

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2019

I greet you today in the wonderful name of Jesus. I'm sure you have other places you could be and other things you could be doing during these three days at the end of May. I, on the other hand, didn't really have anything else to do so here I am. You're here, I'm here, but the most important person required is our God's Holy Spirit. I am thankful to know that many of you have joined with me over the past month to ask God's Spirit to show up in a special way during these days of National Conference. As you have heard me say in the pre-conference meetings, we have a lot to accomplish during our time for denominational business. But did you realize that we only spend about 6 ½ hours in business and approximately 7 hours in worship? Is doing business necessary? Yes. Is it important? (We better not put that question to a vote.) Worship, on the other hand, is both necessary and important. We must worship the One who created us, who redeemed us, saved us from the power of sin and death, who sustains and guides us. Worshipers, is WHO WE ARE. Praise God for the presence of his Holy Spirit with us throughout this time of National Conference because if he wouldn't be here, there would be no need for us to be here either. But he is here and for that I am deeply grateful. I pray that as we begin this afternoon and every moment of this National Conference and as long as the Lord gives us breath, we will rejoice in the presence of his Holy Spirit.

You've probably heard me say it before: it doesn't take much time reading or watching the news to see that our world is a mess. We've all heard that we are living in a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Christendom world. We live in a culture that sees Christianity as, at best, irrelevant, and at worst dangerous. Some have speculated that Christians today have much in common with the Hebrew people of the Old Testament or the church seen in the book of Acts; we are people living in exile, disbursed to live in a foreign land. There is validity in those expressions of our current experience. But one thing we cannot do is forget WHO WE ARE; and that's the theme of this year's National Conference.

There is no room in following Jesus for "identity amnesia." Daniel was carried off to a foreign land, but he clearly knew who he was and more importantly who he served. So Daniel lived out that relationship as one of God's chosen people even when threatened by the authorities. The early church was scattered across the Roman Empire and beyond, yet they did not retreat from who they were or what they believed. They lived out their vital and intimate relationship with Jesus in every situation. The apostle Peter experienced misunderstanding and persecution first hand. The disciple who once denied Jesus was reinstated and would never turn back or lose confidence in his Savior and Lord. Peter reminds us, as we live out our faith, of WHO WE ARE – "...you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light." [1 Peter 2:9] We are a people with a purpose; called out of this culture to serve the King of kings so that we "can show others the goodness of God." We need to reclaim what it means to be bound with Jesus – he is our identity. We need to live out the "goodness of God" in real and practical terms. A member of a local E.C. congregation said to me that we seem to have become a culture that is addicted to anger. Find a topic, inside the church or outside the church and it won't take long to find someone who's angry about it. We are not defined by what we're angry about. We are not defined by our economic status. We are not defined by our political affiliation. If our culture doesn't see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in us; if they don't see "the goodness of God" and, instead, sees a political party or a "cause," we have missed the point of the Kingdom.

We must understand WHO WE ARE not because of who we are, but because of whose we are. Paul was making a specific point about individual sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6; but there is also wider application when he says, "You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price." We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. We are his. Our speakers during National Conference will help us to understand both WHO WE ARE and whose we are. In order to grasp a clear understanding of our identity in Christ we must also know what we believe. I get concerned that we can become overwhelmed by our post-modern, post-Christian, culture to the point that we can lose track of orthodox faith and theology. We have National Conference Rules, and yes, we take some time to work on them during one of our business sessions. We have a Discipline, and we'll take time to talk about beginning the process of amending the Discipline. But understand this statement from the Evangelical Congregational Church Discipline, found in the questions asked in the Reception of Members: "The Bible itself, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit, is our standard of Christian life and practice." Theology, good theology, biblical

theology is vital in knowing WHO WE ARE in a world that has lost its way and yet tries to squeeze us into its likeness. Biblical theology is vital, but it is also lived out in relationship. That too is WHO WE ARE. The statement in the Reception of Members is followed by “Are you willing to seek to live by the teachings of the Bible as the Spirit guides you, and will you seek to contribute to the harmony of the local church by following the rules of the *Discipline*?” There clearly is a relational aspect to WHO WE ARE. The second chapter of Acts describes the church as community. Every aspect of our theme verse of 1 Peter 2:9 is a community statement: “people,” “priests,” “nation,” “possession.” Salvation is found in personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Every individual must make that personal decision. We pray for it, preach for it, and witness to that reality. But after that “Jesus and me” moment comes a lifetime of “Jesus and we;” a life of discipleship, of wholehearted devotion to obeying our Lord’s will and way. That is WHO WE ARE.

In our effort to provide practical resources to you as our congregational leaders, tomorrow afternoon we’ll participate in another style of Educational Experience. When you registered you had the opportunity to choose three different workshops out of a list of thirteen. The Evangelical Congregational Church consists of many congregations and ministries and each one has unique concerns and needs. I believe many of these workshops can be helpful to your ministry setting. We have gathered a number of presenters from across the denomination, and a few from outside the EC Church, who will be facilitating interesting conversation and sharing information that should be of help to you. It is our hope you will be encouraged and your imagination stirred as we discover ways to raise up healthy churches proclaiming Christ to a hurting world.

WHO WE ARE does not change: we are the body of Christ; that is clearly stated in the Bible. But how we are organized is pretty much left to us. Karl Vaters in a blog post wrote, “There are only two forms of the church that ultimately matter. The universal church and the local church. Everything else is an add-on. Including buildings, furniture, styles of music, types of preaching, curriculum, and denominations.” “Denominations that support and enhance the biblical mission of the local church will thrive. Those that don’t will continue to decline.” In 2015 the members of National Conference overwhelmingly voted to make a change in how the Evangelical Congregational Church “does denomination.” Five years ago I wrote “We’re ‘Congregational,’ because that’s where the action is. We intentionally empower congregations to use their unique gifts and graces in their local setting to reach their communities with the Gospel. We are on the right track, but we need to keep moving.

When we made the structural adjustments to fulfill the commitments we made in our denominational Covenant, in keeping with our church *Discipline*, we gave ourselves permission to set aside the structural elements described in the *Discipline* in order to move from a more traditional, hierarchical structure to a much flatter structure. That change officially went into effect on July 1, 2016. Our National Ministry Team began a process of evaluation during its October 2018 meeting. Since then many individuals and groups have shared their opinions and observation of our current operational structure. A separate Strategic Evaluation Report was provided in your report packet and will be considered later today. I am pleased to tell you now that the vast majority of responses have been positive. The plan is not perfect, I didn’t expect it would be; but we are on the right track and we are making progress. The National Ministry Team unanimously adopted a motion to recommend to the National Conference that we instruct the Amendments Committee to prepare amendments to the EC *Discipline* such that the *Discipline* can be amended to formalize and approve this structure that is currently in place. The NMT further recommends that these amendments be presented to National Conference at its 2020 session for first reading so that they can be considered for final approval and *Discipline* change at the 2021 session of the National Conference.

We all understand that change is the one constant in our lives. We experienced the first “wave” of baby-boomer retirements in 2016 when the National Conference granted Superannuated status to ten pastors. This year’s wave is not quite as large; we have seven requests for Superannuation and one for Supernumerary status. These changes will bring significant change to the Allegheny District. That district made up of eight churches will see three of their pastors retire from active pastoral ministry. One of those pastors, Gary Brown will end his ministry as a full-time pastor, as well as his service as the Allegheny District Field Director and Stationing Elder. Obviously, this has made the work of the Stationing Committee even more challenging this year.

