for ministry is “diakonia.” The root word is “konis” which means “dust” or “grit.” In other words, ministry is dirty work; it rolls up its sleeves and does things that many times, look unimportant to the world. Our English word for “ministry” comes from the Latin root for “small things,” as in the word “miniscule.” Ministry means I am to be involved in little acts, small gestures, and everyday service: giving a cup of cold water to the thirsty, preaching the whole Gospel, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, caring for those with special needs, or as Jesus illustrated washing others’ feet. Ministry, bi-vocational, volunteer, and/or full-time, requires us to be “ALL IN.”

I am the Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church of the United States; not really “the bishop of the world” as I was introduced a few years ago in Liberia. But I do have the privilege to travel to our international conferences to minister alongside the leaders and people of the EC Church around the world. I will not steal Randy’s thunder (or at least too much of it) but I am excited about what God is doing in other parts of the church even as they deal with very difficult circumstances. Just a few weeks prior to leaving on a trip to Nepal this past year, the team received word the Nepalese government had adopted a law outlawing what we would call evangelism and others would call proselytizing. While Nepal’s constitution already forbids religious proselytizing, the new law — which also contains an anti-blasphemy stipulation forbidding the “hurting of religious sentiment” — adds teeth to the existing restriction: five years imprisonment and a 5,000-rupee fine per violation. While the team was focused mainly on encouraging the existing church and did not have a lot of interaction with the Hindu majority, Pastor Janga, leader of the EC Church in Nepal, and the other pastors and church leaders face a daily threat of persecution, yet the church grows.

Our brothers and sisters in Japan continue to faithfully serve a country that is less than one percent Christian. Liberia shares the good news about Jesus in remote areas of that developing county. The EC Church of India is sending out their own missionaries to least reached areas

of their own country as well as neighboring countries. And our brothers and sisters in Mexico continue to work together to tell others about Jesus even as they deal with the threat of violence from the drug cartels.

May the Lord continue to give all of these brothers and sisters strength and encouragement to serve him in very challenging times and places. May they always be near the top of our daily prayer lists. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: if you've never participated in a short-term mission trip, if you've never visited a mission field, please do it. God speaks and we hear him in ways we seem to miss when we're at home surrounded by all the responsibilities and stuff of American life.

We, as the National Conference, will be asked to adopt one Resolution dealing with the closure of Grace EC Church, East Petersburg, PA. The congregation voted to close effective September 24, 2017. The good news is that the facility did not stay closed for long. Grace EC Church, Lancaster, PA felt the Lord's leading to relocate their ministry from South Shippen Street in downtown Lancaster city where they had been sharing facilities with "In the Light Ministries." I believe I can say the Lord miraculously provided the motivation to move so that as one Grace EC Church closed in September another Grace EC Church opened for ministry to that community three months later. Praise the Lord!

Tomorrow morning you will hear updates from many of our affiliate ministries. Evangelical Seminary will present a revised Enduring Covenant between the Seminary and the Evangelical Congregational Church. You may recall that National Conference adopted a document entitled "An Enduring Covenant" in May 2012. Both President Tony Blair and I felt that document needed to be updated to more clearly reflect the current relationship following the changes instituted by the denominational restructuring of 2016. I endorse the Enduring Covenant which will be presented tomorrow morning for our adoption.

When I think about all the conversations about our restructuring, one area where I wish I could get a "do-over" is in the way we talked about the funding of our affiliate ministries. When the National Conference voted in 2015 to enter into restructuring it included moving from mandatory funding, through ministry funds, to the voluntary funding of our affiliate ministries. The problem was it was a lot easier to say one word – "defunding" – than say "moving from mandatory funding, through ministry funds, to the voluntary funding." Using one word may have been easier but it wasn't accurate. Let's be clear about this: we have not said our affiliate ministries don't need to be funded. Our affiliates still need our regular support; prayer, encouragement, and voluntary financial support. In 2017, 44 congregations gave a total of \$27,305 to Twin Pines Camp. That sounds pretty good until you discover that one congregation gave \$8,000 of that. Thank you to that church; the rest of us need to do better. In 2017, only 22 congregations gave a gift to Evangelical Seminary. That's up to 25 in the first four months of 2018 but we still have a long way to go. Please remember, both of these affiliate ministries are investments in the future of the Evangelical Congregational Church. They need an on-going relationship with each and every one of our congregations; and our congregations also need an on-going relationship with our camps and seminary. I know these affiliates want to know how they can help you and they're each developing ministries to help our local churches. So, please join me as we do our best to not use the "d-word" any more and instead talk about how we can creatively and voluntarily fund our affiliate ministries.

