

EPISCOPAL ADDRESS NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2014

Members and friends of the 2014 National Conference of the Evangelical Congregational Church, I greet you in the matchless name of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. We gather together not to do our work, nor the work of our beloved denomination, but to do the work of Jesus who gave his life and conquered sin and death that we may have life. He has commissioned us to “make disciples.” *“Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.”* (Ephesians 3:21 NLTse)

DISCIPLE-MAKING

During our 2014 National Conference we are focusing on our theme: CONNECT. As Paul reminded the Thessalonians of his ministry among them he wrote *“We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God’s Good News but our own lives, too.”* (1 Thessalonians 2:8 NLTse) In NC2012 we looked at “PASSION”; our need to love God completely. During NC2013 our focus was “ENGAGE”; the need to engage our culture with the Gospel. This year we continue to respond to God’s call to love him, evangelize by living out the Good News, and disciple others as we CONNECT in life-to-life discipleship. We have, as a denomination, described a disciple as “one who is seeking to pattern his/her life on the Savior’s.” It is a lifelong pursuit of following Jesus. The challenge is that we are required to CONNECT; to form significant and lasting relationships, and that is counter-cultural. We live in the digital age; everything needs to be fast. I have been to the jungle of Liberia and the hills of North East India, and in my own family room every child wants to see their picture on the back of the camera right away. We need smart phones so we can have instant communication by text, email, Twitter, Facebook, or even an actual phone call. Don’t get out of the car; just throw my meal out the window as I drive by. Our culture looks for a shortcut for everything. But neither evangelism nor discipleship happen that way; they take time, it means living in relationship, day in and day out, connecting with those around us as people, as friends. Evangelism is a dialogue, not a monologue. One of the best ways to reach someone is to listen. Don’t compromise the message, but try to establish a dialogue. We need to be the church that connects with people relationally. Evangelism and discipleship go together; they cannot and are not to be separated. Alan Hirsh explains it this way “Discipleship is all about being drawn into the purposes of God. The Great Commission to ‘make disciples’ includes both making Christians and maturing Christians.” The journey of discipleship does not begin when a person accepts Jesus as their Savior and Lord; it starts long before that as the Holy Spirit begins to draw them to himself. We have pledged as the Evangelical Congregational Church to establish disciple-making as the ultimate objective for all our ministries. To do that we must make the time to CONNECT.

When we stop and think about it, connecting with people was a huge part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. His three years of ministry were spent in significant relationship with the people living around him; developing disciples. Before he ascended into heaven, and coincidentally tomorrow is Ascension Day, Jesus gave us a commission to “make disciples.” Too many people define discipleship as Bible study; you just need to learn the facts, the stories, the lessons; that’s what God wants. Do we really believe in our hearts that God sent his One and only Son Jesus into the world to die on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for sin, to rise from the dead conquering sin and death, ascend back to heaven to the place of highest honor and with the name that is above every other name; did God do all of that so church

members could quote scripture or win games of Bible Trivia? Jesus calls his followers to learn the Bible, for certain, and the Bible, God's living Word tells us to "make disciples ...Teach these new disciples to obey..." Jesus wants followers who will allow His Holy Spirit to transform them and conform every aspect of my life to him and his will. When God said we are to be holy as he is holy, he wasn't talking about Sunday mornings; he meant my entire life. He desires disciples who make disciples. I am pleased to say that we have many individuals, pastors and laity, and many congregations who are doing just that. During these few days of Conference we will celebrate some of the good things God is doing in and through the Evangelical Congregational Church. Discipleship isn't a school or program, but a life of passion and purpose. It is personal investment into someone else's life. It is choosing to be seen, sincere, open and vulnerable; as a follower of Jesus living in sincere relationship with the people around you. I call on each one of us to recommit ourselves and our congregations to that mission of God. Who will join me?

