

**EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2017**

I greet you today in the name of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ who gave us the Great Commission to “go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). From the very beginning, action words described the church “go” into the world and “make” disciples. So it makes sense, that a generation after that Great Commission was given, Paul would remind himself and the followers of Jesus living in Philippi of the need to keep moving forward: “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:13-14 NLT) We gather together this week to worship and celebrate a God who is still at work in this world he created. Do you believe that? He is still on mission to redeem his creation and he calls us to join him on that mission. I am thankful and excited to serve as the Bishop of a denomination that is willing to step out in faith and make significant changes to the way we “do denomination” in order to more efficiently and effectively “Press On” toward that to which God calls us.

In 2015 I asked the question: “What if National Conference Accomplished Something Better?” Our denominational forefathers thought it was a good thing to conference. For them “conference” was a verb more than an institution. The purpose of such gatherings, for Albright’s brethren, was important to advancing the Good News about Jesus. The Evangelical Association emerged onto the pages of history with a vibrant passion for lost souls and a powerful message to proclaim to the world. I’ve wondered how it would feel to leave Conference and sense that we’re ready to engage our communities with fresh and passionate opportunities to live out the Gospel? We’re going to take a step in that direction this year. If you’ve been coming to Conference for a long time you’ll notice some differences. When I gave the first draft of the agenda to Brenda she said “It looks so relaxed!” I responded, “Maybe for you!” Yes, there is business that needs to be done; but we’re keeping it as short as is reasonable and we’re accomplishing it in different formats. We’ve provided more time to spend time talking together as every meal break is now 90 minutes. There is the “*Kingdom & Community Experience*” on Thursday afternoon. This is a brand new learning experience in which we will interactively discover the help and resources our communities and denominational personnel can provide to a local EC Church in order to be healthy and impact its community with the Gospel. Each day there will be special times of worship and celebration. During tonight’s service we will celebrate a brand new EC National Conference: the Evangelical Congregational Church of Latin America. That didn’t look like a possibility too many years ago, but God has been and continues to be at work in his church! I offer a special welcome to these precious brothers and sisters who are with us now and look forward to July when Randy Sizemore and I will celebrate the EC Church of Latin America in Latin America. Friday morning we will wrap up by celebrating all that God is doing in the lives of those he calls into his service.

Over the past few years we have rightly spent a lot of time looking at our denomination’s structure; but that’s finished! Now we direct our focus and energy at the mission. “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

I trust that this year you will be challenged, encouraged, and strengthened as we spend time together hearing Kingdom stories, learning together by gaining vital insights into Kingdom work, worshiping our great God and celebrating what God is doing in and through the Evangelical Congregational Church; and he is doing a lot!

As you know, we entered that new world on July 1, 2016. I have to admit that while it looked good on paper, the theory was sound; I find great encouragement in seeing it being lived out in the lives of our leaders, districts, congregations, and pastors. I am pleased to tell you that I believe we have made significant progress toward fully implementing the vision we have for the new Evangelical Congregational Church polity.

I have written a lot about relationships over the past few years. Part of that is to emphasize the connectional aspect of who we are as the EC Church, but more importantly because the more time I spend in leadership the more clearly I see the need for healthy relationships; teamwork. I may be the one standing here right now, as the Bishop of the church, but there is absolutely no way I or anyone can lead without a team to help carry the load. I am pleased to work alongside our Executive Director and Associates; Kevin Henry, Jeff Byerly, Les Cool, Gary Kuehner, and Randy Sizemore; and our Conference Secretary, Kirk Marks as we have launched new communities, committees, and teams which not only apply polity to real life, but more importantly real ministry. They are a dedicated and faithful team of leaders who will serve the Lord and the church well. Each one has given many hours to envisioning how they can enhance the ministry of our local congregations. The Church Center staff, the Global Ministries office, the Finance Office, and administrative offices are all vital parts of the team. On a special note, this is Brenda Long's last National Conference as a full-time employee. She has served the Evangelical Congregational Church for 43 years and over that time has worked for 7 bishops. Beginning in October she will still be around Church Center, apparently she can't stop "cold-turkey," but she will scale back to part-time status, working only about two days a week. We owe Brenda a great debt of gratitude. Every year I say "thank you" to Jodi Earhart, my Administrative Assistant; and I'll do that again now. She really is a great help in so many aspects of my ministry as bishop. Of course, the most precious relationship I have, other than with the Lord, is my wife Gloria. Have you ever had the experience of knowing somebody for most of your life, but being continually amazed by them? I am continually amazed at how she balances a very full professional career, being a grandmother to nine, and being my greatest supporter and encourager. She continues to graciously deal with the demands on my time and attention. I love her so much.

I believe that by now you have heard me say that our denomination is not what church scholars would call a "classic" denomination. Yes, we have a polity, "the way we do things around here"; but I can tell you one of the great things about the "non-classic" E.C. denomination is that we are a connectional church – our strength is in our relationships. I believe that as we "Press On" in our new structure we experience positive and healthy relationships, which will result in healthy ministry.

Prior to its implementation, I said that the success of our structure would greatly depend on the work of our District Field Directors. At the close of last year's Conference I called each of them forward as we installed them and prayed for them. I am very pleased to tell you that our District Field Directors are doing an outstanding job of connecting with our pastors and churches within their districts, and in turn helping those pastors and churches to connect with each other. There are all kinds of wonderful stories coming out of our churches and districts. Praise the Lord! Many of our districts have groups of pastors who meet regularly together for prayer. I hope I don't have to tell you how significant that is. Prayer is the foundation, our connection to the power of God in his Holy Spirit. There is something powerful that happens when our pastors come together to seek God's face and direction in prayer. Praise the Lord for these prayer gatherings! I believe there is also an increase in the number of pastors who are meeting together for fellowship, mutual encouragement, and study. A few of our pastoral groups are reading and discussing books regarding pastoral life and ministry. As pastors and lay leaders interact more with each other through the district, we're hearing of greater cooperation between local congregations. There are dreams of cooperative ministries and service opportunities being shared, planned, and carried out. During the first few months of 2017 we have experienced some unusual and urgent needs in a number of our pastoral families and congregations. While those were difficult times none of us want to relive, in each situation, neighboring pastors have rallied to the call of a District Field Director to help their neighboring brothers and sisters. There was no arm twisting required; in fact, in some instances pastors called us to ask what they could do before we had a chance to figure it out. I am proud to be the Bishop of a denomination that cares about and for each other; that responds to needs and steps up to help in real and practical ways. Thank you for being servant leaders.

All that said, I must remind us that our pastors are often under spiritual attack. This year, our Prayer Mobilization Team will be facilitating prayer times this evening and tomorrow afternoon focusing on the need to support our pastors in prayer. They will be using the recently updated book *"Pastors at Greater Risk"* by H.B. London and Neil Wiseman, as a resource. As the book states "Some of today's pastors are relatively untroubled but need help in releasing the pressure inherent in ministry to others. Others are close to running on empty, both spiritually and emotionally." We all must pray, respond, and help.

This is another important aspect of districts – pastoral health (spiritual, emotional, and physical). Let me share two concerns I have for our pastors. One of my concerns is for the pastor who thinks he can do it all and do it all by himself. That is not a healthy view of ministry. Did it ever occur to you that as great a leader as the Apostle Paul was, he was never alone? I think the Lord knew something both about Paul and about partnership in ministry. My second concern is best illustrated by my iPhone. This wonderful piece of technology contains maps, notes, the Conference Journal, music (over 60 albums), the Bible, text messaging, email, Facebook, Twitter, and all kinds of apps for the latest news, sports, and weather. It also works as a phone. My concern is that having one of these means our pastors never unplug; rarely have the opportunity to truly be “off.” Pastoral ministry has always been a 24/7 calling – but never before have we been so available to anyone and everyone all the time. We cannot turn the clock back, but friends, we must be aware of the impact this has on our spouses and families, and on our own health and wellbeing.

Speaking of pastors and churches, as you know, last year we experienced a record number of pastoral retirements and changes. The work of stationing stretched way beyond the traditional “stationing season.” I held lots of conversations with and spent much time in prayer for Fern Trinity EC Church, Cranberry, Pennsylvania and Cottage Grove EC Church, Akron, Ohio long after we sang the closing song of National Conference. I am thankful, today, that Rev. Shawn Morgan, a pastor credentialed with the Church of God, Anderson, began his service at Fern Trinity as an Approved Elder in October and in March, Bill White, who will appear before us for Approved Pastor status, became the pastor of Cottage Grove. I am especially thankful for Lay Delegates, Dale Kaber at Fern, and Rick Glauthier at Cottage Grove, for their support of the Evangelical Congregational Church while going well beyond the call of duty in these stationing situations.

