

2010 EPISCOPAL ADDRESS

“A New Thing – our future as a movement of God.”

Peace be with you! I greet the delegates and friends of this 8th National Conference of the Evangelical Congregational Church, with the faith, hope, and love that are ours in Christ Jesus. What a privilege we have to serve God together. I am blessed beyond measure by your willingness to give yourself to the Lord. I am thankful beyond words for the prayers, counsel, and grace you have provided for me.

The theme for this conference and my message are Isaiah 43:19. “See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” In context God reminds His people how He brought them to freedom by parting the Red Sea. He opened a path no one else could make. Once they were safely through He slammed the waves shut on their enemies ending all pursuit. It was an incomparable deliverance, yet God challenges Israel to expect even more. Vs 18 says “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.” He’ll keep removing the obstacles that stand between His people and His purposes. The mission always moves ahead...”See I am doing a new thing.”

A new thing – do you believe it? How open to a fresh work of the Holy Spirit are we? Does the idea spark anxiety or anticipation? Is your focus on what was or what might be for the Kingdom? In our desire to preserve His unchanging truth it is easy to miss His ever changing tactics by which a lost world is reached. The Lord who tells us to “walk in newness of life” (Ro. 6:4) wasn’t content for the first disciples to remain inside the Temple walls enjoying each other. He repeatedly pushed them outward into their world and forward on His mission. The early church marched to an apostolic drumbeat that kept them reaching for new people in new places. They were a people and a cause in motion.

Filling positions, perpetuating programs, repeating routines won’t satisfy your own soul let alone make a searching world curious about the Good News. If your church is in the grip of “the same old, same old” don’t expect seekers to “ask you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Pet. 3:15) There will be little hope to see! Spirituality like manna has a short shelf life. It grows stale if not replenished. Jesus explained the source of His vitality and energy for the mission in John 4:34 “My food... is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work.” That work for us is to make disciples as we go about life. Nothing makes us as alive as loving others into committed Christ followers.

A new thing... do you believe God wants to do that in you and for us? I appreciate Mark Batterson’s thought in his book, *Primal*. “There are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet.” We’ve not exhausted God’s solutions. The message remains, methods change. We’re not limited to old ideas to meet new challenges. Our investment in training leaders to coach others and be coached is helping to mine the riches of answers, ideas, and opportunities the Lord has placed in and among us just waiting to be drawn out. Faithfulness mustn’t be a euphemism for mediocrity. It isn’t just doing what’s always been done or defending what is. It’s incarnating Jesus and making disciples in creative ways. Batterson adds, “It is playing offense for the kingdom even if some Pharisees find it offensive.” A new thing... are you in on it?

A new thing – can you see it? In Isaiah 43 God not only affirms a new thing will be done, He challenges them to “see” what His novel work is. He calls them to “perceive” His plans and join Him in their fulfillment. There are signs of newness springing up among us. Have you seen them? Will you take part?

Momentum continues toward a focus on making disciples and not just decisions. Here newness is found in a return to an ancient paradigm. Disciplemaking has been retooled from a topic taught in a class to a lifestyle imparted through relationships. Discipling is being unleashed to bring people to Jesus as well as shape believers to become like Him. The Savior’s curriculum is relevant to every person. My prayer is for a fresh group of congregations to

enlist the Navigator's coaching to become intentional disciplinarians. Scholarship assistance remains available. Yet this is one of many options, not the only path.

Life to life disciplinarianism is taking root in many different forms, in many different congregations. Pastors and lay leaders mentor men, women, youth, and children to disciple others and release a cascade of life changers. Churches of all sizes grasp the concept. Some build upon weekend retreats and accountability pairings. Others employ journaling and sermon based small group studies. God is moving. A new thing is underway. Following Jesus is more than what you know. It's who you are and what you do. Jesus' praise to the good and faithful servant, isn't "well said" or "well answered," but well done! We must train towards transformation which results in Christ like Christians, which is what authentic holiness is and nothing less.

A longing to reach new people and plant new churches is deepening. The desire is welling up at the grassroots. "Outside the box" possibilities the Lord envisioned long before we did emerge. For example a revitalization initiative at Bethany Sunbury meshed with a new church start in that community birthed from Buenas Nuevas Church in Hazleton. The ink is still fresh on what this potentially multicultural and multilingual ministry may become. But in a place where not long ago the well for ministry seemed to be drying out, a new spring bubbles up.

Elsewhere congregations like Reedsville Bethesda, Mohn's Hill, and Sinking Spring Community are pioneering the use of the "Lifetree Café" strategy. This ministry template creates a "third place" or neutral space like a coffeehouse where pre-Christians can come and connect with Christians. Guided discussions on high interest topics open dialogue between believer and unbeliever out of which doors to serve and witness open. Numerous congregations are praying and positioning themselves to birth new believers. Through food and clothing banks, providing meals, after school programs, hosting community events, or meeting neighborhood needs they practice the gospel in deed as well as Word. Evangelicals are relearning that the church has not only a mouth for telling, but heart, hands, eyes, and feet for sharing and caring God's love with the lost. The church is leaving the building to be the body of Christ to its community. We are moving toward being missional!

Do you see new things God is fostering? Instead of evading culture we are learning to infiltrate it, just as Jesus and the early Christians did. Instead of expecting the unchurched to come to us, we're going to them. We're embracing the identity Jesus asked for us in John 17:15-18 "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." We're recalibrating godliness to His standard. Don't keep as far away as possible from those who need Jesus most. Look for ways to get close, so that when we contrast and confront them with the way of Christ we speak as advocates rather than adversaries, acting out of loving humility rather than hostile pride. If we walk as Jesus walked, we too will be known as a "friend of sinners." Like Paul we'll understand that commands "not to associate with the disobedient" refer mainly to keeping a corrective distance from hypocritical believers. It does not set up a buffer zone against the Christless. In 1 Cor. 3:10 he clarifies... "not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral... in that case you would have to leave the world." We can't and we must not abandon a world God sent His Son to save.

New things are contained in the strategic plan that will be voted upon in this conference. I will only summarize them as we have set aside substantial time in tomorrow's agenda for review. Each is intended to perceive what the Lord is doing with us and join Him in that venture. By enhancing our capacity to communicate and celebrate God's work among us we'll give Him the glory that is His. We will encourage ourselves by an awareness of what His Spirit sets in motion in and through us. By developing a network of affinity based groups we'll connect churches, pastors, and leaders in whom God is kindling a particular passion or vision for new and better ministry. The option of participating in cohort learning will provide an "as needed" dimension for the training our district structure may not provide. Congregations will come together around needs and dreams to find ways to become great in pursuing the Great Commandment and Great Commission.

Confirming a biblical approach to leadership seeks to shape our congregationalism in a way that maximizes ministry instead of autonomy. It will foster the ability for leaders to lead collectively and effectively, forging partnerships based on trusting the Holy Spirit to guide us together, rather than on suspicion where excessive checks and balances may prevent us from moving forward at all. By establishing disciple making as the ultimate objective for all ministries, we will strive to make God's main thing our main thing. We'll make "Are we making disciples?" the unavoidable issue by which we gauge our progress and select our priorities. To be about anything else is to fail to fulfill our calling. It falls short of being a church. The church exists to accomplish the mission, not sustain itself. God is doing a new thing. Can you see it?

A new thing – will you pursue it? Why would we refuse it? Still it is obvious that just saying it, or wanting it doesn't make it so. Because the "old things" worked so well for a time they are quite persistent, even insistent. The inclination is to go back to what was or keep it as it used to be. The only practices worth rooting so permanently that nothing can move us from them, are those traceable to Jesus and the apostles. In them I see people who on the whole are more committed than most of us to God's purposes, and more flexible in following His plans -- stubborn and spontaneous; principled yet pliable. That combination almost doesn't make sense, until you realize that it's doing God's "thing" that ties it all together. When the Heavenly Father led the way they changed course to pursue Him. Will we? Can we be a people conservative in theology and progressive in methodology?

There are signs the answer is yes. This is true of the larger church. In an article entitled "Chicken Little Was Wrong" Ed Stetzer writes, "Reports of Christianity's demise in America have been greatly exaggerated. There is little doubt... that the cultural expression of Christianity in America is declining. Christianity is losing its home field advantage in North America. At the same time ... we are seeing the growth of a more robust faith and commitment. We are seeing some abandon a nominal Christianity, and many others retain an authentic Christian faith. Christianity in North America is not going to die out in this generation or any other, even though it is going through an identity crisis of sorts." Our trajectory as a "church within The Church" may be similar. Ministry that is nominal and cultural in nature will fade and fail. Congregations that have lost their vision and missed their opportunity will close. Others that embrace a renewed vision and seize God's moment will grow and thrive. Denominations that can let go of what are really just their own traditions and preferences in order to hold on to the faith once for all delivered to the faithful will endure.

I thank you for a year of strong giving in the face of a weak economy. I thank you for one of the best years of completing and returning reports. In one sense it's a very little thing. In another it helps tell us the truth of how we're doing. Although it is still unclear how much statistical change is a factor of getting more data back as compared to actual growth, I offer this interpretation of the information. We are essentially holding our own in most categories neither increasing nor decreasing. When church planting figures are added to the chartered churches the balance tips slightly to the positive. We are turning, but have not yet turned around. We are not yet a movement. We're still an institution ... functioning as an organization more than organism.

Sociologists theorize that people groups need to maintain a certain reproductive rate in order to perpetuate themselves. If the birth rate falls below a certain level a nation or ethnicity can disappear. Some argue that the same is true of denominations and estimate that at least a 3% rate of new church starts is needed annually. For us that would be roughly 4 church plants a year. In the past twelve months, while there have been signs of possible pregnancies, and a few informal "adoptions," we've had just one church become a mother. Our fertility rate needs an increase. If Christ is stirring your heart to have a hand in birthing a new disciple making outpost act on it. Share the dream with your fellowship that it may be prayed over. Should the vision grow stronger talk to Church Planting Associate, Les Cool or myself about opportunities for planter assessment and training. Together we can explore what combination of bivocational ministry, fund raising and support from the parent church and Church Planting Commission can make this new work viable and sustainable.

Yes, there are oases of health and growth with more on the way. Still it is a season of looking to the Lord to lay out a way for us in the desert. It is a season of calling upon Him to bring forth springs in the dry land. It is time to

hunger for God's new thing. Let me share what I've been hearing from Him with regard to how that might happen. Let me invite you to pursue a common vision of what it will look like for us.

It will require a new passion. I'm not talking about superficial excitement or enthusiasm. That kind of outward fuel never delivers a lot of mileage. You can't tell if this genuine passion is there by someone's worship style or emotional expressiveness. I'm referring to the fact that in the great commandment's call to love the Lord, we are first summoned to love Him with all our heart. That's the deepest part of us. It's a dimension that goes beyond logic and is rooted deeper than reason, though it doesn't ignore or deny we must love Him with mind, body, and strength as well. The point is we must care deeply for God and about the things that matter to Him. We do His will unhesitatingly and eagerly not calculating in advance, "what is in it for us?"

Too often we "do church", conditioned by our culture to consume. We participate for what "we get out of it." We drop out at the first hint that ministry requires something from us. There will be no "new thing" unless we stop behaving like consumers of religious goods and services, and let ourselves be all consumed with the desire to obey Jesus Christ. When that happens all else falls into place. We really do have enough money, enough talent, enough of anything... provided that God has enough of us. So we will make an effort this Conference, and in those that follow to give Him more praise and thanks. We will seek to be less self conscious so that Jesus might be pre-eminent over all.

It will require new engagement with pre-Christians. I've touched on this, but it's too important not to highlight again. Jesus said "Go INTO all the world and preach the good news to all creation." Mark 16:15 How is it we find so many reasons for staying out of that world, and for defining holiness as doing all that we can to avoid people who haven't met Jesus yet? We need to take a break from serving ourselves to serve them. We have the words of the life, the Good News. Enhance them with the good deeds the Bible also calls for. Be Jesus to others where He seems to have no visible presence. Change where you must to do so. Let God do a new thing in you if necessary for that to happen. Understand that such a faith based venture cannot take place without a healthy dose of "risk" and "messiness." The idols of safety and security must be smashed.

As we've gotten to know our new neighborhood, it's become apparent that my next door neighbor's driveway is the unofficial community center. People just like to hang out there to shoot the bull, shoot hoops, sip a brew, and watch their kids ride their Bigwheels. It's not exactly an ideal match for introverted, can barely dribble, my kids are all grown up, don't drink -- me. But I have to spend time there if I'm ever going to engage the place where I live with the Gospel. People really don't need accusers. Satan handles that job all too well. There are always enough Pharisees around. They need Advocates, who like Jesus our Master knew you could befriend sinners without endorsing their sin. If anything that should be easier for us, for unlike Him we are sinners ourselves whom God has received as friends.

It will express itself in new partnerships. We'll find all sorts of unexpected allies if we commit ourselves to building God's Kingdom. Let's begin by partnering together more with members of our own tribe. I take joy in hearing about our churches that work together, at times to the extent of sharing staff people, facilities, or activities for the sake of reaching more people, more effectively. Sister churches have stepped up to help pay bills or send a work team... may it be more so. As leaders become equipped in coaching they will not only develop personally, they will interact with their peers to draw out God's best in each other.

We are still too territorial; finding it easier to guard our turf than to extend Christ's reach. Ministry's not a zero sum game; we don't lose wherever Jesus gains. There was a time when being missional meant starting an evangelical outreach in every small town. In some places it still does. In others it is time for God to give us a new vision to reach a wider region. Instead of duplicating efforts to maintain separate but limited facilities with solo pastors, we can explore the possibility of pooling resources to offer ministry in a better location, with more relevant tools, and perhaps a pastoral team. Could you impact more people for eternity if your congregation merged, let a church plant work out of your facility, or become an outreach of a larger congregation?

Can we not at least pray about such things? I've probably agitated a few of you by just suggesting it. But let me be blunt. Keeping a church open just for us misses God's mark. Holding out because great grand dad donated the stained glass is inadequate to sustain a ministry. It's not about maintaining a place to be a shepherd and make a living, but opening up fields from which to gather a flock.

If your church is coming to the close of its life cycle, look for ways to revitalize the remnant or to leave a legacy for the next generation by investing yourself, resources, and even building in a way that can touch the future. Do it while there is something left to impart. Don't squander it on the "same old, same old." Make the decisions that will result in making disciples. Seek the coaching and counsel you need. Either way... it means allowing Jesus to do a new thing. Are you open to what it might be?

All of us need a fresh work of God within us. My own need for a taste of this "new thing" has been on the top of God's agenda for my life. I'm learning to be desperate for Jesus in ways I never grasped before. I am deeply thankful to the rest of the Church Center Staff, Conference Ministers, former Bishop Mike Sigman and all the other friends in ministry, and family members who give me the grace and patience to lay hold of Him. The old has to yield to the new. God is good. His kindness is overwhelming.

As we take on the year before us, let's remember not to overly complicate things. The way to newness is more simple than it seems. An article in the Reading Eagle last fall focused on an annual list the paper publishes of people that the government owes money to but claims they cannot locate. You've probably seen those postings inviting people to claim what is theirs. A reporter took the first 25 names to see what he could do with them. In less than a few days he managed to contact the majority of the missing by consulting phone books and public directories. One worked for the paper and two were county employees, one with direct connections to the department that compiled the list. They were lost only because no one was really looking.

Doing what God has asked of us isn't as hard as we make it out to be either. Connecting with people who need Jesus starts with reaching out and building a relationship. Discovering God's new thing is ultimately a matter of faith, without which it is impossible to please Him. He is the Waymaker. We have His promise. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you ask whatever you wish and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourselves to be my disciples." John 15:7-8 Abiding, asking, and glorifying God through making followers of Christ, these are the foundation of a movement of God with a future.

For Jesus our First Love,

Bishop Kevin Leibensperger