Here's a question for you (I'm sure it will be on Facebook or Twitter momentarily if you miss it): Did Jesus come to establish an institution called church or did he come to empower people to be church? Thom Schultz, author of the blog "Holy Soup" points out that the church is in danger of experiencing a Kodak Moment. He writes, "Kodak dominated the photographic scene for over 100 years. It commanded an 89 percent market share of photographic film sales in the United States. Yet Kodak became a colossal story of failure and missed opportunities. A gigantic casualty in the wake of digital photography—a technology that Kodak invented. That's right. Kodak engineer Steve Sasson invented the first digital camera in 1975. He later said, 'But it was filmless photography, so management's reaction was, 'That's cute, but don't tell anyone about it.' And the company entered into decades of agonizing decline, unable to perceive and respond to the advancing digital revolution. In 2012 this American icon filed for bankruptcy."

How could something like this happen? There are probably lots of reasons but let me highlight three. 1) They could not see the changing culture. They had no vision for a day when people would walk around with all their photos digitally stored on a smart-phone or tablet. 2) They were afraid of what they would lose. If they moved into digital photography it might mean loss to their film business. Most importantly, 3) they misunderstood their mission. They thought they were in the film business when they were actually in the image business. According to Jesus, we are in the discipleship business; moving people closer to Jesus day by day. We cannot forget that.

I can tell through my own personal experience that in my years growing up in the church and now 37 years of ministry, I have been exposed to lots of evangelism and discipleship programs. The problem is I can't really remember any of them. (I don't think that's because I'm getting older) because even now standing here today I can see the faces of the people who invested their lives in me. I can tell the names of individuals who poured faith into my life through authentic relationship.

SHARED MINISTRY

During the past year we have been challenged to look at denominational leadership from a new perspective through shared ministry positions. At the close of last year's National Conference the lay delegate from Bethel E.C. Church, Dixon, IL approached me to confirm that the financial position of the Global Ministries Commission's administrative budget was now back to where they had been more than two years ago: completely dependent on the voluntary contributions of individuals and local congregations, and not receiving enough donations to adequately meet their needs. When I responded

that was indeed the case he asked if the Global Ministries Commission and I might be open to a shared ministry position. Bethel E.C. Church was in need of a Lead Pastor and the GMC administrative office was in need of financial stability; could these two concerns be addressed together? Numerous conversations, phone calls, texts, emails, and meetings were shared over the next few months to seek the Lord's will and to clarify, as much as possible, what a shared ministry would look like in real life. One of the questions that arose in our deliberations was "What will the leaders of our international churches think of a shared ministry position?" The reality is that all of our international leaders currently serve in shared ministry positions. When I asked Rev. Nobuo Abe for his guidance he shared two important insights. He first noted that he was pleased that the church USA was learning from our international brothers and sisters; that the leadership of just about every Christian denomination in Japan, even the very large groups, was a shared ministry position. Secondly, my brother showed great insight and concern when he noted that denominational leaders are first called and gifted as pastors. He wondered if it really made sense to divorce these men and their wives and families from a local church. When Randy and I visited Ukraine for Ken Sears' ordination I had the opportunity to talk with Brother Pavel Metlenko, the "Senior Presbyterian" for the Baptist churches of the Zaporozhye province, a full time position. He described denominational leadership as "you are everywhere and you are nowhere." After working out the details with Bethel EC Church and the Global Ministries Commission, including ministry descriptions, time schedules, appropriate evaluation and accountability safeguards, as well as salary and benefits Bethel E.C. Church, the Global Ministries Commission and The National Ministry Team each adopted the shared ministry recommendation unanimously. While I readily admit that personally I greatly miss Randy's presence and friendship at Church Center, I know Randy and Carla are very happy to be able to sink deep roots into a local congregation again while at the same time ministering internationally.

