

**EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
TO THE
EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

May 27, 2020

I greet you as brothers and sisters in Christ in this most unusual way in which to present the annual Episcopal Address to the Evangelical Congregational Church. Up until 8 weeks ago, I hoped that this address would be presented to the pastors and lay delegates during the opening business session of our annual National Conference. That conference was to begin today, May 27, 2020; but the Lord has chosen another way for me to share what has become something of a “state of the church” message with you.

What is the state of the Evangelical Congregational Church in a day and age when change and fear have overwhelmed our nation? After meeting with our Associates and District Field Directors and talking with many of our pastors, I can tell you the Evangelical Congregational Church is ministering out of a position of faith rather than fear.

Certainly, these are unprecedented times. This may be a hinge-point in history, when we make a radical change of direction toward an unknown “new normal.” We do not know how our lives and ministries will be affected by this in the years to come. Yet we clearly hear the words Paul wrote to the Philippians “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.” [Philippians 4:6] Did you know the principle word for worry in the New Testament comes from a root, which literally means “to divide the mind”? When I worry, my mind is divided or drawn into many different directions at the same time. I am completely distracted. The language scholars also tell us the English word “worry” comes from the German word which literally means “to strangle.” Again, a pretty good description of worry. The apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 5:7, tells us that instead of hoarding all the concerns and worries to myself, I am to give them to God. Again the language scholars point out an even more vivid description when they tell us the word “give” really means “to throw upon” or as many translations put it “‘cast’ all your worries and cares to God for he cares for you.” Tell God your worries and needs, then trust him to handle it. A lot of times I find my perspective is limited by my humanity. But God’s perspective is not only of my needs, but also of his full supply and complete ability to meet my needs and so much more. Don’t limit God’s answers. It may be a struggle but remember this: God is still God; he is still on the throne; his Holy Spirit is with us and he cares about each one of us. I am thankful that our local pastors and church leaders are exercising trust in God and his great care for us during this most challenging time.

The ministries of the Evangelical Congregational Church, denominationally and locally, have not been interrupted. The work of our denomination’s communities, Church Health, Global Ministries, Kingdom Extension, and Ministerial Development continues. Yes, we have all been stretched. We have learned and have responded well to the needs of both our congregations and our communities. I can tell you that our local church members have responded to the needs in their neighborhoods in the love of Jesus.

While most of our congregations have not come together in one place for a worship service since mid-March, God's people have responded with generous, faithful stewardship so ministry can continue. In some areas financial support has increased! Thank you and praise the Lord!

The theme for this year's National Conference was to be "Made for More" based on Ephesians 3:20-21, "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen." Hear me when I say "Made for More" is not about size. Not every church is going to a mega-church nor should it be. Think about Paul's words, inspired by the Holy Spirit: "through the mighty power at work within us, we will accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think." Perhaps the question to be asked is how every church, regardless of size, can be a church of influence for the Gospel. How can we make a difference in our local community, in our district conversations, in our involvement in the ministry of the Gospel around the world?

One of the ministries that is pivoting to meet changing needs and to even expand their sphere of influence is Evangelical Seminary. Evangelical was founded in 1953 by the EC Church to train our pastors. Over the years it has become so much more; a gift to the Kingdom of God training men and women for ministry and service all around the world. Now we see another point of growth in Evangelical as it joins the Kairos network of seminaries. There comes a time in every organization that they must answer the question: is our purpose to simply keep the organization going or is there something more? I am pleased to tell you the Evangelical Seminary Board of Trustees believes it is time for something more. Please understand, this is a paradigm shift in the education of pastors and other Kingdom leaders. The goal is not to make adjustment to the theological factory; but to break out in a revolution of theological education that will provide high quality theological education that is Biblically based, timely and affordable. I pray that the coming years will see a renewed ability for our denomination to partner with local congregations and our pastoral candidates to provide financially for their educational requirements in ways that would not have been possible before. Please join me in continuing to pray for and support Evangelical Seminary as it enters this new chapter in its ministry to develop servant leaders for transformational ministry in a broken and complex world by nurturing rigorous minds, passionate hearts, and Christ-centered actions.

I pray too, that you will continue to pray for and support our camping ministries. At the time of this report Camp ECCO in Ohio and Rock River Bible Camp in Illinois have both made the difficult decision to cancel their summer camping season. Twin Pines Camp in Pennsylvania continues to hope and plan for summer camps, but with the realization that some aspects will need to be very different.

As your Bishop, I have spoken many times about change. The experts tell us 96% of change is imposed on us; only 4% of change is initiated by us. We are all now dealing with a hugely disruptive change that was not of our design or making. Remember, I was to be presenting this Episcopal Address to the members of our denomination's National Conference in the Brubaker Auditorium on the campus of Messiah College. Instead, I am in a video studio in Willow Street, Pennsylvania. I am pleased to tell you today that the changes we instituted four years ago as a denomination prepared and positioned us for the changes we are facing today. I will mention three.