During March 2017 National Ministry Team meeting, Randy Sizemore, our Global Ministries Associate, announced that he would not seek another term as GMA. That set off a process of seeking the Lord's leading in identifying the next person to serve as our Global Ministries Associate. I am pleased to tell you I believe the Lord has provided the right individual at the right time to serve as our next Global Ministries Associate. Let me take a few moments to express my gratitude to Randy Sizemore. I have often blamed him as the one who started me down the path of denominational restructuring when soon after my election as Bishop he walked into the office and told me we had to have a talk about how the GMC was financed. That brief statement got me started on lots of changes which also included Randy entering into a shared ministry position in 2014 as Lead Pastor of Bethel EC Church, Dixon, IL while still serving as the Director of Global Ministries and then Global Ministries Associate. Most of all, I am thankful to be able to call him my friend. Thank you, Randy and Carla, for your ministry and leadership to the global church. I hope you all will be with us as we express our appreciation to Randy and Carla later this evening. During the March 2018 National Ministry Team meeting, the NMT affirmed the selection of Rev. Ted Rathman as our next Global Ministries Associate. I am thankful for Ted and his wife Jessica. They carefully prayed about this decision before he applied. I am thankful too for the vision of the Grace EC Church, Schuylkill Haven, PA leaders and congregation to allow their pastor to serve both them and the international conferences of the Evangelical Congregational Church. We will take time during the worship service this Friday morning to install Ted as our next Global Ministries Associate. I look forward to working with Ted as he officially begins his ministry as GMA on July 1, 2018.

I want to take a few moments to make sure you know how well the teams leading the Evangelical Congregational Church are working together. The leadership team affectionately known as the BEDAS (Bishop, Executive Director, Associates and Secretary of National Conference) are a dedicated group of strategic thinkers and I greatly appreciate their input. The 13 District Field Directors and the local congregations who allow them to do this vital ministry all continue to amaze me. I want to express my sincere appreciation to each one. Our

District Field Directors are doing an outstanding job of building community within the pastors and congregations in their districts. We are seeing more and more instances of local leaders recognizing our DFDs as guides in navigating the process of tapping in to denominational resources. Our DFDs are creatively helping to guide healthy conversations about ministry in the 21st Century among pastors. In addition, some of the District Field Directors have willingly stepped into some deep waters to help me work through challenging situations with pastors and congregations.

I believe our two year-old denominational structure is beginning to take hold and build a sense of community in our denomination. We've gotten some things right, we've come up short in others. One of the tasks we must now undertake is to evaluate just what those areas are and make the adjustments necessary to keep the momentum moving forward. We also need to begin to think about making the changes permanent or as permanent as things are in this day and age so we can begin the process of writing the appropriate amendments for the next edition of denomination's *Discipline*. That process of preparing amendments to the *Discipline* will begin next year! I also realize that what we are really attempting to do is initiate culture change. During a recent meeting I was reminded by the presenter that culture change takes a minimum of five to seven years. We're making progress; but we aren't there yet.

Today, I am pleased to reinforce what you already know – the Lord is alive and well and is at work in and through the people of the Evangelical Congregational Church.

Listen to some of these recent notes I received on quarterly and annual reports (and yes, I actually do read the reports):

- More people being involved in prayer.
- Our financial picture continues to look good; praise the Lord for his generous supply!
- We have successfully united a group from a recently closed church in with our congregation.
- We've hired a student from Lancaster Bible College to oversee our youth ministry.
- New people are getting connected – both young families and seasoned saints.
- We have started a monthly men's ministry.
- A swell in attendance has caused us to consider a third service.
- New leaders have surfaced.
- People were amazed at our Easter attendance.
- Just completed "40 Days of Prayer."
- Facilities get used frequently by church and community.
- High percentage participation in prayer challenge.
- More volunteers are coming forward.
- Stories people are telling as they witness to others.
- A wonderful church family that lives in harmony with one another.
- We continue to make progress in our revitalization efforts!
- We are seeing the Holy Spirit's presence and power evidenced in powerful new ways in worship and in the lives of members.
- And this response to the line in the annual report form about "Dedications to full-time Christian Service": "Nobody is jumping up to say, 'I wanna be a missionary!' or 'God has called me to pastor!' But I see an increasing commitment to 'full-time' Christian living among our folks. They've always been 'real' Christians, but I've seen an increase in courage and creativity when it comes to life and ministry."

God is at work in and through his people! Do you believe that? Do you see that? Have you experienced that? I certainly hope so! If not, I pray that the Holy Spirit would move in your heart and in the hearts of the people of your local congregation. Take some time during this National Conference to share your good stories – celebrate!

I must also celebrate and express my appreciation for our Church Center staff. We've experienced changes: Brenda now works two days a week in retirement and Jodi, my ever-efficient Administrative Assistant, now works three days a week. Kevin Henry is an outstanding help and resource to me and to our congregations. The rest of the staff, Pat Wolfe, Shirley, Long, Abi Bomgardner, Dave King and Pat Strain continue to serve the Lord and his church and for that I am very grateful. Change is a constant but the work of serving our congregations continues through the staff's faithful and effective service.

In conclusion, I'm still having a good time serving as Bishop of the EC Church. I must admit there are some days that are more enjoyable than others, and I don't sit around bored with nothing to do; but the good days still outnumber the challenging ones, and for that I am very grateful to the Lord. Of course, I am so thankful for Gloria's deep love and support. She truly is my best friend and even with all my travels, together is always my favorite place to be. Thank you to all of you who continue to support us in prayer. It sounds like a cliché but we really do depend on your prayers; please don't stop.

Thanks be to God for his wonderful gift of mercy, grace, and love in Christ Jesus! May he receive all glory and honor for the great things being accomplished for the building of his Kingdom in and through the Evangelical Congregational Church. May each one of us be "ALL IN" for Jesus. "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them." (2 Corinthians 5:15)

In Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce Hill", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop