

YOUR LINK TO GOD'S LARGER VISION

Setting the Stage for Strategic Planning

WHILE IT IS TRUE that one should never paint any situation with a broad brush that sweeps all of the entities into one, it is necessary for us to see the broad scope of the E.C. Church and its impact on local communities, the nation, and the world. There are many bright spots where visionary leaders have seen the need to cease “business as usual” approaches to ministry and have made bold moves to make their ministries culturally relevant. But there are many more struggling ministries that do not seem to be able to assess their current situation or project vital ministry into the future. In light of this, a Strategic Planning Task Force was mandated by the 1998 General Conference to address the future of the E.C. Church in order to make its ministry proactive rather than reactive. The following presuppositions have set the stage for the appointment of the task force and its subsequent work:

1. The general church needs to reassess its purpose, mission, and vision in order to put its “house in order” to be able to give direction and help to the churches and institutions that make up the E.C. Church.
2. The general church needs to revisit its roots and catch a new vision of the passion that drove our forefathers to establish congregations of new converts for the purpose of building the kingdom of God. We need to take a long hard look at our heritage to see what it has to say to us about ministry in the twenty-first century.
3. The general church needs to do an organizational assessment to determine if time, talent, and treasure are being invested in things that will make this denomination a viable part of changing our world. A portion of this overview will need to focus on how we bring together the best of the resources that God has invested in this church to move us to the “cutting-edge” of ministry and keep us there.
4. The general church needs to provide conduits for the grassroots to vocalize their concerns about the ministry of the E.C. Church. We must know what people are thinking—what their perceptions of us are and what they believe we are about as a denomination.
5. We need to discover how and where God is moving in our world. Further, we need to understand what God is doing, and desires to do, and then implement plans to intentionally change our methods and structure to align ourselves with his plan. We believe that God has already gifted the E.C. Church for ministry in the twenty-first century. It is our intention through the strategic planning process to discover what God already knows and then make every effort to fit into his plan.

There is great interest in being able to forecast the future. Economic advisors would love to know what will happen with the future of the worldwide stock markets. Psychics have never been busier. If we were able to correctly predict future events affecting the church and the world, people would beat a path to our door. The truth is the future is unknown to all of us, but planning for it is not. Preparing for the future requires a comprehensive understanding of the past and the present. A casual glance at world events reveals that the only constant is increasingly rapid change. For example, more new technology was developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century than was invented in the previous 100 years.

How will this affect the church? Tom Sine, in his book, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld*, says:

Business as usual won't even begin to equip us to deal with the new challenges of a new millennium. A number of our tried and true methods of being the church won't carry us very far into the future. A little tinkering and fine tuning won't be of much help in our lives, churches, or Christian organizations. We need to pay attention to how God is at work in our world today and prayerfully ask how we can join the lively edge of what God is doing to make our world new.¹

Researcher George Barna explains that our culture is reinventing itself every 3-5 years, while the church changes every 30-40 years.² The message of the gospel is ageless, but the delivery of that message has to be as creative as the times in which we live. People will respond to the gospel when it is presented in the power of the Holy spirit at their point of need. The key for the church of the future will be to determine the needs of the people in the neighborhoods, communities, and cities where the church is located and then use every means available to minister to those people at their point of need. The success of the church will be limited only by its Spirit-inspired creativity and ingenuity. A study of the book of Acts reveals the church as Christ intended it to be—reaching out to people in the marketplace, along the banks of rivers, in the homes and palaces of the ruling monarchs, as well as the synagogues.

Paul and Silas “turned the world upside down.”³ We can do the same in our world as we return to our purpose and allow God to do his work in us. We have the same power and the same God. The same kingdom of God dwells among us.⁴ The future belongs to those who desire to make a difference. May our desire and prayer be to join our God on the lively edge of what he is doing to make our world new.

1 Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 17

2 George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 2.

3 Acts 17:6

4 Luke 17:21

Statements and Core Values

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of the Evangelical Congregational Church is to know Christ and to make him known.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Evangelical Congregational Church is to raise up healthy churches proclaiming Christ to a hurting world.

VISION STATEMENT

The Evangelical Congregational Church will be a dynamic movement of God that is led by pastors and laity who have a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost. We will creatively obey the Great Commission by transforming plateaued and declining churches into healthy, disciple-making churches that are committed to evangelizing the communities to which God has called them. Healthy churches will reproduce themselves by planting churches in least-reached communities. Interdependence will be the distinguishing mark of the Evangelical Congregational Church as local churches network with one another and ministries beyond the E.C. family to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

CORE VALUES

PASSION FOR CHRIST

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH is passionate for Jesus Christ. We express this passion in our purpose when we declare that we want to know Christ and make him

As demonstrated by our commitment to the authority of the Bible, the centrality of prayer and the pursuit of holiness.

known to others. We explain it further in this core value by identifying three demonstrations of our denominational passion for Christ.

First, we demonstrate passion for Christ by our commitment to the authority of the Bible. As we have already learned, the E.C. Church affirms the Bible as the inspired Word of God.⁵

Because we understand the *authoritative* nature of Scripture, we use it as the only guide when stating our beliefs and defining our denomination's life and ministry.



5 2 Timothy 3:16

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For example, we believe that Jesus is the only way to be saved from sin and enter into a relationship with God. We believe this because it is taught in God's Word.⁶ We also believe that God is the maker of every human life, and as a result, every person has infinite worth.⁷ This biblical teaching about human life is the reason that we believe abortion and euthanasia are wrong.

The Bible is also our denomination's authority for making day-to-day decisions. For that reason, every denominational meeting opens with a time of prayer and Bible reading. In smaller committee meetings, the Bible reading is often followed by a brief study or devotional on the teaching from that portion of the Bible. In the large National Conference sessions, Bible readings are always followed by sermons, allowing God to guide our personal lives and the Evangelical Congregational Church in accomplishing his will.

Secondly, we demonstrate passion for Christ by the centrality of prayer in the life of our denomination. Earlier in this study, we have learned that prayer is also the key to accessing the authority that Jesus gives us to tap into his power and release his Holy Spirit to work in us and our world.⁸ Since prayer is so important, the E.C. Church weaves prayer into every aspect of its denominational life and work.

For this reason, prayer is the first item on the agenda of every denominational meeting. Why? We want to spend time with the Lord, seek his knowledge and wisdom, request his guidance and help, and declare our love and devotion before we attempt to do his work. Since the Lord is the most important participant in every gathering, we use prayer to welcome him and invite him to use us to accomplish his will.

When we refer to prayer as the first work of our denomination, we realize it to be the most important work we do. Beyond its prominent position on our agendas, the centrality of prayer is clearly seen in e-mail prayer notices sent to E.C. leaders and special prayer summits and retreats. The Prayer Mobilization Team of the E.C. Church is continually working to make prayer central to the life of every local E.C. church by training prayer mobilizers in each local congregation. These people are committed to making prayer the *first work* in each of our churches.

Lastly, we demonstrate passion for Christ by our pursuit of holiness. Holiness can be a confusing term if we listen to the world's definitions. The E.C. Church turns to the Bible for the conclusive definition—“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”⁹

The primary meaning of holy in this and other biblical passages is “to be set apart.” To be holy as a Christian is to be set apart from sin and set apart for God. Simply stated, we pursue holiness when we stay away from sin and make it our lifelong goal to become like Jesus Christ. Denominations and local churches should pursue holiness in the same way. The programs,

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6 John 14:1-7
7 Psalm 139
8 John 14:12-14
9 1 Peter 1:15-16

procedures and personnel of the E.C. Church must always conform to the teaching of the Bible. We must seek to do work of the denomination the way we believe Jesus would do it. Therefore, we require our pastors to live holy lives so they can be examples to their congregations and the communities in which they serve.¹⁰ Even in the financial and business affairs of our denomination we conduct ourselves with absolute integrity—we pay our bills on time, give regular reports to the church, and use our money to help people know and honor God. When we have differences of opinion, we talk and pray together, making every effort to avoid brokenness and division. And when we learn that one of our leaders or congregations is suffering, we find ways to try to ease the suffering. When we do these things, we show the world the kindness and love of God in Jesus Christ. When we do these things, we pursue a denominational life of holiness.

COMPASSION FOR THE LOST

As demonstrated by evangelism and acts of mercy on a local, national and global scale.

Jesus wept for Jerusalem as he approached the city on the ride that has become known as the Triumphal Entry.¹¹ He did not weep for the buildings and streets, but rather for the lost men, women, and children. Jesus wept because the heart of God always breaks over the loss of relationship with people. This compassion for the lost has motivated God to move time and space, people and places, to provide a bridge home.

Jesus is the bridge home. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, descended from the glories of Heaven and became one of us, less sin, that he might lead us home. Jesus allowed his body to be used as a vehicle to carry away the sin that separates people from God. Jesus allowed his body to be used as the receptacle for God's punishment upon sin. Jesus allowed his body to be used as the bridge, or door, back home for those who would trust in his name, in the work he accomplished upon the Cross of Calvary. And Jesus chose to use his body, the Church—you and me and all believers—as the megaphone announcing the message of life to a dying world.

The Gospel is our message. But why would we want to take the time, risk the cost, and test the depth of our current relationships, to tell others what they might not want to hear? We might do so in response to God's command; he has so commanded and we should obey. We might do so out of a selfish desire to take our loved ones with us; possible loss can be a strong motivation. The example of Jesus, however, is a more likely motivation to share the good message.

Jesus was moved to tears, and into action, because of his compassion for the lost. And Jesus invites you and me to live amongst and to serve the many people in our lives with the same kind of compassion. Parables—a man searching for one lost sheep, a woman sweeping her house for one lost coin, and a father staring at the horizon in search of his wandering child—become illustrations of compassion.¹² Perhaps we might ask ourselves if our hearts break for the lost of the world.

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¹⁰ 1 Timothy 3:1-7

¹¹ Luke 19:41-44

¹² Luke 15:4-7; 8-10; 11-24

If so, what might we be willing to do to earn permission or develop an opportunity to share the gospel—the answer to everyone’s most basic need? Jesus lived his life for others, gave of himself for others, and used his gifts and abilities to serve others. Jesus laid down his life to become the bridge home for lost men, women, and children. Evangelism and acts of mercy become for the believer a means of serving as Jesus’ hands and feet and voice.

Acts of mercy that serve the needs of men, women, and children can become the means that makes possible a telling and hearing of the gospel. But people do not want to be a project, not even a church project. Sincere compassion must motivate our acts of mercy. Lost people will know the difference!

Evangelism in words only, telling and running, falls short of Jesus’ ideals. As much as possible our evangelism must be a sharing of God’s truth by speaking into the lives of others while serving them in Christ-like ways. And we will do so, most effectively, as we develop relationships and learn to speak the truth in love and with grace. Of course, the depth of our relationships will vary according to our proximity and time with the people with whom we share. Family and friends will be closer than the individuals we seek to help across the world. In either case, compassion is the fundamental motivation, the most effective link to the lost.

The Communities of the National Conference work to keep outreach as high a priority in our churches as it is in the heart of the Heavenly Father. The communities offer tools and training for making disciples. Individual believers, followers of Jesus, can and should open their hearts and lives to the influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. To do so is to allow Jesus to live through us, to allow Jesus to feel through us, to allow Jesus to care and share through us. This believer will be deeply moved on behalf of the lost. This compassion for the lost will yield acts of mercy and evangelism.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

As demonstrated by the training and development of men and women for mission and ministry.

It has been said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” The Evangelical Congregational Church is convinced of the importance of effective leadership in the life and ministry of the church and is committed to the biblical principle of servant-leadership. God uses servant leaders at many levels to build a healthy, strong body—one that is responsive and obedient to Jesus Christ.

We understand servant leadership as Jesus taught in the Holy Scriptures. Jesus is our greatest example of a servant leader. He often referred to himself as a servant and stated his mission was one of service. “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹³

In a world and culture where leadership is thought of as a position, Jesus also demonstrated leadership as function. He reminded his disciples, “The greatest among you must be a servant.”¹⁴ He elaborated this theme to his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28 where he contrasted the leadership style of secular rulers against the leadership style and method of those called to

13 Mark 10:45

14 Matthew 23:11

lead in his body, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. *Not so with you.*”

In the upper room, Jesus powerfully demonstrated this principle by kneeling before the Twelve and washing their feet. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked. “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”¹⁵ Jesus made it clear that in the church leaders are servants who stoop to minister from the servants position to nurture and enable the Church to serve Christ and the world.

Therefore, we are committed to servant-leadership throughout the ministry of the Evangelical Congregational Church. We believe that all disciples of Jesus who are called to any position of leadership within our church—local congregational leaders, pastors, missionaries, institutional or National Conference—are expected to give leadership with a servant’s heart.

Pastoral students are exposed to the concepts and models of servant leadership in the academic programs at Evangelical Theological Seminary. Leaders of the seminary, retirement community, and our camp and conference centers as well as our bishop and national leaders are effective models of leading with a servant’s heart. The Ministerial Development Community of the National Conference focuses on providing for an effective process by which to recruit and equip believers who are called and gifted to lead in ministry. Again Holy Scripture indicates that true servants of God should serve with an attitude of gentleness and humility, trusting that God the Holy Spirit will be the leader’s resource and through this relationship God will be glorified and the Church edified.

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HEALTHY MINISTRIES

As demonstrated by changed lives through culturally sensitive churches and denominational institutions.

The Evangelical Congregational Church is committed to healthy ministries, believing that they occur naturally when we live out our mission of raising up healthy churches that proclaim Christ to a hurting world. This commitment is demonstrated as resources of time, talent, and money are directed toward those congregations that commit themselves, in word and action, to becoming healthy communities of faith.

We identify a church or faith community as healthy when lives are changed by Christ and the culture in which the church lives and ministers is biblically impacted. Healthy churches exercise both the fruit of the Spirit¹⁶ and the gifts of the Spirit.¹⁷ Healthy churches manifest healthy ministry by creating an awareness for others; caring for their needs by showing hospitality and Christian love; and dedicating themselves to evangelism, discipleship, spiritual maturity, inspiring worship, and nurturing fellowship.

This foundation for healthy ministry was evident in the early church soon after its birth. The people’s devotion to “the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer”¹⁸ characterized the health and vitality of the Church at its inception. Care for others was

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15 Cf. John 13:12-15

16 Galatians 5:22-23

17 Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

18 Acts 2:42

evident as they sold their possessions and “gave to anyone as he had need.”¹⁹ As they continually met and spent time together, their living testimony in word and deed brought them favor with all the people— “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”²⁰

The Evangelical Congregational Church is committed to the continuation of this ministry spirit that was energizing the early church. Assessment tools such as Natural Church Development enable congregations to identify their current levels of health and track their progress toward increased healthy ministry. Likewise, a team of church health facilitators has emerged to coach churches through decision-making roadblocks in order move past previous barriers to ministry. In our pursuit of seeing lives changed through the efforts of our church and its commitment to a culturally sensitive ministry, it is our hope and prayer that all people will know that we are Jesus’ disciples, by the way that we show our love for one another.²¹

UNITY IN THE BODY

As demonstrated by the networking of churches with the Evangelical Congregational Church and the larger Kingdom of God.

Unity is God’s gift to the Church. It is not a human achievement, the result of our best efforts. It is in contrast to the strife and strain in human relationships found in virtually every segment of our culture and our world. We long for the harmony brought by a sense of belonging and acceptance, where we are valued and given meaningful roles to perform, where we love and are loved without consideration. God gives us all of this in Christ, and gives us the task of protecting and nurturing this precious gift.²² Jesus himself pleaded with the Father that his future followers would demonstrate the fact that they belong to him by being united in love for one another. In so doing, they would be witnessing to the very character of God.²³

This prayer of Jesus, which is echoed by New Testament authors, applies both to our immediate relationships in individual congregations and to our unity with all who likewise follow him, wherever they may live and worship. Since we have the same Lord, have been baptized in the same Trinitarian name, and have the same hope for our final salvation, we also share in the great purpose of “knowing him and making him known.” Our unity is not created by our decisions to agree with others; it already exists because of our belonging to Christ. Therefore, we are called upon to demonstrate that unity by accepting those who have accepted Christ by faith, and to work with them to reach the world with his saving message.

One way of showing Christian unity is through denominations, which allow congregations to identify with one another and to join together for ministries that could not be carried out by individual churches themselves. This also provides ways for stronger congregations to assist

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19 Acts 2:45

20 Acts 2:47

21 John 13:35

22 Ephesians 4:1-6

weaker ones, demonstrating that love is not just for those who are close to us. Another important way of witnessing to the world is to work together with other denominations to reach our culture with the gospel. We recognize that there continue to be disagreements over some aspects of the Bible and its correct interpretation and application; but by joining with other Christian denominations, we let it be known that in spite of these differences the love of God compels us to think more about the needs of the lost and suffering people of the world than about our desire to have the final word on the fine points of doctrine.

The world longs for unity but seems farther from it with every passing year and every new instance of unrest and hostility. As Christ's own possession, the Church can and must demonstrate that unity is both God's desire and God's provision for us. Partnerships with other Christ-centered and Kingdom-minded organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals, Mission America, and a wide variety of para-church groups enable us to be more for God together than we would ever be alone.