I’ve written before about the challenges to stationing. I’ll try not to take too much time recounting those issues now; it has not gotten easier. The change we are experiencing is that stationing is becoming more and more of a year-round effort. While our historical experience of pastors and churches changing on one day, July 1, continues to be the majority; more and more stationing is being done throughout the year. Some of this is the result of the amount of time stationing can take as the right pastor/church assignment is identified. We’re also seeing a trend in churches and pastors seeking to make changes away from our traditional July 1 starting date. We need to be aware of a

few concerns that come with these changes. We are experiencing a growing trend in gaps in pastoral service in a congregation. We do not always have a replacement pastor standing in line when a congregation or pastor feels it's time for different pastoral leadership. I am thankful to report to you that when these situations have occurred, retired pastors living in the area have often stepped up to help fill pulpits. In addition, pastors in the district have volunteered to provide pastoral care coverage as needed. I appreciate the willingness of the members of the body to step in and help where they can. While extremely helpful in providing care to the congregation, the work of stationing is the responsibility of the Stationing Committee members. I am very thankful for the Stationing Committee members and the churches they serve for sharing so much time and energy in accomplishing the work of stationing. When most of these men were elected to serve, the "stationing season" ran from mid-January through April. This past year we had Stationing Elders actively involved in the work of stationing in all but two months. I am thankful they have willingly served above and beyond the call of duty. Our polity calls for the Bishop to be the chairman of the Stationing Committee. I still believe that is valuable. If we are, as a National Conference, going to "raise up healthy churches proclaiming Christ to a hurting world" we must work with pastors and congregations to discover pastoral assignments where both pastor and congregation can fit and flourish. My concern is that the creep toward year-round stationing, combined with the vital importance of stationing, can take much time, attention, and energy away for the other responsibilities of serving as bishop. I have shared this concern with the Episcopacy Committee and, together, we will monitor this evolving concern. Interestingly, we are not the only group experiencing this. I have talked with other denominational leaders from similar traditions and we are all struggling to grapple with the evolution of stationing in our denominations. Obviously, it becomes a matter for significant prayer for all involved.

We are also experiencing change in our churches. The Community at New Direction in Tallmadge, Ohio officially closed on December 31, 2018. This congregation never reached the critical mass to become a chartered congregation but was able to impact the Tallmadge, Ohio community for a number of years. They voted to close when their bi-vocational Pastor Tim Ream announced that he was relocating due to the requirements of his wife's full-time job. This closure will not require an action of Conference since it was not a chartered church. But we will be asked to adopt a resolution concerning the ownership of the Tallmadge property in order for the National Conference to sell the property to another church. The Winnebago Evangelical Fellowship in Winnebago, Illinois has been on a long and interesting journey of faith. Pastor Dennis Buss resigned in September 2017. Since that time the small congregation has provided their own pulpit supply as they waited and planned on receiving another pastor. During this time an Evangelical Free congregation located about 40 minutes away planted a church in a community center just outside of Winnebago. There are strengths and weakness to renting space as a church, so an Associate Pastor in the Evangelical Free Church, who at one time had EC credentials, reached out to the Winnebago EC leaders about the possibility of sharing their facilities with the church plant. (After many conversations and emails and a trip to Illinois to meet with the leadership of all three congregations, the founding Evangelical Free Church, the church plant, and our Winnebago congregation to investigate the possibility of the two congregations merging to form a new Evangelical Free Church.) While I really don't want to lose the Winnebago congregation, when I see a group of 10 E.C. senior citizens and a group of about 30 Evangelical Free younger families talking about how, together, they can build the Kingdom, I am encouraged. So we will be asked to adopt a resolution of disaffiliation so the Winnebago church can merge and form a new congregation in the Winnebago Evangelical Fellowship building. I endorse this Kingdom action.

I am pleased to tell you that we are making significant strides in providing more online learning opportunities for our pastors. This results in a significant savings, not only in travel costs; but in the time pastors need to be away from home. This past year Kevin Henry, our Executive Director, and I conducted the First Time Appointment workshop for newly appointed pastors. This three-hour workshop was held on a Monday evening. I was the only participant present in Church Center. Everyone else was in their office or home from Pennsylvania or Ohio; yet we all could see and hear each other clearly. We have also offered the EC History & Polity course online and our newly minted course on doctrine, EC Ethos, is also offered online. Kevin Henry worked in cooperation with the Church Health Community to purchase more video equipment, which will only increase our ability to use video, whether live, online or pre-recorded, in innovative ways as we continue to provide resources to our pastors and congregations.

