

EVALUATION OF E.C. DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURE

The 2015 National Conference was truly historic when 90% of the members voted to adopt a new denominational structure. That restructuring went into effect on July 1, 2016 in order to enable us to practically live out the four points of the Covenant adopted by the members of National Conference:

1. We will move to a regional shared ministry and leadership model.
2. We will reevaluate our denominational relationships with affiliate ministries.
3. We will substantially reduce denominational operating expenses.
4. We will significantly reduce ministry fund asking from local churches.

As those points were developed we understood that God's mission must be at the center of who we are and what we do. Then we look to the various aspects of our denominational structure to activate, direct, support and celebrate what God is doing in and through the EC Church.

The strategic evaluation was undertaken for two significant reasons: 1. it provides us with an opportunity to look back over the past two years and see our progress and where adjustments are needed; 2. to set a course so appropriate amendments to the *EC Discipline* can be offered in keeping with our established schedule for amending the *Discipline*.

The *Discipline* describes the connectional aspect of our denomination this way: "With the understanding that the local church cannot carry out the Great Commission alone, we surrender self-sufficiency and autonomy to join together in love. Embracing our common *Discipline* and our common purpose – to know Christ and make Him known – Evangelical Congregational Churches will pray together, fellowship together, develop leaders together, evangelize together, plant churches together, perform acts of mercy together, pursue justice together, and celebrate God together."

There must be an atmosphere of mutual care, ministry to and with one another. That's life in the body of Christ; and the vision for restructuring was to describe life in the Evangelical Congregational Church – doing life and ministry together. That's the basis for much of our restructuring. You have heard it said that "language influences culture." For that reason, the Covenant Implementation Team intentionally chose the name "community" to describe the major elements of our new structure. Our communities are made up of people who are engaged with each other on the journey of faith.

The process of undertaking this strategic evaluation involved many people.

- Each associate did a self-evaluation and an evaluation of their community.
- The communities, likewise, did a self-evaluation.
- Every District Field Director (DFD) completed a self-evaluation as well as an evaluation of their district.
- Each district met and evaluated the district structure, the communities, finances, and the National Conference.
- The members of the Conference Network Team (CNT) met to evaluate the CNT structure, the district, and National Conference.
- The National Ministry Team evaluated the community structure, the Conference Network Team, the Conference Support Team (CST), and the National Conference.
- The BEDAS group (Bishop, Executive Director, Associates, and Secretary of Conference) reviewed all the information provided by evaluation efforts.
- All of these strategic conversations resulted in over 230 pages of opinions and observations.

While it is not the intent to delve into all the detail of the evaluations, there are general conclusions that can be drawn from what has been shared. Our new denominational structure has allowed us to get off to a strong start in meeting our stated goals.

Districts

The decision to move to a structure emphasizing the importance of our thirteen (13) districts, each led by a District Field Director has been seen as a very positive step. Numerous responses in the evaluation note that the strong focus on districting encourages a greater sense of community. Those who are participating in the life of the district are gaining a greater sense of connection and developing relationships with other pastors. Pastors and congregations are reaching out to each other in times of need. Some are exploring ways to partner with each other for greater ministry effectiveness, both in their congregations and in the community. The ministry and geographical proximity of the District Field Directors on each district means DFDs are more familiar with pastors, their families, and congregations. This relationship has allowed for more communication, more purposeful meetings, and easier and consistent contact. Pastors and churches feel more cared for and supported. Even the area of accountability occurring on a local level through other pastors and the DFD is seen as a positive. The DFDs are not seen as supervisors; but fellow pastors who have the ability to lead to empower others through relationship and influence.

There are needs that need to be addressed in districting; most of them are not new to our current structure. Many have asked how we can encourage more people to take advantage of participation in the district? The need to be more creative in involving others is true for both bi-vocational pastors and those men who simply don't "play well with others." While most districts focused on involving the pastors in the life of the district, there needs to be lay involvement as well. We need to think more about how much influence or authority a DFD should have when meeting with pastors or local lay leaders; particularly when dealing with challenging situations.

Communities

Communities are seen as providing great resources to pastors and churches. The Associates are seen as being available and knowledgeable. Communication has been good and pastors know who to contact and experience a much clearer path to support. Since all our Associates are either active or retired pastors, there is a sense that they are also practitioners and understand both pastors and the congregations they serve. As one respondent put it "we have the ability to know Associates and the Associate know us." They are "friendly, loving people who know us." It appears to be easier to unify under a common goal or ethos. There is a great appreciation for the resources each community has available and that almost all of them are provided free of charge. The communities are seen as providing the ability for people to come together, and move from "doing business" to providing more opportunities for sharing information and ideas; the ability to hear more perspectives, and develop a "think tank" atmosphere. The involvement of the Associates in the BEDAS group allows for greater communication and the breaking down of "silos." Additionally, the move from generalists to specialists is seen as being more effective and efficient.

The areas of community life that need additional attention include the need for both Associates and communities to break through the preconception that "the expert or the perfect program will save us." It is clear that pastors and lay leaders are more aware of resources; but are they taking advantage of them? The communities must look at ways they can make resources available to even more people in our local congregations. Certainly this is accomplished through close working relationships between the communities and local congregations; but it may also mean using technology in creative ways to enhance the local impact. Specific suggestions and ideas are being shared directly with communities and Associates.

Conference Network Team

It is noted that the Conference Network Team (CNT) which is led by the Bishop and includes the Executive Director, Associates, Secretary of Conference, and all our District Field Directors provides space for information to be shared more quickly. Everyone, from the Bishop to the local leaders are more strongly connected. There is a greater sense of connection between CNT members as they regularly meet to talk and pray. Needs of churches are being met and, interestingly, needs of churches are surfacing faster. This peer driven team provides both encouragement and accountability; minimizing the lone ranger leader mentality.

Conference Support Team

The Conference Support Team (CST) chaired by the Executive Director is seen as a seamless source of practical help. There is timely and accurate information shared over numerous platforms. The Team's quick responses to needs, sensitivity to local situations, and the confidential manner in which resources are provided are appreciated. Resources and help are seen as just a phone call away. One area of further study for the Team will be to discover even more effective ways to train local leaders.

National Conference

There is overwhelming unity in support of the changes that have been made to our annual National Conference. The move from a focus on business to more time given to worship, celebration, encouragement, resourcing, and relationships is seen as a very positive change. Pastors and lay leaders appreciate the greater time given to networking with other leaders. The varied styles of educational experiences are welcome and meet the needs of different types of learners. While some wonder if National Conference can be made even shorter, most believe we are being very efficient in using our time together. It is important for us to continue the use of pre-conference meetings in order to involve the members of Conference to engage with the reports and motions to be brought before the body. Again there is a desire for a better use of technology so various aspects of the Conference can be shared with others who are not able to attend.

Finance

The decrease in ministry funds is appreciated by everyone. One commented "it is evidence that ECC leadership is sensitive to local financial stress." While everyone was thankful for the consistent decrease in the National Conference budget and in the percentage used to calculate ministry funds, there was also the recognition of a significant weakness. It is agreed that more money is available locally but is it being used to develop and support ministries to reach people with the Good News about Jesus or simply to maintain the status quo longer? In addition, there was concern expressed that churches have not responded to the call to shift from mandatory funding of affiliates to voluntary funding. If local pastors and lay leaders don't respond to this change it results in additional stress for our associate ministries. This is an issue which will require continued communication by the affiliates and denominational encouragement for local churches to find ways to support these ministries.

A financial comparison of the years 2015, the last full year of the former structure, to the projected 2020 budget, the first full year of fully implementing the new structure, indicates a clear decrease in the ministry fund percentage. We responded to clearly expressed concerns of our churches, those struggling to pay their ministry funds, as well as those paying increasingly larger amounts as they grow. Therefore, the cost of providing essential administration, connectional ministry and support, as well as the mandated funding of our affiliated ministries has been addressed and the results are seen in the decline of ministry fund percentage as seen in the charts below.

Ministry Fund Percentage: Delaware and Susquehanna Regions

	Actual 2015	Actual 2016	Actual 2017	Actual 2018	Actual 2019	Projected 2020
National Conference %	8.82%	8.00%	7.33%	6.75%	6.05%	5.55%
Camping %	0.60%	0.48%	0.36%	0.24%	0.12%	0.00%
Total Ministry Fund %	9.42%	8.48%	7.69%	6.99%	6.17%	5.55%

Ministry Fund Percentage: Allegheny and Buckeye Districts

	Actual 2015	Actual 2016	Actual 2017	Actual 2018	Actual 2019	Projected 2020
National Conference %	8.82%	8.00%	7.33%	6.75%	6.05%	5.55%
Camping %	0.13%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total Ministry Fund %	8.95%	8.00%	7.33%	6.75%	6.05%	5.55%

Ministry Fund Percentage: Illinois District

	Actual 2015	Actual 2016	Actual 2017	Actual 2018	Actual 2019	Projected 2020
National Conference %	8.82%	8.00%	7.33%	6.75%	6.05%	5.55%
Camping %	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total Ministry Fund %	8.82%	8.00%	7.33%	6.75%	6.05%	5.55%

Expense Changes as the result of the Covenant Implementation

ETS Funding	\$ (220,000)
Twin Pines Funding	(78,000)
Camp ECCO Funding	(2,000)
Retiree Health Insurance	<u>(237,000)</u>
Subtotal affiliate changes	\$ (537,000)
Conference Ministers	(289,000)
District Field Directors	151,000
Associates	28,000
Eliminate ETS Shared Svcs	<u>66,000</u>
Subtotal staff changes	\$ (44,000)
Total Expense Reduction	\$ <u>(581,000)</u>

The table to the left is a summary of the major expense changes resulting from the implementation of the covenant. These amounts were the actual expenses as of December 31, 2015 that have been reduced to zero or our new expenses. The reduction in affiliate funding is the main driver of the expense reductions but what is not included in the smaller expense decrease from the staff changes is the positive change in denominational connectivity as a result of the work of the District Field Directors and Communities. It is difficult and subjective to assign a dollar value to nonfinancial criteria. Please be aware financial metrics are easy to measure and understand but they do not always relay an accurate message.