I am pleased to tell you that we have not experienced a second wave of baby-boomer retirements this year. You may think that translates into an easy year for the Stationing Committee. While the situation was very different from last year, it was no less challenging. Stationing bi-vocational pastors to churches is a very complicated endeavor. Generally, a bi-vocational pastor and family cannot move away from a secular job(s) in order to live closer to a part-time church; so the “pool” of available pastors living within a “reasonable commute” is small right from the start. We talked with twenty (20) different pastors, both EC and non-EC, about four open part-time churches and have only been able to schedule two interviews. In addition, we have talked with congregational leaders about forming a partnership or relationship with other nearby congregations with no success. Stationing Elder Dave Carr, Pastor of Grace EC Church, Afolkey, IL, has pointed out to the Stationing Committee “God loves and blesses small churches. Unfortunately, the skyrocketing cost of education and health insurance has saddled both pastors and small churches with weights too heavy to bear.”

There is a clear need for bi-vocational pastors. Please hear me when I say bi-vocational pastors are not part-time pastors. They are not half-pastors or pastors “sort of.” That would be like calling someone a “part-time Christian” or “sort-of a Christian.” They are men who have heard and responded to the call of God to pastoral ministry, and I don’t believe God calls anybody to anything “part-time.”

Many church experts believe that the need for bi-vocational pastors will increase as our culture changes and develops a new perspective of its relationship with churches and other not-for-profit organizations. Let me give you two quick examples of what I mean: As government looks for more and more tax dollars, the day may come when churches will be expected to pay their fair share for community services through real estate taxes. Think about how that would impact your church budget. Probably even sooner, pastors may lose the tax advantage of the “housing allowance.” Again, that will impact both the church’s budget as well as the pastor’s personal budget. It may not be too far off in the 21st Century when “full-time vocational pastor” becomes a minority and bi-vocational pastors are the norm.

If you took the time to read the Ministerial Development Community’s “Profile of an EC Pastor”, which I endorse, you will note that it makes no reference to vocational or bi-vocational pastors. We need them all and this is our expectation for any and every pastor holding EC credentials. Please read this “Profile of an EC Pastor” document. The intent is that it be added to the other documents in the Appendix to the National Conference Journal. What we’re seeing developed in the documents contained in the Appendix is really a description of who we are as the EC Church, our EC ethos.

None of this is to say we should give up. Quite the opposite – the call of God is for us to “Press On” in doing his Kingdom work. I understand that small congregations want to continue on in ministry. In fact, small congregations offer unique opportunities because they are small. But no church, large or small, can continue to “do church” the way we always have. We serve a creative God and I think he expects his church to be creative in meeting the needs of ministry in the 21st Century. The complications of continuing to do things the way we’ve always done them are simply easier to see and become obvious more quickly in small congregations. It doesn’t matter how large or small our congregation is, none of us can simply continue as we have in past generations simply because that’s what makes us comfortable and happy. As Ed Stetzer has written “The Great Nostalgia is not the Great Commission.” Each of our congregations must do the hard work of discovering how to contextualize the message of Jesus in the language and culture in which we minister whether that is a city in the rust-belt of Ohio and Pennsylvania, the mountains of Kentucky, or rural Illinois. Paul wrote “Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on...” (Philippians 3:13) It does not mean that all small churches must close; but it does mean that all our churches will need to be open to alternate opportunities which may come through mergers, partnerships, other connections, and cooperative district ministries. I believe the answers will be found in these and in other creative answers yet to be identified. Working through these answers will require much faith on the part of pastors, congregational leaders, members, and denominational leadership. There is a world of exciting (and yes, frightening) possibilities – the question is: do we simply say “This is my church; I like it this way, leave me alone” or are we willing to faithfully explore new ways to “do church” together in the coming years?