This coming year Kevin Henry will lead the launch of a new initiative "Financial Health, Solutions for Pastors & Churches." This is a joint effort between the EC Church, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Lilly Endowment. I encourage our pastors and wives, as well as, local congregational leaders, to participate in this unique program. You will hear more about this exciting opportunity as we approach the fall of 2019. I also encourage our Lay Delegates to read through the "Bless Your Pastor, Over 50 Creative Ways to Show God's Love for Your Pastor" brochure which can be found on the Church Center table. There's also a "40 Day Generous Life Devotional" available on the table. The brochure and devotional are free and if we give away all the copies we have, we will get more. Being a pastor has always been a

challenging vocation. But the changing face of our culture, the 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. As Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church I want to thank our pastors for their faithful service and I want to encourage you as Lay Delegates to lead your congregation in appreciating and blessing your pastor and his family.

Our disciple-making resource communities are fulfilling their calling to help connect pastors and local lay leaders to the resources available to help them in their ministries. I trust you have read each of their reports. We have a lot of resources available and almost all of them are provided by the community or associate free of charge to the local church. As members of the National Conference every one of us are connecting links between the available resources and local congregations who can use them. Each one of us talks with other pastors and lay leaders (or at least we should) and we have opportunity to tell them about the resources we want to bring to their situation. I trust you are doing that. Thank you too, to each of our District Field Directors. They are vital in the connectional life in the district and in our denomination. If your District Field Director stops in on a Sunday morning, I encourage you to take a moment to recognize him and his contribution to the work of the district. Again, this helps people in your congregation make the connection with being part of a network of congregations.

There are lots of good things going on within the Evangelical Congregational Church we can talk about. Perhaps you noted in the Treasurer's Report that the ministry fund receipts are down slightly in the second half of 2018. Now that may not sound like good news until you read on and see that one of the reasons is the "record number of churches with a recorded exemption for a sizeable building project [or] Kingdom Extension project." Praise the Lord for the desire to make room for new ministry opportunities! I have been asked to pray for a congregation who needs to identify larger facilities to replace their existing building. In a clear answer to prayer (and lots of hard work) I had the privilege of leading in the dedication of the new facilities for Bushkill Community Church. It's not too often that a former bar gets converted into a church, but it works! More churches are reaching out to the Church Health Community to ask about Natural Church Development or one of the other resources. The Kingdom Extension Community has hosted a number of online conversations via Zoom at times that are more convenient for pastors and lay people to participate. As you may know, I actually do read the quarterly reports that are submitted to Church Center. I pay attention to the numbers, but I spend more time reading and praying for the comments that are shared by the pastor. They are reporting that people are responding to the call for new leaders. Churches, large and small, tell me they are seeing new people visiting on Sunday mornings. I am thankful to be able to report that a number of our churches are experiencing growth both in the number of individuals attending worship services and in the number of people involved in some type of discipleship ministry. One church reported "some of the highest average attendance in years." A pastor praised the Lord for "...congregational life and vibrancy which is contagious and attractive." One reported he has observed people in his congregation "get beyond their comfort zones and be excited about ministry." Another said "people are coming to faith in Jesus." Friends that's what it's all about – "go and make disciples." Join me in praying for all our congregations to be actively and intentionally leading people to Jesus and for their subsequent growth in the faith into wholehearted followers of Jesus. Congregations are reporting financial stability and growth. Listen to this sentence from an email update from a pastor: "We have started making ministry fund payments, and I'm really excited about that. I have no idea how long [we] haven't been contributing. But now we are!" There are always challenges in reaching a lost and hurting world with the Gospel; but there are also great opportunities for which we must praise the Lord.