As a result of the restructuring total National Conference expenses will have decreased by approximately \$582,000 by the end of 2020. If the restructuring did not occur, National Conference expenses would have increased by approximately \$100,000 in that same five year period (2015–2020). This has resulted in a \$685,000 variance. It would have been unlikely that there would have been sufficient expense reductions available or new revenue to balance the budget in order to absorb the \$100,000 in projected expense increases in 2020 or in the years to come.

Conclusion

During the General Conference of 1928 a committee was appointed "...so as to assure 'congregational independence and the connectional interests.'" Yes, our denomination has a great degree of "congregational independence" but please do not miss the second half of that statement, we also must maintain vital "connectional interests." The Covenant which was adopted by the 2014 National Conference sought to find a balance in congregational independence and the connectional interests. This has impacted

almost every aspect of our denomination; from leadership positions, to denomination finance, and even how we conference with each other locally and nationally.

Our current style of organization is less reliant on systems of control and centralization and more reliant on relationship, networks, and personal and organizational integrity. That is intentional in its design and it comes with strengths and weakness. If congregations and their leaders, pastors and lay leaders, choose to not participate in or support denominational life and ministries, we all, including our connectional ministries, suffer.

As followers of Jesus we need interaction with fellow believers in order to grow and mature; to be disciplined. The same is true for a local gathering of believers. A local congregation benefits from being part of something larger than their own local fellowship. Denominational relationships make for healthier people and churches to help us serve more effectively. We do not all look alike, we do not agree on everything, we have different gifts and graces, we may even speak different languages and yet we are the family of God and there is no stronger relationship. Through a connected denomination; pastors, lay leaders, and whole congregations can move beyond simply supporting relationships to actually expanding relationships as we pray, fellowship, develop leaders, evangelize, plant churches, perform acts of mercy, pursue justice, and celebrate God together.

The strength of a denomination's resources is found not only in programs and material but in people. As a denomination, we value leadership to the point that we join together to provide training and resources for men and women as they prepare for leadership in our churches and communities. It is a blessing for our local pastors to know there are other like-minded leaders available for encouragement and support. In addition, shared resources provide vital ministries at home and around the world: camping ministries, a seminary, ministries to seniors, and a global ministries emphasis that now resources churches in five countries, many of whom are now sending out their own missionaries.

Left to ourselves we tend to wander, to take our eyes off the goal; local congregations can be that way too. Being part of a denomination helps to keep us focused. We benefit as we hold each other accountable to fulfilling the mission of God in our local communities and around the world. The relationships we have with other pastors, congregational leaders, and even denominational leaders help to keep us moving in the right direction, focused on the right things, and avoid distractions. We all need accountability. We work together within the denomination to help local pastors, leaders and congregations follow God's leading and direction for ministry. This new model of structure and the entire Evangelical Congregational Church is built with a mutual trust and shared integrity.

In the Introduction to the EC Governance Manual, Bishop Leibensperger wrote "What system of governance is ideal? While we have glimpses of how the early church organized for ministry, God's Word does not spell out a single 'sacred' way to structure the Body of Christ to fulfill its mission. Instead we see a remarkably adaptable and dynamic approach. The church follows the Lord's lead in responding to changing opportunities and obstacles." One of the unique strengths of the EC Church is the ability and willingness to make adjustments to our structure.

The challenge that our denomination faced was to find solutions that both address the financial concerns and enables our local congregations to more efficiently and effectively fulfill the mission to "go and make disciples." We are on the right track and going in the right direction. We should all be thankful our founding fathers provided a distinctive provision for operational changes in our denomination and wrote that into our *Discipline*. They knew we needed to be structurally and operationally flexible in order to bring a relevant Christ to a contemporary world.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop

On motion, the National Ministry Team recommends that this report of the evaluation of the denominational structure be presented to National Conference with the National Ministry Team's further recommendation that the National Conference instruct the Amendments Committee to prepare amendments to the EC *Discipline* such that the *Discipline* can be amended to formalize and approve this structure that is currently in place as an experiment under section 409.11. We further recommend that these amendments be presented to National Conference at its 2020 session for first reading so that they can be considered for final approval and *Discipline* change at the 2021 session of the National Conference.