Not claiming the gift of prophecy, but seeing this shift becoming a reality I approached the National Executive Committee (NEC) seeking their counsel on how to proceed if other denominational leaders were approached by local churches about shared ministry. I agreed with the Executive Committee that we would not, at this time, seek out shared ministry positions but would be open to discuss them if we were approached by a local congregation. This spring I was contacted by the leadership of Trinity E.C. Church, Fishing Creek, PA about their interest in a shared ministry position with Gordy Lewis, Susquehanna Region Conference Minister. Again, after much discussion with all those involved, including receiving the approval of the NEC and the Stationing Committee, Rev. Lewis will be stationed to this shared ministry effective July 1, 2014.

CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP

This year our National Conference will experience a transition in the position of Great Lakes Conference Minister. Rev. Gary Brown has served as the Conference Superintendent of the former Western Annual Conference from 2000 to 2004 when he assumed the position of Great Lakes Region Conference Minister. Gary's term will end on June 30, 2014 and he was not eligible for re-election. I am thankful for the willing and gracious service Gary and Ann Brown have had in the Great Lakes Region, the Evangelical Congregational Church, and the Kingdom of God. They have, together, traveled many, many miles in the service of the King. The Lord has used Gary's strong pastoral heart to touch the hearts of many, pastors and lay alike. Not every day has gone well, there are always trials and struggles in leadership; Gary has faithfully and steadily met them and, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, faithfully provided wise counsel to many. The Supervisory Committee has looked to his many years of experience in denominational leadership to provide us with denominational memory; he is our "Mister History."

Thank you, Gary, for your friendship and faithful service to Christ and his church. Before you think Gary and Ann are moving to matching rocking chairs on some front porch; this is simply the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one in their life. Effective July 1, 2014 Ann will join Gary as he becomes the pastor of New Zion Evangelical Congregational Church, Emlenton, PA.

As you know, the National Ministry Team voted to hold a special meeting in January 2014 to elect Gary's successor rather than holding the election at National Conference 2013. This was at the recommendation of the Supervisory Committee. I am pleased to report that the special meeting (one meeting, two locations) was a success. The pastors and volunteers at both locations, Bethel E.C. Church, Dixon, IL and Lakeside E.C. Church, Transfer, PA worked with me to prepare for the meeting. Rev. Charles "Chuck" Campbell was elected Great Lakes Region Conference Minister. After some time for Chuck to catch his breath, I had the privilege of installing him as Conference Minister this past April. The next big transition for Chuck is when he gets married to Nettie on June 7. Chuck's term as Great Lakes Conference Minister will begin July 1. I look forward to serving with Chuck as he becomes an important member of our leadership team and pray the Lord's blessing on his marriage with Nettie.

Rev. Gordy Lewis's first term as Susquehanna Conference Minister will come to an end in June 30, 2015. Following this National Conference I will form a Nominating Committee to begin the process which will result in an election during a special meeting of the Susquehanna Region in January 2015. While my term as Bishop does not end until June 30, 2016 the timeline for nominations and election is different from that of the Conference Ministers. An Episcopal Nominating Committee will be formed this fall so an Episcopal election can be held at National Conference 2015.

FUTURES INITIATIVE

I will not take a lot of time in this address to discuss the recommendations of the Futures Initiative Team. I do want to clearly state that I strongly recommend that this National Conference adopt both the statement entitled "The Church" and the Covenant when they are presented later in our business sessions. I need to make two observations based on my experience with Futures Initiative. During one of our meetings the Futures Initiative Core Group expressed the clear opinion that we must address ministry funds; we must lower the percentage rate churches are required to remit to the denomination. I have long felt that is true. The problem came when we actually tried to accomplish that. It became obvious that given the current level of local church involvement in paying ministry funds and the budget required funding our work that simply cannot and will not happen without significant change. We are in a precarious position: churches are choosing to pay partial or no ministry funds. This results in forcing the larger churches to take on a greater share of denominational finances. We are caught between two groups who find it more and more difficult to fund what is required or defend the amount of ministry funds required. The second observation I need to make, is that over the past few years I have learned that we all struggle with making hard decisions. That simply isn't something we want to do. The problem is, as we were reminded last year by Dr. Chris Backert "If we refuse to make difficult decisions today, we will be faced with even more difficult decisions in the days to come."

Brothers and sisters, make no mistake about this: we will all be faced with extremely difficult choices as we continue to plot the future course of the Evangelical Congregational Church. I pray and believe the Lord of the church will show us his way into a bright future but it may not be an easy journey.

DENOMINATIONAL LIFE

In 2012, during my first Episcopal Address, I said that we were quickly moving into a post-denominational world. I hear more and more people wondering why they need to pay ministry funds. I responded through a series of articles in the EC LEADER highlighting the important “together ministries” we are able to do because of ministry funds: commissions & committees, Church Center operations, affiliate support, and heritage care. Beyond that we’ve heard people ask even more generally “What’s the purpose of a denomination?” or “What’s the advantage of being part of a denomination?” Let me share a glimpse of what I think. With apologies to old school teachers, I think it comes down to three Rs: relationships, resources, and results.

Relationships – We all recognize there are individuals who make the argument that they don’t need to attend church; they can worship at home as well as they can with a bunch of people in a building. I believe we all recognize the extreme weakness of that position. Certainly the author of Hebrews did. We are not created to go through life alone. I need interaction with fellow believers in order to grow and mature; to be discipled. So too a local gathering of believers can benefit from being a part of something larger than their own local fellowship. Another parallel I see in the relationship between an individual to a local church and a local church to the denomination is the “have it your way” mentality. Burger King has long trumpeted that consumers should and can “have it your way.” What does it say about us that when we shop for a local church, we look for one that makes me comfortable? What does it say when the primary reason for a relationship is my personal happiness? I may not want to hear that I need to be in a relationship that holds me accountable, but it doesn’t make it any less true. Paul and Peter tested what they believed they were called to do by bringing it to the larger body in the Council of Jerusalem. Denominational relationships give both the local church and the pastor someone beyond themselves to talk with. I think it makes for healthier people and a healthier church. Much of the spiritual health that I experienced is a result of pastoral relationships I have nurtured over 30+ years of ministry. Healthy things multiply; they multiply disciples, groups, ministries, churches. Even in a non-denominational age we see the growth of “fellowships” and “networks.” We don’t like the word “denomination” but we recognize the relationships are vital to our spiritual health. Additionally, the inter-connectedness of a denomination provides for opportunities to interact and serve with people who may be very different from my homogeneous local church. 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. I pray that pastors, lay leaders, and whole congregations will move beyond simply supporting relationships to actually expanding relationships. As we already say in the *Discipline* “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 – E.C. 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.”

Resources – Today, with the help of technology, there are lots of places to go for resources. In fact, many of our local Christian book stores struggle because every pastor, youth leader, Sunday School teacher and Vacation Bible School director can search and select materials on line and have them delivered to the front door. The strength of a denomination’s resources is found in an entirely different aspect of church life: people. I do not want church leadership to be discovered by accident. Leadership development, training, and deployment are critical and most local congregations are not equipped to do that by themselves. I am proud to say that as a member of the Evangelical Congregational Church I am a part of a group that values leadership to the point that we support a Pastoral Assessment Center, that we

join together to provide scholarship money to help men and women prepare for leadership in our churches and communities, that we support a seminary that is developing innovative programs to train the next generation of pastors and leaders. I am thankful for a Stationing Committee that honestly works with local leaders to identify and place pastors who will fit and flourish. We all have stationing horror stories, but the reality is that the majority of them are from the “good old days.” As pastors and congregations we need to let go of the “good old days”; these are much better days. I would not, as a member of a local church want to be completely dependent on my own resources for identifying, credentialing, and having the full responsibility for dealing with the accountability of the pastor. On the other hand, as a local pastor it was good to know there was someone available to be there when I needed them. We work together to protect, preserve, and share resources; and that includes the most precious resources for our pastors and people.

