

The Evangelical Congregational Church

## **BISHOP'S REPORT**

To the 2021 National Conference

I greet you in the name of Jesus after what has been a most unusual year of life and ministry for each of us. Our lives and ministries changed dramatically in March 2020 in ways none of us could have predicted. And yet we gather today recognizing that while so much has changed, Jesus, the Christ, has not changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. I am very thankful to know that. While the storms rage, we know the One who can calm the storm with one word. May we hold on to him tightly. May each one of us be drawn more closely to him during these next few days that we may “Know Him Better and Love Him More.”

During the past year we have learned more about the word pandemic than a person ever wants to know. A pandemic is an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents or worldwide, affecting a substantial number of people. Pandemic was a word from history: the great Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918. Pandemic is a word from another continent: the Ebola Epidemic in Africa. It was a word rarely used in the United States.

One of the questions that has been asked at this point in the experience of our country is “Has the pandemic been a great disrupter or a great accelerator?” The answer is “Yes.”

- People were already shopping online, but did we predict that online shopping over the 2020 holidays in the United States would grow 32.2% in one year? Two days before the Super Bowl, the television in our family room died. We bought a new one online and selected curbside pickup. I texted them when I arrived. The man brought it to my truck. A new television without ever stepping inside a store. You can do the same thing with your doctor through telemedicine.
- The decline of cash and now even a physical plastic card, just input the numbers and you're good to go.
- Home-school is something we've all heard about and some of us have done; but who would have predicted the exponential growth of online virtual school? I drive by Evangelical Seminary every morning on my way to Church Center. As a Board member, I was excited a few years ago when we talked about offering classes online. Now I drive by a building that sits empty most of the time as every class is online.

The Los Angeles Times reported “Coronavirus changed everything, including common language.” “C-O-V-I-D dash one nine” appeared in the Websters Dictionary one month after the World Health Organization coined it. That's the fastest journey from conception to formal recognition in Webster's nearly 200-year history. Words like asymptomatic, super-spreader, social distancing, flattening the curve, and touchless have become a part of regular conversation. “Zoom, Zoom” went from a catch phrase in Mazda car commercials to the way most meetings are held. Zoom-bombing, that's when an uninvited person intrudes into a private Zoom meeting, became a word. Speaking of Zoom, Taylor Schreiner, director of Adobe Digital Insights reminds us “In light of the pandemic, digital has become the primary way for people to connect, work, be entertained and shop.” And, I would add – worship.

These trends were either in place or slowly coming; but thanks to the pandemic, every single one of them received a giant push forward. In many ways, nothing is new in the age of COVID-19. There's just a whole lot more of it than ever before. A pandemic step on the accelerator and we all lurched forward.

I do believe the Lord did prepare the Evangelical Congregational Church for 2020, even without us knowing it. Our flatter denominational structure has enabled us to be more efficient. Giving assigned pastors the authority to “oversee” the administration of the Lord's Supper has allowed for the creative provision of this important aspect of congregational worship. While our culture defines church as a location or an event, we clearly stated in 2014 “The church is the people called by God to his mission.” That ecclesiology statement, the clear understanding that the church is a people and our strong history and commitment to the involvement of lay people in the ministry of the local church have been key to making the adjustments required to minister during the pandemic.

Tomorrow we will consider amendments to our *Discipline* which will reflect those structural changes from a more traditional, hierarchical structure to a much flatter, organic, structure. I trust you all will be here tomorrow as we consider those amendments along with a host of other proposed amendments.

In 2014, the National Conference adopted a Covenant as a way forward for our denomination. That Covenant included:

- Move to a regional shared ministry and leadership model.
- Re-evaluation of our denominational relationships with affiliate ministries.
- Substantially reduce denominational operating expenses.
- Significantly reduce ministry fund asking from local congregations.

I am thankful that I can say today, the Covenant has been fulfilled. Without our knowledge, the Lord was preparing us for 2020 and beyond. Praise the Lord for his provision!

Praise the Lord, too, for the Lord's provision through the generous stewardship of his people throughout a very challenging year. The Evangelical Congregational Church did not rest or coast during the time of services being shut down. I have joked that our pastors went from pastor of a small community congregation to becoming tele-evangelists overnight. That was no small task. We have all worked hard; many denying themselves days off and vacation time to deal with the ever-changing demands and impacts of the pandemic. Pastors and lay people educated themselves to providing online services and ministries. Congregations invested time and funding into new audio systems, video switchers, cameras, software, and people to run it all. Congregations used the time the sanctuary was open to remodel and update what we usually think of as the primary worship space. Other congregations went further "out of the box" as they accelerated other changes. First EC Church, Lebanon, PA and Zion EC Church, Myerstown, PA (both pastored by Tim Valentino) use this time to take the bold step to consolidate into one congregation – Christ Community Church. Join me in praying for this new united congregation ministering the Good News of the wonderful grace of God to the eastern Lebanon County area. Two other congregations have caught a vision for a different type of vital connection. Grace Community Church of Willow Street, PA and Bethel EC Church, Conestoga, Pa have agreed to partner together to redevelop Bethel Church into a healthy, growing, multigenerational Gospel-centered congregation focused on reaching the village of Conestoga and its surrounding township. What the pandemic could have negatively impacted, the Lord has used for good to accelerate ministry changes which I pray will result in more people coming to know Jesus. Denominationally, the Kingdom Extension Community has entered into a creative relationship with Grace Community Church to develop a shared ministry position with Pastor Addison Roberts to help us understand and develop virtual ministries. While this work has already begun, it becomes official on July 1, 2021. These are just a few of the examples.

We have been challenged during this past year, but the Holy Spirit continues to bless and guide and, I am thankful, God's people have responded. In the midst of the mess, the people of the EC Church have provided for their pastors needs, the continuing of their local ministries, and support of the global work of making disciples and helping others. Even while the pandemic was affecting us, we provided over \$36,000 in additional support in response to the needs of our pastors in Mexico and to help the school sponsored by St. Paul's EC Church in Monrovia, Liberia. Praise God!

As Rev. Scott Ridout, President of Converge, has said, "We understand that our faith is fundamentally relational and incarnational." I am pleased to tell you our local congregations have creatively engaged with members and non-members to minister relationally. That has looked very different from what most of us grew up with, but it continued none the less. Those connections are vital; getting to know people, moving them into community, and caring for them whether in-person or virtually. Perhaps one of the good things to come out of this awful time is that we have been reminded that the church, discipleship itself, is not about consumption but about connection. Connecting to the Lord through his Holy Spirit and connecting to each other, both inside and outside the church – Know Him Better; Love Him More.

We have been forced to face the reality that while attendance is good, people simply showing up at a given time and place isn't the end toward which we work. Jesus commanded us to "make disciples." Disciples attend, but they also connect, they engage. We

don't just gather disciples – we equip them for life and ministry. We have discovered that an online presence allows us to connect not only on Sunday morning, but also throughout the week. We've always believed that, now we're actually doing it. As Carey Nieuwhof pointed out "We may be speaking from 'the room,' but they are at home, in their cars, at work, and in the community." I believe the good news is, as he points out, "In the future, churches that equip Christians will eclipse churches that gather them." These trends and more we can't even predict at the moment will challenge our thinking and planning; but that is a good thing.

The state of the Evangelical Congregational Church is good. We continue to make progress and reach out into our communities. We have learned to be innovative in our ministries and in the way we reach out to our communities.

So, is the pandemic a disrupter or an accelerator? Yes.

Pandemic, I've said that word so often I don't want to think or hear about it again. We are just tired of it. Actually, we're just tired. As Richard Villodas, notes in comments about his recent book "The Deeply Formed Life," too many Christians, including pastors and lay leaders, live at such a violent pace that it eliminates any semblance of being with Jesus. I find it very interesting that during this time of constant change that comes on us at break-neck speed, one of the most popular verses of Scripture printed on signs and just about anything else has been "Be still and know that I am God." [Psalm 46:10] For too many people, that's the goal but far from the daily experience. It is one thing to be committed to being a Christian; it is quite another to be deeply shaped and formed by and for Christ.

Some have said we thought this past year would be a marathon, only to discover it was a triathlon; we had to ride a bike and swim as well. So too, this life of faith, especially this year, requires endurance. The good news is Hebrews gives us the key to endurance: "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus." [Hebrews 12:2] The verb translated "keeping" really means 'to look away from all other things to look at one' – to focus. I need to keep my eyes on Jesus, because my faith depends on him from start to finish. There are days and nights when each one of us wants to just give up, stop running, quit; that's normal, natural. Instead of quitting let us remember those who have gone before us, generations or individuals who have sacrificed and worked so we can be here. So, let us fix our eyes on Jesus as we faithfully serve him even in the middle of the triathlon of life and ministry.

It will be up to the historians to decide what this time in our country and world is best remembered, but I believe it very well could be the year of exhaustion. Our senses and sensibilities have been assaulted. Most of the people I know and talk with are simply worn out. Emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted. We're too tired to even plan a vacation and where do you go, anyway? Elijah, after the overwhelming victory over false priests and prophets and their false gods on Mount Carmel, soon said to the Lord "I have had enough, LORD." Elijah was worn out, exhausted.

Have you noticed that one of the things that happens when we get over-tired is that people get cranky? Who hasn't experienced the joy of a day at the beach; playing in the sand, jumping in the waves and the inevitable melt-down that follows later that night on the boardwalk? That's not just the experience for children. Elijah complained, I'm the only one following God. Nobody cares. I have no help. I quit. We're all tired. We live in the most polarized time we can remember. And we can be cranky. Have you seen that – in yourself? A LifeWay Research study noted that the percentage of pastors dealing with facing disagreement and complaints within their congregations went from 8% to 27% in less than three months. Wrestling with disunity and division in their church became the top concern for pastors. The history of protestantism and our own denomination has shown when we disagree, we divide. My friends we must be on our guard; we cannot let that happen.

Elijah's first instructions from the Lord were to eat, drink, and sleep. Then the Lord instructed him to travel to Mount Sinai. If you know the account found in 1 Kings 19, you know that when Elijah arrived on the mountain, he experienced a windstorm so strong that the rocks were torn loose. That was followed by an earthquake, and then a fire. "And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper"; many of us remember that passage as "a still small voice." You see while the wind, earthquake and fire were all impressive, the Lord was not in them. There is a difference between the power of God and the presence of God. Each of us needs to understand, it's okay to say to God (and to some trusted friends) "I've had enough"; "I'm worn out"; "I just want to quit". When we're exhausted, we may think we need more power; when the truth is, we need more of God's presence. To know him better. To

love him more. My prayer for our pastors and lay leaders is that even in the middle of this ongoing time of stress and exhaustion, the triathlon that seems not to have a finish line, you will experience the deep and abiding presence of God in your heart and life. May he restore us.

How do you handle stress? That's something we've all been dealing with for the last year and, I'm afraid to say, we'll continue to deal with as the pandemic and its effects continue. So, how do you handle stress?

The WebMD site tells us some of the signs of stress are depression or anxiety; anger, irritability, or restlessness; feeling overwhelmed, unmotivated, or unfocused; racing thoughts or constant worry. Those are signs we see all around us, and perhaps even when we take the time to really look at that person in the mirror. According to another website, "Research shows that stress spills over into our relationships, causing a wide range of problems. When people are under a lot of stress, they become distracted, withdrawn and less affectionate." Elijah just wanted to quit.

How does the stress you've been under effect your relationship with Jesus? Have you become distracted, withdrawn and less affectionate in your discipleship journey? You see, all the stress we have been experiencing will do one of two things in our relationship with Jesus: it will cause us to withdraw and become less affectionate; or it will cause us to want to know him better and love him more.

Think about Job and his wife in the Old Testament. In the course of one day, they lost everything that was precious to them. In the overwhelming stress of loss, when everything was different and lost, and only God remained, the question was; was God enough?

Our world has been turned upside down, shaken and stirred. I believe it will be years until we understand the full impact this time in history has had on us as individuals, families, on our congregations, and ministries. Life has been disrupted and accelerated at the same time. During our time of National Conference, I trust we will allow the stress we've been experiencing to draw us deeper into our relationship with Jesus; to know him better and love him more.

This past year has challenged us all to be flexible, to think outside the box, and to re-imagine what church could look like. We have been asked to promote unity and lead with mercy and grace, at a time when they seem to be in such short supply in our world and culture. Yet, as Mordecai challenged Esther, perhaps each one of us are here, leaders in local congregations, for just such a time as this. I am thankful for your leadership, your partnership in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the building of his Kingdom, and in the work of the Evangelical Congregational Church. God is at work in and through his people! Do you believe that? Do you see that? Have you experienced that? I certainly hope so!

I must also celebrate and express my appreciation for our Church Center staff. We've experienced changes: Both Pat Strain and Pat Wolfe retired, but in the last few months Denise "Dee" Jaramillo has quickly become a member of our Church Center family. Kevin Henry continues to be an outstanding help and resource to me and to our congregations. The rest of the staff Shirley Long, Abigail Zimmerman, and Dave King continue to serve the Lord and his church, and for that I am very grateful. Jodi Earhart, my Assistant, is a joy to work with and helps me in so many ways. Change is a constant but the work of serving our congregations continues through the staff's faithful and effective service. Change. Next year a different Bishop will give the Episcopal Address. After eleven years, that will be a new experience.

In a just a little while, together, we will elect the next Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church. I am thankful to have spent a lot of time with both Kirk Marks and Randy Sizemore. I know from personal experience the decision to allow your name to appear on an episcopal ballot is not an easy one. They have responded to the call of the Lord and his church to make themselves available to serve if that is the Lord's will. I want to thank both of you, on behalf of the EC Church, for your faithfulness to the promptings of God's Holy Spirit on your hearts to take this step of faith. This has been a long process. You both are my brothers and my friends. For that I am grateful and will pledge my continued friendship, support, and prayers.

Many of you have asked me what my plans are when my service as Bishop is over. I can honestly tell you I have no idea. A long time ago, when I was a child, as I was leaving the house to go play and explore our neighboring fields and woods my mom would

ask me where I was going. My reply was often “I don’t know, I’ll tell you when I get back.” I guess I’ll say the same to you – I’ll tell you when I come back.

Of course, I am so grateful for Gloria’s deep love and support during this crazy adventure of my ministry. I was an electrician and finish carpenter when we got married 45 years ago. Then a pastor, a Chief Executive Officer of our growing ministry to seniors, a pastor again, and then Bishop. We had no idea where the Lord would take us. This past year Gloria has had me around more since I was not able to travel to preach as much as usual in local congregations and I still can’t travel to visit our international conferences. Though, recently Ted Rathman, our Global Ministries Associate, and I participated in the EC Church of India’s Leaders Conference and in the dedication of a new Conference Hall. Yes, all via Zoom. After all these years, Gloria truly is still my best friend and together is always my favorite place to be. Thank you to all of you who continue to support us in prayer. Pray that I finish well. It sounds like a cliché, but we really do depend on your prayers; please don’t stop.

What will the “new normal” or the “next normal” be like and will we recognize it when we get there? Or are we there already? I’m not sure any one of us can answer that. But I look forward to that discovery knowing the Lord is leading us.

Thanks be to God our Father for his faithfulness! Praise him for revealing himself in the wonderful gift of mercy, grace, and love in Christ Jesus! May his Holy Spirit continue to empower and guide us as we faithfully serve him together. May his Kingdom continue to expand and may his blessings continue to flow to and through the Evangelical Congregational Church. At the end of the day, may each one of us be able to say to the Lord that I’ve gotten to Know Him Better and Love Him More.

In Christ’s Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce D. Hill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Bruce D. Hill  
Bishop