

# EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

## Bulgaria (and the need for accessible learning)

I'm sorry I will not be with you in person for this conference. I will be teaching leadership to a network of church planters in southern Bulgaria, near the Turkish border, where Islam is well funded and very visible, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is corrupt and dying, and an evangelical voice has been largely missing or anemic. The leader of this network is Hari Atanasov; he and his wife Penka are highly gifted artists; they planted a church in Kurdjli, the largest city in the region, largely through funding received by the selling of their artwork. My congregation in Lititz, Pennsylvania, is their sister, which is why I have been asked to do some teaching there.

We Protestant speaks much of the "priesthood of all believers." The Bulgarians practice it. These church planters are all untrained, unprofessional, unprepared... except for the oversight provided by my friend Hari (who also lacks a formal theological education) and the occasional seminars we have provided to them online and through visits like these. There was a time when the best an overseas church leader could hope for was enough money to move to the US, enroll in seminary, and return home years later with the training to lead a church, denomination, or Bible school. So I am very grateful for the tools we now have to make education accessible to leaders in Bulgaria.

And in Arizona, Michigan, Florida, Philadelphia, and Timbuktu. I've been telling you from nearly the beginning of my tenure as president of Evangelical that we were moving more and more intentionally online, and we have been. Over the past five years in particular we improved our technology infrastructure, trained our faculty, leased our learning platforms, and learned new tricks every step of the way... to the point where, in 2018, we can finally make a complete master's degree program available fully online. And two more to go this fall! Our Master of Arts (Bible) was launched in January (our fifth new program in 5 years!) and can be taken onground at Myerstown or entirely online (or a mixture of both). Assuming we win approval from our accreditor, our MDiv and MA in Ministry will both be offered the same way beginning this fall.

Yes, we can improve student enrollment this way, and that truly matters for our long-term sustainability. But this is about more than numbers; it is about mission. If we truly believe in what we're doing, then we'll make it available to those who need it most. And so we are doing.

This will be my first trip to Bulgaria, but I've been privileged to visit some other foreign countries over the years, and each one has taught me something important for what we do now at Evangelical.

## Spain (and the need for ongoing spiritual formation)

Last summer the Board of Trustees granted me a month off to travel to Spain and walk the Camino de Santiago (the "Way of St. James"). The Camino is a thousand-year-old spiritual pilgrimage route, or a collection of routes, ending in Santiago, where the relics of the Apostle James are said to be housed in the cathedral there. (As an historian, I can assure you that they're not, but the thousands of people who flock to see them think otherwise.) I walked the Camino, not for James, but for me and Jesus to have a month-long conversation without the distraction of being a president, professor, or preacher, an experience I have never had in my entire adult life.

It was an extraordinary experience, one that sharpened every part of me. As an historian, I appreciated the opportunity to worship in 800-year-old village churches, and to tread in ancient paths pounded six feet below ground level by millions of pilgrim feet over so many centuries. The art-lover in me delighted in the free-standing sculpture so ubiquitous in Spain, the Leonardo da Vincis hanging incongruously in a cathedral chapel, the stained glass windows that transformed light into color and story, and the Gaudi-designed architecture. My middle-aged muscles strained and tendons cracked at the physical ordeal I asked my body to undertake, so that I limped, more than walked, across the country, and yet I returned in the best physical shape I've been in for years.

It was my soul that was restored the most. I spent much of each day praying through the "Spiritual Exercises," an intense 30-day devotional experience created by Ignatius of Loyola of Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and still utilized to this day by the Jesuits and a burgeoning group of Protestants. We actually have a certificate program at the Seminary now to teach people how to guide others through this amazing spiritual experience of walking with Jesus in prayer from the manger to the tomb, becoming one with him in his death and resurrection. Jesus walked with me from Pamplona to Santiago, over 400 miles, and was laughing with joyful abandon much of the time.