First, we re-emphasized the long-held position that the National Ministry Team is empowered to act on behalf of the National Conference. Little did we know, when that was written, that the National Ministry Team would be faced with making the difficult decision of whether National Conference could even be held. I am thankful to tell you the Team met by ZOOM and held an open and honest discussion on the various scenarios and ultimately voted unanimously to cancel National Conference 2020 due to the ongoing pandemic. This was not an easy decision, but it was, I believe, the right one to make. Therefore, the election of our next Bishop will be held at National Conference in May 2021. So too, action on proposed amendments to the book of Discipline, and changes to the Rules of Conference will be delayed until 2021. The regular meeting of our National Ministry Team will be held this October and they will adopt the details concerning the transition in the episcopal office, that is when our next bishop takes office, and they will adopt the National Conference's 2021 budget. These decisions will be clearly communicated to the members of Conference following the National Ministry Team meeting.

The second way our denominational restructuring has positioned us well is our refocusing and re-emphasis on local congregations being organized into districts. Each district, made up of about 10 local congregations, is facilitated by a District Field Director. I am very thankful to the Lord that while we thought it was a good idea, the Holy Spirit knew it would be vital to our denomination as we face the changing landscape of a pandemic. I am pleased to tell you our District Field Directors are doing an outstanding job of resourcing and encouraging the pastors on their district during this most challenging time of ministry. The focus on districts allows us to communicate more easily and provide for greater levels of connection with pastors and between pastors. I want to express my deep appreciation to our District Field Directors who are key to the effectiveness of our work as a denomination. Please join me in thanking your District Field Director the next time you see him.

Since I am talking about people who work hard for the church and Kingdom, I also want to express my appreciation to our Evangelical Congregational pastors. I have said that being a pastor has always been a challenging vocation. But the changing face of our culture, 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. Now throw in a pandemic and being a pastor becomes an almost insurmountable task. And it is, except through the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit. In these last few months pastors have been forced to learn a whole new set of skills. They have leaned into the Holy Spirit and leaned on each other and on key lay leaders to learn how all about livestreaming worship services, Bible studies, and children and youth ministries. The reality is that even though we have not been gathering in church buildings, our pastors have been busier than ever. Every decision carries with it more questions, considerations, and complications. As Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church I want to thank our pastors for their faithful service and I want to encourage you, if you're listening to this as a lay leader, to lead your congregation in appreciating and blessing your pastor and his family. I know I could not have survived as pastor of a local church without my wife's constant prayers, encouragement, and support. I still depend on that today as Bishop. So, to Gloria and every pastor's wife I say, "thank you." Please join me in expressing that appreciation to your pastor, his wife and family.

The third way the changes we made a few years ago has helped us prepare for today is our understanding of the “church;” we clarified our understanding of the church. This understanding of church is that it does not require an institutional hierarchical structure. When we understand and accept that, it opens new possibilities. As Hugh Halter and Matt Smay write in *“AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church”*, the church is “a beautiful balance ...that scatters its people through incarnational communities while providing gathered structures that hold it all together.” We challenged ourselves to envision a denominational structure that encourages and empowers local congregations to join God on his mission in our neighborhoods, communities, and world. We do not chase after digital engagement as a fad; but as a tool to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God. To be missionaries who are committed to the truth of the Bible in a digital world. Our goal is not a stronger institution but a network of healthy congregations where everything we do is focused on fulfilling our goal of communicating the whole gospel to a lost and needy world; to “go and make disciples.”

We have discovered new opportunities to reach exponentially more people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ through online engagement. Worship services, virtual and in-person, are a part of the disciplining process; but just one piece in a very large puzzle that includes so much more. For too long we have defined discipleship as simply a Bible study; learning more facts; the people, places, and stories of the Bible. But discipleship is not a destination; it is not as “simple” as learning lessons, or even selling or giving away all your stuff and “whalla” you are a disciple. Discipleship is not a destination; it is a direction; growing to be more and more like Jesus.

When Jesus talked about being one of his followers, he talked about learning lessons; but they were life lessons; life transformation. Jesus’ statements on following him are statements on direction, on focus, on priorities. We have been forced out of our traditional model of thinking that if people would simply come to a specific place on Sunday morning, they would be better. We have re-discovered that ministry happens whether we meet in a building or not. The church did very well in the book of Acts, thank you, and for many years, before someone built the first building and stuck a steeple on it. According to the book *“Evangelical From The Beginning – The Story of the Evangelical Congregational Church,”* Jacob Albright “thrived in the informal atmosphere of the class meeting, where testimonies of personal encounters with God in prayer and daily life, mingled with confession of sins.” Ours is a call to personal salvation by God’s grace when you believe. [Ephesians 2:8] It is a call to let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. [Hebrews 12:2] It is a call to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [2 Peter 3:18] Our denominational forefathers, like Jacob Albright, ministered house-to-house, family-to-family, in large outdoor gatherings; but rarely in a church building. Could it be that we are in our own version of *“Back to the Future”*?

We must continue to understand and implement discipleship, growth in personal holiness and devotion to the Lord, obedience to his Word, as central to everything that we do every day. It is life transformation. [Romans 12:2] Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:23 “...let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.” Every day we chose to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us; what we do, act, and think. To cooperate with the Holy Spirit. That is true whether we sit together in a building, sitting in a living room, at work or school, out in my neighborhood, or when I am by myself with God’s Word.

I pray the Holy Spirit will not only develop his gifts and graces with me and each of us, but that God's Holy Spirit will lead us all into ways we can creatively disciple others; leading them to love Jesus more deeply and know his will and his ways. This is our task, our privilege, in good times and in challenging times.

I am thankful I serve alongside our pastoral leaders and lay leaders. In addition, I am thankful to be able to call you my brothers and sisters. You volunteer your time, talents, and treasure. You serve in too many ways to mention. We are the Evangelical Congregational Church. I must express my sincere appreciation for the gifted and gracious people who serve as leaders of our Communities: Gary Kuehner, Church Health; Ted Rathman and Pat Strain, for Global Ministries; Les Cool, with Kingdom Extension; and Jeff Byerly, with Ministerial Development. Those that serve at Church Center, including Kevin Henry, Executive Director; Shirley Long, Abigail Zimmerman, and Dave King in the Finance Office; and Pat Wolfe who keeps the administrative work in Church Center moving smoothly. This was to be Pat's last National Conference as she is set to retire this summer. The last Church Center staff member I want to express my appreciation to is Jodi Earhart, Assistant to the Bishop, who keeps me on schedule and somewhat under control. Lastly, I must tell you how thankful I am for Gloria's support and love. Our next wedding anniversary will be number 45! She puts up with my schedule, only occasionally reminding me how long it has been since I took a day off or a vacation. She works full time for the ELCO School District, travels with me when she can, prays for me, and encourages me with her love every day. And thank you all for your prayers and support for me as Bishop; I depend on them.

In 2 Kings we find the account of King Hezekiah. He was a spiritual man yet because of political mistakes and the people's lack of faith, Israel was invaded, and the king was trapped in the city of Jerusalem with many of his people. They were surrounded by the Assyrian army, there was no escape. The Assyrian king sent his commander in chief, his field commander, and his chief of staff to give Hezekiah a message, an ultimatum: give up or be destroyed. That is a problem, that is a reason to be afraid, very afraid. So, what did Hezekiah do? According to 2 Kings 19:14-19 he took the letter into the Temple, "spread it out before the Lord" and prayed. It sounds to me like he laid it out on the floor and said to the Lord "this letter isn't for me, it's for you." This is a problem too big for me and these people. Lord, you need to handle this. Soon the prophet Isaiah came with God's reply; the Lord heard his prayer and would save his people. The account tells us, that night the angel of the Lord went out to the Assyrian camp and destroyed their army. The next morning the Assyrians broke camp and returned to their own land.

My friends, let me close with three passages from the Bible. The word of the Lord given to Malachi centuries ago are still true today "I am the Lord, and I do not change." [Malachi 3:6] So too are the words written to the Hebrew Christians, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." [Hebrews 13:8] The very words of Jesus remind us of his power and presence, when Jesus said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." [Matthew 28:18-20] Those are words of comfort, encouragement, and commission. God is at work and we are called to join him on his mission. As Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church I believe our denomination's statement, "To know Christ and to make him known," is still our purpose today and he

will give us the power to accomplish that for his glory. In fact, I believe he wants to empower us to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. That is the way forward for our denomination, your local congregation, and your ministry in your neighborhood. May we go forward not in fear, but in faith for our Savior and our Lord goes with us! Amen.

Let me pray for you. Our Father, I praise you today for your goodness and grace. We confess that many of us struggle with fear and change. We just want everything to stay the same – to just be normal. The challenge of change is that change is always uncomfortable, even good change, desirable change, necessary change. We truly are living in historic days. We confess our need for you, and we celebrate the assurance that you are with us. Guide us as we strive to serve you in uncertain times. Empower us with your Holy Spirit that we might honor and glorify you and that people would come to know Jesus as the one and only Savior and be disciplined in your Word as Lord. Help us to move forward into the “new normal” with confidence that it is your Holy Spirit who leads us on into the “new normal.”

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.” [Ephesians 3:20-21]