I am thankful that we have camps (ECCO, Rock River and Twin Pines) that are impacting people of all ages with the Gospel of Jesus. I praise God that StoneRidge Retirement Living desires to employ evangelical pastors as chaplains who lead people to Christ even late in life showing us it’s never too late to come to Jesus. I praise the Lord that a group of churches in the United States can, in partnership with brothers and sisters, launch a mission emphasis that now sees close to 500 churches many of whom are now sending out their own missionaries. I want to be part of a denomination that enables a local congregation to send a short-term team from Pennsylvania to Japan to partner with EC Churches there in leading an English Camp where 12 children and one adult came to faith in Jesus. (And that’s just one example!) Our rich history of ministry is a resource. We are who we are because of those who struggled and sacrificed to give us this opportunity to serve the Lord in the church today. Even now we build a legacy for those who will come after us.

We do not bring our resources together to keep something from the past going. I’m asking us to use our resources, to invest our time, our talents, and our treasure to be part of something bigger than you and me, something bigger than our local churches; I’m calling on us to do something crazy – to allow God’s Holy Spirit to use us so that we truly may be a movement of God.

Results – Ed Stetzer has pointed out that “Mission is generally messy, and it creates friction.” What helps smooth the way and lessen the friction is a clear understanding of the desired results – the mission. This is not about us. This is about God and what he’s doing; his mission. Left to ourselves we tend to wander, to take our eyes off the goal. We all know people who are easily distracted by something shiny; maybe you’re secure enough to admit you are one. Local congregations can be that way too. Being part of a denomination helps to keep each of us focused. The relationships we have with other pastors, congregational leaders, and even denominational leaders helps to keep us moving in the right direction, focused on the right things, and lessen the distractions, even good distractions. We all, individuals and churches, need accountability. Without a Global Ministries Commission reminding us of our need to reach out, that the world still needs the Good News, that there are still many unreached people groups, how many of us and our churches would slip into an “it’s all about our needs” mentality. The Great Commission starts at home, but Jesus said “make disciples of all nations.” That’s still true today and sometimes we all need to be reminded of that. I have tried in my preaching this past conference year to remind us all that our strategy of trying to get the people “in here” to get the people “out there” to come “in here” hasn’t worked. Jesus calls for the church is to be “out there;” to *be* the church “out there.”

We are “Evangelical.” We are people of the Good News. Paul wrote very simply in Acts 20:24, **“My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.”** We aren’t evangelical because it’s the

name on our letterhead or church sign; we're evangelical because we are people of the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Bishop Graham Cray of the Church of England exclaimed, "If you're going to *bring* Good News, you darn well better *be* good news!" And what about our being "congregational"? I need to say, and I realize I'm probably stepping on toes here and maybe even fighting against history, but I have to say this: can we please get off the "congregational means that the congregation is in charge" bandwagon? "Congregational" isn't about power; it's about ministry. We're "Congregational," because that's where the action is. We intentionally empower congregations to use their unique gifts and graces in their local setting. We endorse developing a local structure that fits the local context. Our neighborhoods, communities, culture, and the world are changed as normal followers of Jesus Christ live out transformed lives. We can work together within the denomination to give permission for local pastors, leaders and congregations can work together as a team within the larger context of their affinity, or area or region to be creative as they follow God's leading and direction for ministry. That's already a reality in the experience of Journey53, Restore Community, LifeTree Café, Grace Community, Willow Street with Grace, Millersville and others; and we need more.

We do not need more rules and creeds – we need recommitment to our covenantal relationship with each other and with God.

- I see the Evangelical Congregational Church being a denomination that empowers churches and groups of churches to pursue the *missio Dei* – the mission of God – based on the needs in your community. We will provide the encouragement, the resources, and connections to help you do that.
- I'm seeing more congregations, E.C. churches, like a Christian & Missionary Alliance church I visited in New Jersey. Rather than building large facilities or even planting a new church they have chosen to send out teams of 20-30 people into neighboring churches, even non-C&MA, in order to bless and encourage those congregations and help restore them to health and vitality.
- I foresee large E.C. churches who are able to come alongside smaller congregations to resource and support healthy ministry in them.
- I see large congregations blessing their communities in ways that only large ministries can.
- I see churches planting new churches.
- I anticipate groups of pastors meeting together regularly for prayer, fellowship and mutual support.
- Pastoral and lay leaders praying and working together.
- Churches within a local area working together to support and give opportunities to pastoral candidates and seminary students to receive practical experience while positively impacting the work of those churches.
- The church and seminary working closely together to raise up the kind of leaders needed to minister in the 21st Century.
- The Conference and regions providing ministry resources which impact the lives of men, women, youth and kids beyond the reach of an individual congregation.
- I see a time when it is exciting to be E.C. again.

There is a vision for the future of the Evangelical Congregational Church – it is God's vision, his will for us. We need to re-imagine the E.C. Church based on God's will. A great place to start is by changing one word, actually one letter, in a question all of us have asked: instead of "What should the E.C. Church look like?" join me in asking "What could the E.C. Church look like?" To answer that question is to take a step in faith. Think of it this way. Gary, please hold this roll of pennies for me. Hold it tightly in your hand. Don't open your hand. I'd like to give you this ten-dollar bill instead. How do you accept the \$10 using only that hand? You have to open your hand and let go of the pennies. I believe there is a future for the

Evangelical Congregational Church; but we must be willing to let go, to open our hands in order to receive the good things, the new things, the Lord wants to give us.

I am thankful for the heritage of the Evangelical Congregational Church. We are proudly Albright's people. We were doing small groups (we called them classes) before any mega-church pastor was born. We strive to live out John Wesley's favorite Bible verse, *"What is important is faith expressing itself in love."* (Galatians 5:8 NLTse) We understand the importance of accountability and disciple-making that goes all the way back to the early church when Paul said *"You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others."* (2 Timothy 2:2 NLTse)

We respect the past; we honor the lives and ministries of generations of pastors and lay leaders, Bishops, District Superintendents, and Conference Ministers who have labored so faithfully for the Lord and his Kingdom; individuals who came together as a team to accomplish great things with God. I am thankful for those who are part of the current team I have the privilege to serve with: my wife, Gloria, as she graciously deals with the demands on her husband's time and attention. Our Conference Ministers (Gary Brown, Gordy Lewis, and Gary Kuehner), Director of Global Ministries, Randy Sizemore, Pat Strain, in the GMC office, Kevin Henry, our Controller, and his business office staff, Shirley Long, Peggy Derr and Dave King; and my Administrative Assistant, Jodi Earhart, along with Office Manager, Brenda Long, and Pat Wolfe who are always helpful and encouraging. As a denomination we acknowledge our individual and corporate strengths and weaknesses, when we gained and when we have lost; recognizing our present reality, we embrace the future with the firm conviction that God is not done with this fellowship of churches yet.

Did you know the title song on the contemporary Christian group Casting Crowns' latest album sounds strangely like our denominational Purpose Statement, "to know Christ and make him known"? Listen to the words of the chorus "Just to know you and to make you known, we lift your name on high. Shine like the sun made darkness run and hide. We know we were made for so much more than ordinary lives. It's time for us to do more than just survive, we were made to shine. Joy unspeakable, faith unsinkable, love unstoppable, anything is possible. We were made to thrive." (*Thrive* by Casting Crowns)

We must open our hands, and our hearts, and our heads to what he is doing. It's his work, his church, his mission. He is Lord and we must follow where he leads. Will you please join me in this adventure of faith? Will you join with me as, together, we open our hands to receive what God wants to bless us with and move forward in faith?

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