I was already committed to spiritual formation. I am a pastor in my 33<sup>rd</sup> year of ministry. I am a trained spiritual director. I know how important it is to cultivate the spirit. And yet my time with Jesus in Spain reminded me how essential it is that seminary not be merely an academic experience. It is never enough to simply know the Bible, or doctrine, or how to preach, or how to do anything... as important as they are. As the revivalists of the Great Awakening reminded me, unless one is converted and transformed, we truly have nothing to say that has power or credibility.

And so we are building spiritual formation longitudinally into our ministry training—beginning this fall, all students in those programs will spend at least four semesters participating in spiritual formation groups...not only nurturing their own spiritual lives, together, as the body of Christ, but also learning how to do the same in their own ministry contexts. Moreover, as I have reported to you in previous years, we have developed our own MA in Spiritual Formation and Direction to provide specialized training for those who would lead spiritual formation, discipleship, men's, women's, youth, or Christian education ministries within or outside the congregation. We even have a specialized certificate for those who wish to be trained as evangelical spiritual directors, and have joined a national network of other evangelical institutions who provide such training.

### Singapore (and the need for innovative doctoral education)

Spain wasn't the only foreign country in which I had a profound spiritual experience; I went to a pastors' conference in Singapore in 2004 and came home a different man. I think God uses unfamiliar settings to get my attention, spiritually, and I'm glad he does! I was there somewhat unwillingly—the doctoral program I was in at the time required an international experience and a friend invited me to go to Singapore with him. The last thing I needed was another conference! I thought... and, indeed, the conference itself was not all that helpful, but the Holy Spirit was there. So it became a profound growing experience for me, one that I have wished for others to enjoy.

In February we announced that we were launching a creative Doctor of Theology (ThD) program this fall, one that we borrowed from LaSalle University and reshaped for our own context. I won't give you all the marketing pitch here (check out the program webpage at [www.evangelical.edu/thd](http://www.evangelical.edu/thd) though!), except to say that it's really struck a nerve. We've been amazed at the quantity and quality of inquiries we've received for this program. It's too early at the writing of this to say how many students we'll have this fall but it seems safe to assume that we'll have a full cohort.

We are not doing doctoral education just to brag about having a doctoral program. I have held off on creating one for these because there are many good DMin and PhD programs out there. Unless we had something distinctive to offer we weren't going to add to a crowded field. Well, we DO have something distinctive to offer! It's partly that the program is a ThD, instead of the usual options. It's about the same credit load and duration as a DMin program but with deeper theological reflection, and more individualized, customizable learning. And it's designed for ministry practitioners, not for pure research or purely academic scholarship, like a PhD. We want to make ministry better. And this program will go a long way toward fulfilling that objective.

### The Czech Republic (and the need for leadership in dark times)

In 2009 I had the opportunity to visit Prague to attend the annual conference of the International Leadership Association. I was there with students and other faculty from the university at which I used to serve. I did a brief presentation and assiduously attended the conference seminars, since the school had invested a fair amount for me to participate there, but once again found that what happened outside of the conference sessions was more significant than what was going on inside.

While in the country, I traveled east to the site of the Nazi's Theresienstadt concentration camp, a very dark place even five decades after its last use. I saw with my own eyes the evil that leadership is capable of, if immoral, narcissistic, inhumane, or even demonic. I then traveled west to the German city of Dresden, which was firebombed by the Allied powers over a weekend in 1945, with the loss of perhaps 50,000 civilian lives. In Dresden I saw with my own eyes what damage even "good" leadership is capable of, when in conflict with evil. I then traveled into the heart of Prague as well, to visit the Bethlehem Chapel, where Jan Hus once preached reform. In return, the spiritual descendants of those set aflame as human torches in Nero's gardens burned to death their brother in Christ. And so I saw what evil even "Christian" leadership is capable of in pursuit of power.

And, then, late in our last night in Prague, a German tourist dropped to the sidewalk with a heart attack after a river cruise we had enjoyed together. I saw two of our female students make a beeline in heels to a hospital two blocks away to get an ambulance. I saw one of my faculty colleagues, a nursing professor, instantly begin CPR, joined soon by a British nurse who happened to be walking by. I saw another faculty colleague, a Korean who spoke a bit of

German, start translating information from the wife of the ill tourist, and another student stepped forward to translate English into French, so a French-speaking African doctor could not only know what to do but also translate into Czech for the ambulance crew that had arrived. Whew! I saw a Czech EMT working feverishly for a solid hour, trying anything she could, to keep that man's heart beating. When she ran out of options, there was no one left but her, my Korean friend, myself, and a new widow to whom we had to break very bad news in our awkward cacophony of languages. The EMT looked at us curiously, and with very broken English asked, "You his friends?" No, we don't know him. We stayed because God loves him. And in that dark moment on a dark night in a dark city I saw leadership that cares about what matters, even when we're not always "successful."

We have taught leadership at Evangelical for 65 years—to pastors, other church staff positions, parachurch leaders, business people, nonprofit leaders, teachers, and therapists. There is no death of leadership in the world; leadership is happening all around us, for good or ill. What is needed is leadership with a deep heart, a fresh imagination, a spiritual passion, and eyes to see in the dark.

### Italy (and the need for relationship)

I was sent to Rome in early 2008 to try to establish a partnership with a university there, one in which we could send business students back and forth between our countries, so as to gain a broader international exposure. A faculty colleague and I taught leadership to some of the students at the Italian university for a week, and negotiated with the head of the department the rest of the time. On the last day, there was a little time for some sightseeing—two Caravaggio paintings hanging in the church of Santa Maria de Popolo and an hour or so gawking at St. Peter's Basilica.

The trip was unsuccessful. It turned out that our Italian counterpart was primarily interested in financial aggrandizement for himself, not a relationship between the two institutions. Some of his other behavior was objectionable too. We returned home disappointed and without an agreement, but aware that not all of these collaboration efforts work out. Fortunately, we had established many other partnerships in other parts of the world, some closer to home, and most of them had served us well and served our students even better, which was what mattered most.

We seek partnerships at Evangelical as well...sometimes unsuccessfully and sometimes with happy results. We're in some conversations now, which we may be able to talk about publicly by the time conference rolls around. Even if not, we ask your prayers for wisdom as we discern what God has in store for Evangelical. We have a great blessing in that our farsighted Board of Trustees is far more concerned about sustaining the mission of the seminary than any aspect of its container. It matters less to us what name is out front, or where the "front" is, than that we can continue to provide a relevant, Christ-centered, Bible-based education to serve the Church and the world.

The most important relationship we have is with you, the Evangelical Congregational Church. I came to you last May and assured you that we intended to sustain that relationship in the years ahead, even though the forms of it have been changing. Bishop Hill said much the same thing in return. That renewed commitment has been articulated in recent months in a revised covenant between seminary and denomination, written by the bishop and myself. It has the endorsement of our board and awaits your as well, which I trust you will provide at this conference. We aim to remain the "EC Seminary" in perpetuity, even as we continue to serve a wider constituency.

## Myerstown (and the need for hope)

I've been fortunate to visit these countries and others beside. I have been to Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town, and seen the jail cell that once held Nelson Mandela, and the salt mines at which he once worked as a prisoner. And then, when he was released, we all saw what reconciling leadership could do. I've taught Asian leaders in Bangkok. I've been multiple times to London, and other sites in Great Britain where God did great things, and sites where leaders did evil things.

Today I do not write from a foreign land; I am sitting in my office in Myerstown as I finish this report. There's little that's exotic here—no strange languages, except, perhaps, from our Amish neighbors. No historical sites, except, perhaps, for the building in which I sit. No great works of art, except, perhaps, for the magnificent tree in the front lawn of our campus. There are no statues, memorial plaques, grand hotels, or great cathedrals here.

No, the great delight of Myerstown is not in the externals; it is that God is here...the God who is at work in this generation in new and wonderful ways, the God who wants to be known—intimately, passionately, transformatively—and the God who wants to be seen, in all our waking and unawake moments, with eyes both physical and spiritual. So we will keep showing people how to see him, know him, and understand him, and you please keep doing the same in your churches. And sooner or later, He will be glorified in Bulgaria, Spain, Singapore, Prague, Rome, and Myerstown... and every nation, city, town, and village we represent or serve, all over this great big broken world.

Gratefully,

***Dr. Tony Blair, President***

### AN ENDURING COVENANT

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
AND  
EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Evangelical Theological Seminary was founded by the Evangelical Congregational Church in 1953 out of a vision to train clergy for service in the denomination. Over the years the Seminary has broadened the scope of its mission to include many other broadly evangelical constituencies and other forms of preparation for service to the Church and the world, all with the support and encouragement of the Church. The funding relationship between the Church and Seminary has been changed, as has the Evangelical Congregational composition of the Seminary's board of trustees. Yet the vital relationship between the Seminary and the Church continues enthusiastically today, as delineated and affirmed in this Enduring Covenant.

The Church and Seminary agree that the curriculum, programs, marketing, and operations of Evangelical Seminary are and shall remain designed to promote growth and development in accordance with these shared core values:

- To establish students in the knowledge of God's inspired word, and to teach competency in its interpretation, proclamation, and application in the contemporary world
- To exhibit and model academic excellence in the teaching and learning of all disciplines in the seminary curriculum.

- To promote the process of spiritual formation for every student so that their relationship with the living Christ permeates their character, attitude, and ministry
- To help students evaluate and grow in their relationship skills, commitments, accountability, and Christ-likeness within their marriages, families, friendships, congregations, and communities
- To develop dynamic, creative, and Spirit-filled leaders who will serve Christ and the Church with integrity and skill while equipping others to do the same
- To cultivate in students a passion and ability to take Christ's redemptive work to a lost world by proclaiming the good news of salvation, helping believers grow and mature in the faith and acting to alleviate human suffering and injustice
- To create in students an awareness, sensitivity, and active commitment to the global nature of the mission and ministry of the church.

In order to maintain and continue this vital relationship, the Evangelical Congregational Church and Evangelical Seminary commit to the following components of this Enduring Covenant. The Evangelical Congregational Church will:

1. Regard Evangelical Seminary as the preferred institution of higher education for the training of Evangelical Congregational pastors, missionaries, specialized ministers, and other vocations for which the Seminary provides training and support.
2. Encourage financial support for the Seminary by promoting an awareness that theological education is the responsibility of the whole Church.
3. Encourage ECC member congregations to support the work of the Seminary by permitting Seminary representatives to present the ministry of the Seminary in their local services and programs.
4. Encourage ECC member congregations to support the Seminary financially by including the Seminary's "Fund for Students" in their budget and supporting capital fund drives and/or other special gifts/appeals.
5. Encourage local churches and Districts to consider creating scholarship funds for students from their church/Region.
6. Support the work of the Evangelical Congregational Studies Center of Evangelical Seminary.

Evangelical Seminary will:

1. Maintain an educational and spiritual environment consistent with the Core Values and Theological Commitments of Evangelical Theological Seminary and the Discipline of the Evangelical Congregational Church.
2. Grant to the Evangelical Congregational Church, in keeping with the Seminary's By-laws, that the Bishop of the Church shall be a voting member of the Board of Trustees.
3. Consult with ECC leadership when hiring key faculty and staff positions.
4. Make available on a regular basis, through the Center for EC Studies, courses in ECC theology, history and polity, along with other offerings that will provide ongoing support to EC denominational leaders, pastors, and laity.
5. Provide regular reports on the Seminary to the ECC National Conference, denominational leaders, pastors, and other leaders.

The Evangelical Congregational Church and Evangelical Seminary will both:

1. Keep open lines of communication with the Seminary to share concerns and celebrate what the Lord is doing in each other's ministries.
2. Share personnel, resources and facilities when possible and appropriate in order to further the mission of the Church and Seminary.

3. Solicit recommendations from the Church in identifying qualified candidates to be considered for membership on the Seminary's Board of Trustees.

Revision approved by the Evangelical Seminary Board of Trustees, February, 2018, and the National Conference of the Evangelical Congregational Church, May, 2018.