Our national and world-wide impact is expanding. Dr. Juliana Leshner, an Ordained Deaconess, recently was promoted National Director of the Veterans Administration Chaplaincy at Department of Veterans Affairs. That means she oversees all the chaplains in the VA system. Our international churches continue to expand the boundaries of their ministries. Tomoyuki and Jessica Abe are beginning a new ministry to Japanese people living in France. The EC Church – Nepal continues to expand, planting two new churches this year, even in the face of active persecution. The EC Church – India, Mexico, and Liberia are each following God-sized vision for the expansion of their ministries.

Personally, I had the opportunity to continue to travel throughout the conference and preach in many of our churches. It is always a joy to meet the members of the EC Church and spend time sharing with them in God's Word. This past year I have also had the opportunity to meet with several local ministry councils in a day-long leadership workshop. I have not made a big deal or announcement about this opportunity, but the word-of-mouth response to the workshop has been positive. Additionally, I was invited to participate in an Operation Christmas Child shoe box distribution in Lima, Peru. Operation Christmas Child is most well known for collecting gifts for children in orphanages and other at-risk areas. But shoeboxes are not an end to themselves – they are a tool, an illustration of the Good News and great joy for all people.

When people ask about my schedule, I often reply that I don't sit around bored very often. You may know that Gloria works full time as the Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent of Schools for the Eastern Lebanon County School District, as well as, the district's Human Resources Coordinator. When they worked on designing her most recent business card they couldn't fit all of that on one small card. While our schedules are full, sometimes to overflowing, we are blessed. The Episcopacy Committee, which directly reports to the National Conference, is bringing a recommendation that I receive a sabbatical this summer. I must tell you that this process has been very challenging to me personally. I am not good at taking vacation and have never taken all the vacation time available to me. I honestly enjoy what I do. (At least most days.) The thought of being out of the office for over 60 consecutive days is foreign to me. Gloria seriously questions if I will actually take a sabbatical. I know that it is good and important. I understand all the beneficial aspects of a sabbatical. I encourage pastors to do it. I've written letters encouraging congregations to give their pastor a sabbatical. But me?! We'll see, particularly when the work of stationing will stretch well into the summer season and work on amendments to the *Discipline* must begin as well. I guess we'll all discover together how that works out in real life if this National Conference endorses the Episcopacy Committee's recommendation.

Every year I say something like this, but it's absolutely true – I must express my sincere appreciation for the gifted and gracious people I have the privilege to work with. Kevin Henry, our Executive Director, our four Associates, Jeff Byerly, Les Cool, Gary Kuehner, and Ted Rathman, along with Kirk Marks, the Secretary of Conference, we have a strong and capable team that is able to enjoy each other as we work together. Shirley Long, Abi Bomgardner, and Dave King in the Finance Office are always helpful and willing to “go the extra mile” to help those who are “numbers challenged.” I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Brenda Long and Pat Wolfe who keep the administrative work moving smoothly. Thanks too to Pat Strain, the GMC presence at Church Center. Jodi Earhart, my Assistant, is a joy to work with, even as she keeps me on task, on schedule, and moving forward. Lastly, I must tell you how thankful I am for Gloria's support and love. As I've already mentioned she works full time, twelve months a year, for the Eastern Lebanon County School District. More importantly she is “gamma” to nine grandchildren. And she's still willing to travel with me on weekends, puts up with my schedule and my moods with mercy, grace, and love. We all know how important spousal cooperation is. If you don't have it, it's a knockout in our Pastoral Assessment Center. I love her deeply and I know she loves me each and every day, even after 43 years of marriage. Thank you too, for your prayers and support. You are not only members of the National Conference, but also members in the EC family; it's WHO WE ARE.

Operation Christmas Child describes their shoebox ministry this way: “The amazing journey of a shoebox gift begins with you and results in evangelism, discipleship, and multiplication.” I trust that will be a good description of our continued ministry as the Evangelical Congregational Church – an amazing journey of evangelism, discipleship, and multiplication. It's happening. In some places it's happening quickly; almost exponentially. In other locations it's slow and steady, but there is progress. Let us give thanks for the times and the places we can clearly see God at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us. To him be the glory now and forever!

In Christ's Service,



Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop