

T.E.A.C.H. International 2008

## THE E.C. CHURCH AS AN INTERNATIONAL DENOMINATION

Not long ago I said goodbye to the congregation I pastored for twenty two years. As I left the building for the last time and walked across the field to my house nearby, I thought, "I'm something I've never been before in my entire life. I'm a man without a church." To prepare the way for the next pastor I can't continue to attend Trinity. Yet since we move closer to Myerstown later this year but don't know where, I won't be able to search for a new home church for months. It was a depressing idea. From my birth when my parents took me to Grace E.C. in Reading, PA I've always had a church to belong to. This season of being "in between" was something I would not enjoy as part of being a Bishop.

However, the first Sunday I visited an E.C. Church I'd never been to, I realized how wrong I was. I remembered something I should not have forgotten. My spiritual family is a lot bigger than I'll ever comprehend. Wherever people exalt Jesus and proclaim Him as God's good news is "my" church, because it is Christ's church. I belong anywhere the Bible is preached and the grace of the cross is trusted. I couldn't be a man without a church if I tried. There's a universal connectedness and almost instant bond that exists between believers wherever you meet them. You've experienced it I'm sure. It is the same extraordinary, heaven made unity and community we are discovering that makes us an international denomination. That's not something we are in the process of becoming. It is what we already are and have always been. It's simply that we

haven't always acknowledged it or appreciated the richness of what that means.

I know that's a fact because of the truth declared in scripture. 1 Peter 2:9-12 "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." We're living out a miracle of divine mercy and sovereignty. We too were once "not a people." Now "we are a people of God." The E.C. Church is a fellowship that spans the earth a fellowship on which the sun never sets. The depth and breadth of our union is amazing. We're:

***One in identity.*** Verse 9 calls us "a chosen people." Do you realize we have been brought together not by chance, but the Lord's choice? Our relationship is no coincidence but the result of divine providence. His hand has moved in the ages of history and across the distance of geography to weave us together in a beautiful tapestry He alone could design. There is nothing accidental about our all being around the table today. It was intentional on heavens part. All of our individual and corporate decisions along the way to join with one another in Christ's cause

were an echo of His deciding; the answer of our spirit to His Holy Spirit. We embraced His plan as ours. Trace back the story of how all the different countries we represent found their way into the common venture called the E.C. Church and you will find the trail leads to the remarkable grace of God at the beginning. We who were not a people, now are a people of God and it is all His doing. It is a proof of the greatness of the Savior who is assembling “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language” to stand before His throne. Rev. 7:9 Give Christ the glory. He’s made us:

***One in ministry.*** The ninth verse also calls us a “royal priesthood.” Every disciple of Christ is a child of the King Most High. It doesn’t matter if you are new or old to the family of God, each son or daughter is a prince or princess, a member of the royal house. Having one Father means that we relate to each other not as parent to child, but as siblings – brother to brother. The era of “paternalism” is over. We’ve not been adopted by each other, but by Him. Some of our churches have been in God’s household longer, but none of us is closer than any other to the Father’s heart. As members of His family we cannot detach our affection from Him from the affection we have for each other. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves His child as well.” 1 John 5:1

The priestly anointing we have in common makes us equals in serving Him. The Lord does not play favorites within His home. From all four points of the compass the church has recognized the weakness of a “colonial” model

of missions that regards one party as the patron and the other as a client. It is never meant to be a one way flow from a benefactor to recipient, but a two way exchange of gifts and graces bestowed on each by the Lord of the church. A healthy and necessary redefining of roles has taken place. We no longer think of the work abroad as our mission fields. We're all God's field. We work together today as peers. What we have is a partnership not proprietorship. The ownership that exists is of a common mission. We belong to each other. None of us is more expert or competent than the other. Spirituality doesn't work that way. The family branches of churches we represent all have weaknesses to be helped by the others. All have strengths to help the other's needs. We need one another.

From the outset God has built an international church, using the national churches as His building blocks. He has pulled us together on a global scale in the same way He brings together different individuals in a local church. He is forming and completing the Body of Christ. The same principles of interdependence and mutual regard apply. "God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." 1 Cor. 12:24-25

The principle of indigenuity, developing ministries and churches that reflect the society in which they are planted blesses us all. Jesus gives us the necessary flexibility to raise up churches that reflect the unique diversity of the nation or community we are trying to reach. The greater

effectiveness and efficiency someone has reaching his or her own countrymen...those who share a common heart language or sympathetic world, view is obvious. It is not my culture or yours that we seek to import with the gospel. It's Christ alone we want to export to every person on earth. We can trust Jesus to shape churches as He wants them around the world...meeting in very different buildings, worshiping Him in a wide array of styles, organizing themselves and reaching out to their neighbors through a host of strategies. All the while we obey the same Lord, hold fast to the same word, and proclaim the same Good News. The gospel transcends culture. The multinational flavor of the church was imbedded in its DNA from birth at Pentecost. There by the working of the Holy Spirit citizens from around the world "heard the wonders of God in [their] own tongues." Acts 2:11 We are also:

***One in opportunity.*** Our mission is identical – to exalt Jesus Christ! Peter reminds us in v. 10 that we are “a holy nation, raised up to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Out of many nationalities Christ is forging one nation, committed to holiness – set apart unto the Lord as His possession. Regardless of what nationality is stamped in our passport, we are citizens of heaven above all. Our highest allegiance is to a kingdom not of this world; an empire whose boundaries extend past all borders and wrap round the whole earth. There's an English saying that “blood is thicker than water” meaning the ties of earthly kinship are stronger than mere friendship. An international church has the opportunity to show those who have not met God that

there is an even stronger basis for family and brotherhood. The bond of the Spirit of Christ indwelling all believers is tighter still and erases the distinctions of race and nationality. His disciples are one people.

When we stand shoulder to shoulder, working to meet the needs those around us we give the world a glimpse of Christ. Through our concern for justice and compassion for the eternal souls of the lost we incarnate the grace and goodness of the Heavenly Father as Jesus did when on earth in human form. Imagine EC believer from India ministering in Mexico, or volunteers from Japan and Costa Rica serving in Liberia. A church consisting of many different people groups gives expression to the transforming power of the risen Christ as it fulfills His commands. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35 "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:23

I assure our brothers in our nations that when we talk about empowerment, we do not mean abandonment. We cannot forget each other. Our need for your partnership is as great as your need of us. If we ever seem hesitant in our sharing it is because we want only to share what is healthy about us, not what is unhealthy. All is not well in the American church. Not everything in the West is a blessing to be copied elsewhere. We have often been too reliant on finances, programs, facilities, and structures. You have been teaching us to be more reliant on the Spirit, less dependent on material resources, and more

flexible and courageous with outreach. Let us share our wellness but not illness; our strength not our weakness.

As a people sanctified to the Lord we're also set apart before the world, declaring His praises that other also may respond to His invitation to come out of the darkness into the light of His life. Let us never forget that our great commission with God is to make disciples of all nations. Mt. 28:19 That's a task that no one national church can complete on it's own. The challenge demands that we pursue the goal as a team. The explosive growth of the world's population, as well as the rise of secularism and false religion require that we cooperate in the venture of making disciples and planting churches. Only by networking with each other in ministry can we become the missional, multiplying movement that is needed in an era of global connectedness.

With technology eliminating barriers of travel and communication the greatest obstacles to reaching the world are issues of passion and sacrifice. Do we care enough to share our faith? Are we committed enough to endure the cost of being faithful? If there ever was a generation for whom the possibility of saturating the planet with the message of salvation was a reality, it is the one we live in. The partnering of an international church and mission's agencies both with a glocal outlook enables Jesus, the truth, to infiltrate and impact every community on earth. As the root system of the people of God spread, the fruit of gospel will surely accompany it. Finally, our Savior has caused us to be:

***One in destiny.*** 1 Peter 2:11,12 urges us to live as “aliens and strangers in this world” living “such good lives among the pagans” that they may see our good deeds and come to “glorify God on the day He visits us.” We are but sojourners, temporary resident in this world, waiting for the kingdom that cannot be shaken; for the enduring city that is to come. It is ironic that we should think of each other as foreigners, for we are all nomads looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth in which we’ll finally be at rest. None of us are “at home” yet. The apostle reminds us that in our travels we be at war with temptations and the Tempter. We must support one another in this spiritual warfare through our fervent prayers, admonition, and encouragement.

We’re less likely to lose heart or lose our way in faith’s journey when we follow that road in each others company. Hebrews 10:25-26 speaks to an international denomination as well. “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching..”

Peter saw the Day of the Lord as motivation to live daily in the anticipation of Jesus’ return. There is an urgency to evangelism and discipleship. We will have forever to enjoy with God, but we have just this age to be His witnesses. If we do not live godly lives before our neighbors today, how will they glorify the Lord when He visits this world again in His glory? There is much to be done, but our Father is still saying “Look at the nations and watch and be utterly ama-

zed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told.” Habakkuk 1:5

We stand on the threshold of major shifts that will astonish and stretch us. Jesus compared the moving of His regenerating Spirit to the blowing of the wind. His redemptive breezes are shifting. The strength of evangelicalism is moving away from North America to the global south. We stand before our brothers and sisters from abroad in need of prayer, counsel, repentance, and renewal. The waves of conversion and revival touching other continents have been strangely absent here. The American church may remain a major sponsor of worldwide outreach for a season still, if her people prove selfless and surrendered to Christ. But that era too may be ending.

It is advantageous for everyone one of our national churches to press toward becoming largely self supporting. A day may be coming when America will no longer be “the arsenal of evangelicalism.” Perhaps after more than two centuries of religious freedom and peace, we will taste the refining fires of persecution and discrimination for our beliefs as most of our brethren have known around the world. We will learn the lessons of patient, perseverance many of you live with everyday as a Christian minority. It is a cause for concern, but in an international church it not reason for despair. Our Father will provide! Has it not been through cycles of ebb and flow that God has irresistibly sought the lost and added to His people? The back and forth movement of His mission is etched on the pages of church history.

Christianity was born in Asia from which it spread to Europe after been nurtured in Africa along the way. From

Europe it came to the New World; from there it was sent back to the places of its origin and beyond in the next great wave of missions. In the season before us the flow may well reverse again, as the sending nations of the west, become receiving nations for those coming from the east. This give and take has been the method of the Holy Spirit from the first. Churches planted by missionaries, send out missionaries who go out to plant more churches and send more missionaries. We forget that the movement founded by Jacob Albright, our parent denomination the Evangelical Association was returning missionaries to its ethnic homeland Germany within just a few generations from its beginning. It could be that some of our national churches partnered here in TEACH will begin to send out church planting teams to their compatriots who have emigrated to America and other parts of the world. They'll be join our efforts here, as we have joined in their efforts there, each party bringing what needed resources they have to offer for the venture – sharing prayers, resources, funds, expertise, and workers.

It seems to me that the gospel spreads like ripples on a lake, in waves that not only move outward, but rebound in the opposite direction when they collide with the opposite shore. Whereas physical waves lose energy with each obstacle they hit, these spiritual waves of Christianity pick up momentum whenever they meet resistance. The end result is that with each succeeding tide the influence of the gospel and the glorious name of Jesus reaches further and wider. The “sea level” rises until as the Word promises, the time shall come when the knowledge of

glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters of the sea. Hab. 2:14

All this leads me to declare with Paul “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” Romans 11:33-36

Every ministry represented here tonight has something to give and something to receive; something to teach and something to learn. A God with a love as big as His universe reaches out to the people of the world through believers like us from Costa Rica, India, Japan, Liberia, Mexico, America, and beyond. Only through an international church can Christ’s prophecy be fulfilled. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” Mt. 24:14 He has made us who were not a people into a people, an international church with a mission field as big as the planet. When Jacob Albright left his tile making and farming to be a street preacher to his Pennsylvania German neighbors he could not have imagined the trail he pioneered would one day extend around the earth and across generations. More than 100,000 believers gathered in more than 500 churches. Who but God knows where our small steps of a sold out faith today may lead tomorrow as we partner together for the world!