My friends, it’s normal for us to be focused on the life and work of our local congregations; the needs and opportunities. After all, each one of us here is vitally involved in the ministries, services, and programs of a local congregation. You are important members of that local gathering of Jesus followers. As Bishop, I am thankful for your involvement in your congregation. You should be concerned with what is and is not happening in your church and community. That’s a good thing. But never forget that what we do in our local churches scattered around the countryside or in suburban developments, in little towns and large cities; all of our service and ministry has consequences that have a wide and eternal impact. We are sent people; yet a connectional church. I am thankful and hopeful for the church – the people of God as we continue to invest in our pastors and lay leaders; in relationships, so that the Evangelical Congregational Church is known around the world as a warm, dynamic, loving community of God’s people that will penetrate culture and claim it for Christ in all the various forms it will take in the years to come.

Let me take an extra moment or two to tell you how excited I am to have served as an assessor at our Pastoral Assessment Center, led by Kirk Marks, as Director. This year was one of the best Assessment Centers I have ever been a part of. Some of that was due to the camaraderie and unity of the team of assessors. They truly worked well together. Then too, there are the men and women who were assessed this year. They were a tremendous group of people who deeply love the Lord and want to serve him in their lives. I don’t know if I can recall a more gifted group of assesseees. If these are the quality of pastors and wives the Lord is bringing to the Evangelical Congregational Church, we have a great future in becoming the movement of God so many of us have longed and prayed for.

As I talk with them, the connectional aspect of denominational life comes shining through. These are people whose lives have been impacted by camping ministries. They are individuals with a teachable spirit, who want to be life-long learners. As Bishop, I am thankful for our affiliated camping ministries and Evangelical Seminary. While we, as a National Conference, have decided to withdraw mandatory funding of the ministries, please hear me when I say they need our regular support; prayer, encouragement, and financial support. They need an on-going relationship with each and every one of our congregations. Our congregations alike need an on-going relationship with our camps and seminary. I know these affiliates want to know how they can help you and they’re each developing ministries to help our local churches. When they contact you, please be open and listen; the needs and the opportunities to continue our vital partnerships are great.

My friends, we live at a critical time in our nation and the world. If the church is going to impact our neighborhoods with the Good News about Jesus we must stop playing defense. It's time to play offense – to “Press On” – to live into the mission we are created for. Stop worrying and get to work.

I recently stayed at a Hyatt Hotel and noticed a poster mounted on the inside of the elevator door; it said “You’ve come too far to settle now.” Pastors – how would you apply that to your ministry? What is the call you answered? Don’t settle for something or anything else. This is a hard question: Have you really put in all the time and effort, the sacrifice, so that you could be doing what you’re doing now? “Press On.” Lay delegates, why was your church started? Have the generations who have preceded you given so much just so your congregation could be where it is and doing what it’s doing today? Another hard question: Would anybody in your community miss it if your church closed this year?

When Spain led the world in the 15th Century, their coins were embossed with this motto: “Ne Plus Ultra” – “Nothing Further.” That signified there was no greater empire in the world; Spain was the ultimate in all the world. Then a sailor named Christopher Columbus and a bunch of other explorers discovered the world was much larger than they realized. Spain changed the motto on their coins to “Plus Ultra” – “More Beyond.” Too many pastors, lay leaders, and entire congregations have adopted the motto “Nothing Further”; not out of a sense of pride but of resignation. Paul writes there’s “More Beyond.” “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:13-14 NLT) I may not be the best church historian, but I think the church was doing very well, thank you, in the time before when someone built a building and stuck a pointy thing on the roof and called it a steeple. My friends we all know it – there is so much more than maintaining a building. Alan Roxburgh writes, in *“Structured For Mission”*, “The crisis confronting denominations is one of imagination.” I believe that is true of denominations and of local congregations. Each one of us must envision the “More Beyond” that is all around us. As a denomination, we must cultivate space for learning communities, partnerships, and experimentation in the many contexts in which we minister and then communicate and celebrate what we are learning.

A few months ago when I told someone that I had decided that the theme of this year’s National Conference would be “Press On” they asked what that meant. After all, he noted, “Press On” could be to “go forward.” But then he said it could also be to push the “on” button. Which one was it? My response was “yes.” Albright’s people have come a long way; but there is a lot in front of us; so much yet to do. As Jesus said, the grain fields are white, ready for harvest. But it is also true that too many Christians and, therefore, congregations seem to have pressed the “pause” button.

When you read the accounts of worship in both the Old and New Testaments, do you get a sense that the “pause” button was part of their worship experience? How do you do worship in your church? When you read the accounts of the early church’s interaction with their neighbors, their culture, does it look like they have any sense of taking a “pause” in ministry? Surveys indicate that 20% of people in the United States attend church regularly (whatever that means today). 20% don’t attend church, but say they do; 20% do not attend but say they would attend with a friend if invited; 40% aren’t interested (yet). Yet another study reports that the average attendee invites someone to church once every 36 years! Don’t “pause” – “Press On”! You’ve read the surveys that say 80% of unchurched people would engage in a faith conversation if their friend wanted to talk about it. Sounds like good news! Until we learn that 70% of the unchurched reported that no one had ever engaged them in a faith conversation. When did we push the “pause” button on relational evangelism? Check out the book *“God Space”* and “Press On” in conversation. I’m sure you could find information illustrating the needs for the church to “Press On” in just about any area of ministry, service, and outreach. So “Press On”!

The Evangelical Congregational Church was founded on a missional distinctive – to reach the unreached; and at that time there were lots and lots of German speaking people that no one was reaching nor serving. The context was not institutional but relational. The Evangelical Congregational Church was founded out of passion; passion for Jesus and for the people who needed the Good News about Jesus.

Please note: our goal is not to teach people *about* Jesus. Bible knowledge is wonderful; but Jesus did not conquer sin and death so I could win a game of Bible trivia. Unfortunately, we've raised up a generation of people who know *about* Jesus but don't really know him personally, intimately. Do you realize that 80% of religiously unaffiliated Americans – a group now known as the “nones” say they were raised with a religious affiliation; they heard the lessons and it didn't matter. The mission is not sin management. We've all tried and failed at getting someone, even ourselves, to stop doing something; sin a little less tomorrow and then a little less the next day, and so on. It's not even about the “get-out-of-hell free card” so many people are interested in. We've bought into all kinds of programs focused on those kinds of things and what have we achieved? – a bunch of burnt out, hurt, and frustrated pastors and people. Programs recruit people to do something; and that's not bad; but so often it's simply doing something for our institution, our church. The mission is focused on *being* something; a devoted disciple of Jesus.

Jesus said on numerous occasions that the Kingdom was “near” or “here.” That confused a lot of his listeners. Many were looking for a kingdom, like that of David, which would exercise political power and authority; and also displace those nasty Romans in the process. Pilate struggled with the concept of Christ's kingship and Kingdom. Jesus gives us more insight into Kingdom when he taught the disciples how to pray; “May your Kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Disciple-making is essentially about following, implementing, actively living out the will of God in every aspect of our lives.

Kingdom ministry is so much more than what we have traditionally understood as the work of the church. Church-work is focused on making a particular church, my church, bigger. That's not a bad thing. I would love to report that all of our EC congregations are growing in the number of attendees. But I also understand that the number of people sitting in the sanctuary is not the same as the number who are actively living out the will of God in their daily lives.

Our mission is one that is lived out in our employment, lived out in real ways in our homes and family relationships, a practical part of our recreational and social life. It is so much more than what I know or do – it is who I am – a disciple of Jesus. We are called to “Press On” in living out God's eternal Kingdom principles here in a broken, hurting, and lost world. We are called to live out the transformational, redemptive mission of God in a lost and hurting world – making disciples!

In order to become a disciple-making movement of God we must take the long view. This does not happen quickly. It means we must invest ourselves into the lives of others. Think about it, much of the disciples' learning came out of conversations with Jesus and the experiences they shared as they did life together. I would love to give you the easy fix but it doesn't exist. Unfortunately, we live in an age of easy steps: three characteristics of effective churches, five steps to church growth, four steps to happy living, and six fundamentals for the future. I know what it's like to want my church to grow and I want it to happen this Sunday. I really do understand the tyranny of attendance figures. Men tend to be fixers; just give me duct tape and WD-40 and I'll make it work. I really wish Kingdom work, disciple-making, was that quick and easy; they're not. But there is no greater calling than the one Jesus gives us – to “go and make disciples.” Therefore, “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus, is calling us.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

In Christ's Service,



Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop