

The Evangelical Congregational Church

BISHOP'S REPORT

To the National Ministry Team

October 21, 2021

I greet you today in the name of Jesus our Savior and Lord the living Word of God. As we gather, I am thankful for the incarnate Word and the written word. Jesus promised "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) And the apostle Paul reminds us "The Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled." (Romans 15:4) As I travel around the conference it quickly becomes obvious that pastors, lay leaders, and attendees each need the reassurance that Jesus is with us; we need encouragement and hope.

I believe most of us thought that the pandemic, divisive politics, and the general polarization of our culture would be distant memories by October 2021. Instead, they are ongoing realities in our lives and ministries. Most disturbing to me is that they are too often evidenced in the life of the church. Remember, we understand that the church is not a building, but the people called by God to his mission. It was Jesus who prayed that his people would be one.

Unfortunately, Tim Dalrymple, President and CEO of Christianity Today, has observed, "New fractures are forming within the American evangelical movement, fractures that do not run along the usual regional, denominational, ethnic, or political lines. Couples, families, friends, and congregations once united in their commitment to Christ are now dividing over seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. In fact, they are not merely dividing but becoming incomprehensible to one another."

And yet, in the middle of all of this, Jesus' prayer found in John 17 was that we "...will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me." [John 17:21] Jesus' prayer was that we, you and me, the people in our congregations, the church, would be united. This unity would then be living breathing evidence that the Gospel is true – that God revealed himself in Jesus, who gave his life for the sins of the world, conquered death, and is even now redeeming his creation. My friends, do the church, do our lives evidence that supernatural truth?

The Evangelical Congregational Church that I grew up in did not regularly recite the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, or some other statement of faith. Perhaps we should have. They were written to both correct false teaching or doctrine, and to provide the opportunity for each person to recommit to our common faith. Instead, many seem to have exchanged unity of faith for allegiance to a cultural, economic, or political cause. This causes me great pain and concern as bishop. That said, I cannot imagine how it hurts the heart of Jesus.

We minister in a time of great polarization. We have abandoned the middle; we have become a culture of extremes; there is no longer a middle. I'm not sure how you can have two ends, two extremes and no middle; but somehow our culture and the church have found a way to do that. That is particularly challenging for the Evangelical Congregational Church, a denomination that has often found the middle ground to be our home. Historically, we have seen the danger of an unchecked episcopacy as well as unfettered congregationalism. So, the Evangelical

Congregational Church has carved out the middle ground. I have said before that when I first met a Bishop from the Church of England, he wondered aloud how I could be the bishop of a congregational denomination. Yet, that is our polity. There are multiple examples of this strong denominational commitment to the middle:

- Congregations can structure themselves in a wide range of governance choices, elders, boards, councils, pastor-led, and staff-led.
- Theologically, we have traditionally baptized infants; but we recognize many of our members would prefer dedication or presentation, so we allow for that.
- Our *Discipline's* 25 Articles of Faith say this about the Second Coming. Actually, the Articles of Faith don't say anything specific about Jesus' Second Coming.

To borrow a phrase Dr. Tony Blair has used to describe Evangelical Seminary, the EC Church is "broadly evangelical." That does not mean that we have no convictions, or that we do not take strong positions on many things, or that we don't know what we believe (we do have 25 Articles of Faith, we do have doctrines and standards); but we have trusted the maturity of local leaders and members to know and focus on primary things rather than the distraction of secondary things. The fact that we do believe in the inspiration of the Bible and clearly state "the Bible itself, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit, is our standard of Christian life and practice." I have had multiple conversations with pastors of other denominations inquiring about transferring their credentials and entire congregations into the EC family. I will continue to have these conversations and will look forward to how the Lord will lead as Randy continues them after National Conference 2022.

I am afraid that what we are seeing today is the result of poor disciple-making in the church. As my friend, Pastor Jeff Martin, said many years ago, he was afraid "Too many of us are better Americans than we are Christians." That's not the fault of the culture, that's what culture does. It doesn't matter where you look in the Bible, the culture has always tried to pressure God's people to conform. That's precisely why Paul wrote, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." [Romans 12:2] Paul is writing this to believers living in the capital of the Roman Empire, a society characterized by ambitious, pleasure-loving, cynical, superstitious people. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Take the characteristics of Rome, mix with capitalism and technology, and here we are – American 2021. What we see today is the same old sinful culture, just more convenient. Pastors, preach the Word!

In the middle of a lost and sinful culture the Holy Spirit inspires Paul to write that, what is required in the lives of Jesus' followers is a complete change in the way we see the world and our part in it. This can only happen through our cooperation with God – through the power of God's Holy Spirit at work within us. Mature discipleship understands the Christian life begins with personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, but its effects must be seen in daily life, in the way we act, and in the way we think, in attitudes and motives. This is the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, soul, and mind of every believer. The goal of the transformed life is my becoming more and more like Christ and reflecting his glory to those all around us. Christ takes the individual and implants new principles, new motives, new aims, and new hopes. The life of Christian commitment is a transformed life, one characterized by spiritual growth and maturity. I am deeply concerned we have missed that message of deep discipleship and now reap what we have sown.

How many of our church members spend more time on social media than they do their Bible? A June 2020 news report noted that social media links users to “incendiary posts and misinformation because that keeps its users hooked on the site.” Joanna Hoffman, who worked on the original Macintosh team at Apple, said at a conference, Facebook is “peddling in an addictive drug called anger” and is “destroying the very fabric of democracy, destroying the very fabric of human relationships.” She goes on, “You know it’s just like tobacco, it’s no different than the opioids,” CNBC reported her as telling the crowd “We know anger is addictive, we know we can attract people to our platform and get engagement if we get them [angry] enough.”

Is it any wonder that Skylar Spradlin, a pastor and writer for LifeWay Research noted “The world has been experiencing a record high of negative emotions and stressors [and] being a Christian doesn’t make us an exception. Somehow, we have lost our understanding of gentleness in a world of hot-takes and witty retorts.” The New International Version translates what Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write to the Philippians (4:5) as “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” The New Living Translation says, “Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do, Remember, the Lord is coming soon.” I know lots of church members who believe the end of that verse is true. In fact, they pray for Jesus to come soon. But what about the first half? The Holy Spirit’s command that the gentleness or consideration for others be clearly seen by everyone?

The combined impact of our culture of anger and negativity, combined the church’s failure to develop strong, mature disciples, is now evidenced in the life of congregations. Two quick examples: I recently talked with a young man who was struggling with a call to ministry because he has watched his pastor struggle with the attitudes and emotions expressed in their local church. I have heard from lay leaders and members who find it easier to walk or run away than to stay and slug it out in the latest church conflict. I won’t even begin to address how this effects the principle of Biblical accountability, but it most certainly does.

I stopped writing at this point and thought “well this is certainly depressing.” And if responding to all of this depended on me, on us, it truly would be depressing. Yet, my friends, the promise of Jesus is as true and real today as it was the day he stood on the Mount of Olives said it, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Do we believe that? (Matthew 28:20) The Scriptures still give us hope and encouragement as we wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled. But we are to do much more than just sit and wait, Jesus told us (you know the words) to “go and make disciples.” (Matthew 28:19)

If there ever was a time and culture that needed the Gospel, it is today. Social media isn’t the answer. Politics and politicians have proved they are not the answer. The natural and sinful reaction to choose up sides and fight it out doesn’t work. At the risk of sounding old, I’ll quote the first line from a song written by Andrae Crouch the year after I graduated from Dieruff High School in Allentown - “Jesus is the answer.” Rather than retreating into our homes and church buildings, we must go into the world, into our neighborhoods and towns with the Good News about Jesus. I am thankful for the number of churches and districts who are taking advantage of the resources offered by the Church Health Community and Kingdom Extension Community. We must engage our neighbors with the Gospel, both in word and in deed. Praise the Lord for pastors and churches who are actively and creatively sharing the Gospel inside church buildings and outside church buildings, in season and out of season, or, as the New International Version translates it “whether the time is favorable or not.” In case you aren’t sure, this is a “or not” moment in history. So what?! Remember, he is with us. Have hope. Be encouraged.

The second aspect we, the church, must heavily invest ourselves in is the development of mature, discerning disciples. I look again to the apostle to the Gentiles, every follower of Jesus is to "...be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church." (Ephesians 4:13b-15) As Cary Nieuwhof wrote, we must "Refocus on helping people connect with God and each other and play the long game." That is the task of disciple-making. I am not happy to watch the migration of people away from Sunday morning worship, but I realize that following Jesus means so much more than simply showing up for an hour once a week. Spiritual maturity, evangelism, and discipleship all need to take place in homes, in families, and between friends wherever we are. And please remember, discipleship is not just learning Bible stories and lessons. Discipleship is cooperating with the Holy Spirit to "transform [us] into a new person by changing the way you think." (Romans 12:2) Heart change. Mind change. Life change. That's why Jesus came.

May the church be the church. I pray every one of us will commit ourselves to spiritual maturity, to sharing the Gospel and living out the Good News in all our relationships, to making disciples who will make disciples, who will make disciples. That is not our only hope, it is the hope of the world. And the good news we don't do it alone. Look around the room today, look at those who will be a part of your worship this weekend, we're in it together. We are the church, the body of Christ, and Jesus, the head has promised he is with us. He is leading us. His gift of the Holy Spirit empowers us. Have hope and be encouraged. Let me close with 2 Corinthians 4:8-18 from *The Message*, "We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us - trial and torture, mockery, and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us - he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best! We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise! So, we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever."

In Christ's Service,



Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop