

The
CREED, RITUAL
and
DISCIPLINE
of the
Evangelical Congregational Church

As amended and adopted by
The National Conference
Edition of 2016

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCIPLINE:	
Preface.....	v
The Lord's Prayer.....	vi
The Apostles' Creed.....	vii
Historical statement.....	viii
PART ONE: The Creed	
Chapter I - Articles of Faith.....	Part 1 - Pg. 1
Chapter II - Christian Perfection	Part 1 - Pg. 4
Chapter III - Christian Practice.....	Part 1 - Pg. 6
Spiritual Standards	Part 1 - Pg. 6
Moral Standards.....	Part 1 - Pg. 9
Social Standards.....	Part 1 - Pg. 13
PART TWO: The Ritual	
Chapter I - The Sacraments	Part 2 - Pg. 1
Sacrament of Baptism of Infants.....	Part 2 - Pg. 1
Sacrament of Baptism of Adults	Page 2- Pg. 2
Sacrament of The Lord's Supper.....	Part 2 - Pg. 3
Ordination of Elders.....	Part 2 - Pg. 4
Ordination of Those in the Alternatives to Pastoral Ministry Track.....	Part 2 - Pg. 7
Commissioning of Full-time and Short-Term Missionaries	Part 2 - Pg. 8
Consecration of a Bishop	Part 2 - Pg. 11
PART THREE: The Congregation	
Membership.....	Part 3 - Pg. 3
Responsibility of Affiliation.....	Part 3 - Pg. 8
Congregational Meetings.....	Part 3 - Pg. 10
Property.....	Part 3 - Pg. 10
Local Conference.....	Part 3 - Pg. 12
Lay Delegate.....	Part 3 - Pg. 13
Pastoral Relations Committee.....	Part 3 - Pg. 14
PART FOUR: The Conferences and Districts	
Chapter I - National Conference.....	Part 4 - Pg. 1
Chapter II - National Ministry Team of the National Conference	Part 4 - Pg. 5
Chapter III - Mission Conference.....	Part 4 - Pg. 7
Chapter IV - TEACH International.....	Part 4 - Pg. 8
Chapter V - Districts	Part 4 - Pg. 8
PART FIVE: The Ministry	
Chapter I - Ministerial Qualifications and Work.....	Part 5 - Pg. 1
Chapter II - Classification of Ministers.....	Part 5 - Pg. 2
PART SIX: Conflict Resolution and Redemptive Church Discipline	
Introduction	Part 6 - Pg. 1
Chapter I – Formal Discipline of Lay Members.....	Part 6 - Pg. 4
Chapter II – Discipline of Ministers.....	Part 6 - Pg. 7
Chapter III – Discipline of a Bishop.....	Part 6 - Pg. 9
Chapter IV – Jurisdiction and Evidence	Part 6 - Pg. 9
PART SEVEN: National Conference Commissions and Affiliates	
Chapter I - National Conference.....	Part 7 - Pg. 1
Cabinet.....	Part 7 - Pg. 1
Commissions.....	Part 7 - Pg. 1

Chapter II - Board of Trustees of the Evangelical Theological Seminary	Part 7 - Pg. 4
Chapter III – New Dawn Christian Community Services, Inc.....	Part 7 - Pg. 5
Chapter IV – Benefits Corporation.....	Part 7 - Pg. 6
Chapter V - Board of Trustees of the Historical Society	Part 7 - Pg. 7

PART EIGHT: Amendments to the Discipline

APPENDIX A: Charters

General Conference	Pg. 1
Evangelical School of Theology	Pg. 3
Historical Society.....	Pg. 4
Board of Pensions	Pg. 5
Evangelical Congregational Church Retirement Village	Pg. 6
Twin Pines	Pg. 8

PREFACE

The Evangelical Congregational Church *Discipline* is meant to provide historical, creedal (or doctrinal) and operational governance for the denomination, its Commissions, and affiliates, including the local churches. Additionally, it provides guidelines for the conduct of the rituals, the organizational structure for a local congregation, and outlines the responsibility of the National Conference and her ministers.

All of the above are charged with tasking the work of the total church through a people-centered ministry having the mandate: “to know Christ and make Him known.” This vision is captured with the mission statement, which directs the denomination to raise up healthy churches by proclaiming Christ to a needy world in obedience to the Great Commission stated in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 28.

To this end, the *Discipline* reflects denominational response to the mission and vision established with these core values:

1. Possessing a passion for Christ as demonstrated by our commitment to the authority of the scripture, the centrality of prayer and the pursuit of holiness.
2. Having compassion for the lost as demonstrated by evangelism and acts of mercy on a world-wide basis.
3. Utilizing servant leadership as demonstrated by training and developing persons for mission and ministry.
4. Sharing concern for healthy ministries through changed lives within culturally sensitive congregations and denominational affiliates.
5. Functioning as a unified body of Christ by networking with Evangelical Congregational churches with the goal of extending the kingdom of God.

Our vision is to be a dynamic movement of God, led by pastors and laity with a zeal to reach lost souls for Christ and His church in a global endeavor as together we fulfill God’s purpose on earth.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6: 9-13 KJV)

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I BELIEVE IN God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; that He descended into hades, the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead; I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy general church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

TO THE

DISCIPLINE

HISTORICAL STATEMENT

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HISTORICAL STATEMENT

1. Introduction

God has revealed Himself to us through His written Word, the Bible, and through His spoken Word, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1). The beliefs of the church regarding God's revelation of Himself are set forth in creedal statements, and man's response to God is seen in the lives of the saints of God in history. The *Discipline* of the Evangelical Congregational Church describes the doctrines of this body of believers in the 25 Articles of Faith and creedal statements. The polity of the Church expresses its practices and ordinances in the lives of its members.

We describe here the history of the Evangelical Congregational Church as seen in the lives of its stalwart founders. Some of these were itinerant preachers of the evangelical conviction that all men are lost and need the grace of God as it is expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They believed that the most important words of Jesus were "You must be born again" and that the proof of the authenticity of this Christian experience through faith is seen in holy living. These early preachers went about the countryside preaching the good news of Christ and beseeching everyone to repent and be born again.

One of these early itinerant preachers was Jacob Albright (May 1, 1759-May 18, 1808). As a young convert, he looked for a church with which he could unite that served his Lord Jesus Christ and upheld good discipline. It should come as no surprise to us that he found such a fellowship in the faith and practice of the church of John Wesley, the Methodists of that day. In the year 1796, yearning for the salvation of his spiritually neglected German-speaking brethren, he started out as a humble layman to preach the gospel of Christ to them. His labors extended over large portions of Pennsylvania and into parts of Maryland and Virginia, resulting in the saving of many souls.

Albright and his co-laborers had no thought of founding a new religious denomination, but in 1800, he yielded to the oft-repeated and urgent requests of those whom he had led to the Lord to begin the work of organization. Three classes were organized in as many counties in Pennsylvania. In November 1803, at a council composed of Mr. Albright, his two assistants, and fourteen of the leading men of the Association, Mr. Albright was declared to be "a genuine evangelical preacher" in the name of the whole Association and solemnly ordained as such. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were declared to be their rule of faith and practice.

The influence of the creedal statements and the polity of the American Methodists of that day were never completely erased from the formal statements of faith and practice of the embryonic Evangelical Congregational Church.

As a result of the demands upon his physique traveling on horseback across the countryside in all kinds of weather, Jacob Albright fell victim to tuberculosis and died May 18, 1808, at the age of 49. He was on the way from a service in Dauphin County to his home near Ephrata. Illness prevented him from going farther than the area called Muehlbach, about 10 miles east of Lebanon, PA. He was buried in the private burial plot of John George Becker, Sr., at what is now Kleinfeltersville, PA.

2. The Evangelical Association

Following the death of Jacob Albright, his collaborators continued to evangelize their fellow German-speaking people in the eastern states. With zeal and vision, they went from community to community wherever anyone would listen to the message of salvation. The number of local classes (congregations) increased, conferences were organized, and missionary work extended.

The election of Rev. John Seybert to the office of Bishop in 1839 gave vigorous leadership to the dozens of circuit riders. They did not limit their preaching to the settled areas in the east but followed migrating people westward into the new territories and states.

At first, the ministry was limited to German-speaking people, but as new generations were born, the English language was used more and more.

The church bore the name of The Evangelical Association, and the practice of zealous evangelism resulted in numerical growth and increased outreach. As members migrated to the Midwest and later to the far West, congregations were organized in the northern states and also Canada. Immigrants from Germany were attracted to the fellowship because many of the services in the early church were conducted in German, and the preaching was in German. These German-speaking churches experienced phenomenal growth. Mission conferences were organized in Germany and Switzerland and later in Japan.

3. Development of Differences

As the denomination grew, differences of opinion and practice developed. One divisive issue

concerned conflicting understanding and interpretation of the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness.

A more serious difference developed concerning the form of government. The increased use of the English language in the services and the accompanying application of American principles of self government clashed with the more centralized forms of government found in European churches.

The Church was faced with a critical issue at the Nineteenth General Conference in 1887, which met in Buffalo, New York, September 1-27. Rev. H. B. Hartzler, editor of the *Evangelical Messenger*, the official English publication, was brought to trial by the General Conference for "unchristian conduct, official misconduct and grievous offense as minister and as editor in our church." He had refused to print certain criticisms of the Japan mission, which were submitted by the senior Bishop, J. J. Esher. The editor did not believe the Bishop was justified in his statements. After a trial occupying eleven days of the Conference session, the editor was deposed by a vote of 57 to 47. Since there were no lay delegates at this Conference the vote was by ministers.

The large minority protested the action and rallied sufficient support to reelect Rudolph Dubs to the office of bishop. He became their official leader. Bishop J. J. Esher and Bishop Thomas Bowman were also reelected and led what was known as "The Majority," commonly called "The Esherites." The sympathizers with the deposed editor, H. B. Hartzler, were called "The Minority" or "The Dubsites." In order to provide a medium to advocate and defend their position, the Minority started an independent weekly called *The Evangelical*, which was published at Harrisburg, PA, and first appeared under the date of November 14, 1887.

The official denominational publications were closed to their views on the issues in question. Although personalities entered into the controversies, the issue was primarily a centralized form of government versus a more representative form. Steps were taken according to provisions in the *Discipline* to remove each of the three bishops from active service, but only Bishop Dubs complied by refraining from the performance of the duties of the office during the period of suspension. Annual Conferences took positions with one side or the other or were divided into separate conferences according to their loyalties. By the end of the four-year period, almost every preacher and congregation was forced to take a position for or against the leadership in control.

4. The Church Divides

This resulted in two General Conferences convening in 1891. The East Pennsylvania Conference, as the oldest Annual Conference, called for the General Conference to meet in Philadelphia. The Majority group used the Board of Publication to call the Twentieth General Conference to meet in Indianapolis as the General Conference of 1887 had designated. They endorsed the position of their bishops and excluded all ministers and congregations who supported the Philadelphia Conference. The Majority sought to evict from parsonages and church buildings pastors and congregations who were not loyal to the leaders of the Evangelical Association.

The non-merging UEs did not lose their properties this time, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled against their use of the name "United Evangelical," so in 1928 they adopted the name "Evangelical Congregational" to emphasize their heritage in evangelical doctrine and evangelistic outreach and their concern for congregational rights in controlling church property and determining church affiliation. Denominational cohesion would be maintained through the itinerant system, in which pastors were assigned to congregations by the denominational leadership. The ECs lost their stake in Albright College, but once the Evangelical Church had moved the institution to Reading it was happy to sell the campus property to the EC Church in 1931. By the 1950s the site was home to Church Center Press (later the EC Church Center), the Burd and Rogers Memorial Home (later E.C.C. Retirement Village), and Evangelical School of Theology (later Evangelical Theological Seminary). In some communities, the civil courts were asked to rule, but in general they did not consider the moral and equitable phases of the questions at issue, and denominational ownership and control of the church property were accepted. The result was that congregations with the Minority party had to provide new places for services or buy back their own buildings.

5. The United Evangelical Church

Efforts to reconcile the differences, both within the denomination and from neutral persons, were of no avail. The defeated Minority was compelled either to submit or to withdraw and reorganize. Most of them chose to join together in a new fellowship under a new government. On October 10, 1894, the East Pennsylvania Conference met in convention and organized as the East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church. They called for a General Conference to meet at Naperville, Illinois, on November 29 of the same year. Other Annual Conferences were represented by delegates who organized the first General Conference of the United Evangelical Church. This represented several hundred congregations, the larger number being in the three conferences in the state of Pennsylvania.

Articles of Faith and the *Discipline* were adopted by this Conference. The creedal statements gave added emphasis to the subjective Christian faith, with new articles on Regeneration, Repentance, Witness of the Spirit, Sanctification, and the Work of the Holy Spirit, as well as articles on the future life. The main substance of the Articles of Faith came from a doctrinal statement compiled by Dr. Milton Terry, a theologian of the Methodist Church.

The *Discipline* that was adopted limited the powers of the General Conference and restricted the authority of bishops. Each Annual Conference was provided with a measure of autonomy, and the ownership of property was placed in the control of the local congregation. The congregation also could determine all questions of ecclesiastical connection, when acting according to its deed and charter. Each pastoral charge was entitled to elect a lay delegate to represent it at the Annual Conference, and each Annual Conference was entitled to elect an equal number of lay and ministerial delegates to the General Conference, according to its membership.

From 1894 to 1922, the United Evangelical Church gained in membership, Sunday School enrollment, and property value. An evangelistic emphasis in congregations, camp meetings, and missionary projects showed spiritual results. The foreign mission outreach went to China and to Africa. Two colleges were supported liberally and developed to meet the educational needs of the times.

6. Problems of Reunion

During these years, a growing concern developed to reconcile the differences that had caused the division before the turn of the century. Following the General Conference of 1910, negotiations were started to bring the United Evangelical Church and the Evangelical Association together. Committees worked on a *Basis of Union*. Some concessions were made to the United Evangelicals, but some of the principal issues sought by them, which had caused the division in the first place, were not acceptable to the representatives of the Evangelical Association. These issues included the limited power of the bishops and the right of the Annual Conference to determine its ecclesiastical relationship.

Prior to the General Conference of 1922, the *Basis of Union* was presented to each of the Annual Conferences. The East Pennsylvania Conference meeting in February of that year took the position that this *Basis* was not properly before it but should first go to the General Conference for consideration and, therefore, refused to vote on the submitted *Basis*. All of the other Annual Conferences voted with a majority being secured to approve the *Basis of Union*. However, there were strong minorities in some of the Conferences who opposed the merger.

When the General Conference met at Barrington, Illinois, in October 1922, the East Pennsylvania delegation asked for further consideration of the issues that had previously been rejected in the *Basis of Union*. The East Pennsylvania delegates, following the instructions of their Annual Conference, did not vote. However, by this time the plans for the merger had proceeded so far that the General Conference of the Evangelical Association had convened in Special Session in Detroit, Michigan, to receive the United Evangelical delegation. The merger was consummated at Detroit, resulting in what was declared to be The Evangelical Church.

7. The Evangelical Congregational Church

When the East Pennsylvania delegates who did not vote returned home, a special session of their Conference was called to meet in Bethlehem, PA, in November. About three-fourths of the ministers and lay delegates responded and voted to continue as a United Evangelical Conference and not become a part of the merged denomination. A number of congregations in other conferences associated themselves with the East Pennsylvania Conference.

In 1924, churches in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania organized as the Ohio Conference. (A group of six congregations in the state of Illinois affiliated with the East Pennsylvania Conference and in 1931 united with the Ohio Conference to form what became the Western Conference.)

In 1926, delegates of the East Pennsylvania Conference and of the Ohio conference convened as the first General Conference under the *Discipline* of the United Evangelical Church. Bishop W. F. Heil presided. The Rev. E. S. Woodring was elected bishop for the next quadrennium.

This group, who desired to perpetuate the principles of the United Evangelical Church, found it necessary and expedient to select a new name. Consequently, in 1928, a special session of the General Conference adopted the name, "The Evangelical Congregational Church." The word "evangelical" was chosen because it emphasized the church as evangelical in doctrine and evangelistic in outreach. The word "congregational" recognized congregational rights in controlling church property and determining church membership. They continued to use the itinerant system to assign ministers, which served as a connectional means in the conferences to provide for the church's outreach.

In 1998, directed by the General Conference that recognized the need for a proactive approach to fulfill our mission, a task force began the work of strategic planning and vision casting for the denomination. A document, the *Basis of Union*, expressing purpose, values, and vision for the church, resulted. This contemporary restatement of the Evangelical Congregational Church's mission led to restructuring the Annual and General Conferences. Approved in 2002, the document resulted in the uniting of the USA-based conferences and the formation of a National Conference. The *Discipline* was amended, incorporating into it the *Basis of Union*. Remaining as foundational, however, are provisions adopted by the (former) United Evangelical Church, including the rights of the local congregation, the continuation of an itinerant system for assigning ministers, and the newly constituted National Conference that serves as a connectional means for the church's outreach.

The first session of the National Conference was held in May 2003 following a transitional period of education for clergy, laity, and churches throughout the conference territories. Revisions to the *Discipline* guarantee congregations the largest freedom consistent with fidelity to the essentials of Christian belief and the orderly and efficient administration of the affairs of the church. The church is called upon to be a dynamic movement of God embodying a passion for Christ, compassion for the lost, servant leadership, healthy ministries, and unity in the body of Christ.

From the very simple beginning under Albright and his people, through the rigors of cleavage and disunity, there has come the Evangelical Congregational Church to which we give allegiance. Now it takes its place in the twenty-first century, targeting a society far different from that of its founder but intent on serving the Christ of the Ages.