

The Evangelical Congregational Church

## **BISHOP'S REPORT**

To the National Ministry Team

March 17, 2022

Part of my preparation in writing reports to the National Ministry Team and the National Conference is to look back at what I wrote in the last report so I'm not repeating myself too much. I did consider for a moment what it would be like to read all ten Episcopal Addresses in order and then simply say "I still mean it." Instead, as I prepared for this report, my final report as Bishop to any official board of the National Conference, I looked back to my very first report to the National Ministry Team in October 2011.

"I find myself in an interesting position as I prepare for this meeting of the National Ministry Team: I will be chairing the first full meeting I will be attending. Obviously, the last few months have included a number of 'firsts' as I assumed the office of Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church. During this time of transition and new beginning I have become increasingly aware of the wonderful community of the Evangelical Congregational Church. You've heard it said that we are a 'connectional denomination.' As the Lead Pastor of Community Evangelical Church, I often emphasized and celebrated our community of believers. That is true of the greater Evangelical Congregational Church as well. I praise God for the community that is the E.C. Church. My favorite book of the Bible is Ephesians. In it the Holy Spirit inspires Paul to describe the purpose and work of the church. Paul wrote: "He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love." (Ephesians 4:16) There are lots of words I could use to describe the Evangelical Congregational Church: connectional, community, team, family, body. Each one is true and gives a flavor of the greatness that is the Church."

Those sentiments are still true, even as I write this last report. Of the many gifts the Lord has given me, I deeply appreciate the gift of the relationships I have been blessed with over the past eleven years.

That very first October report also contained this statement:

"This past summer was unusual in that we had to deal with a number of challenging stationing situations. On more than one occasion Fred came into my office and said, "I don't know if it's you, but we've never had a summer like this before!"

As I look back over the last eleven years, and particularly at the past two years I begin to wonder if it's me or simply the world we live in; but we have had to face issues and deal with circumstances none of us have dealt with before. I really hope it's not me, but if it is, I pray things calm down when Randy is consecrated as our next Bishop. Randy, I love you and look forward to your ministry as bishop, but don't count on things calming down.

The world and our culture continue to provide us with overwhelming evidence of the reality of sin and the lostness of the human soul without Jesus. As Ed Stetzer, Dean of the School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership at Wheaton College, recently described it, the world and western culture in particular is experiencing a “cultural convulsion.” The last time we experienced something like this was in the 1960s. Historians point out that such a “cultural convulsion” happens approximately every 60 years and usually lasts for a number of years before we settle into the “next normal.”

I continue to be deeply concerned for our pastors, lay leaders and churches. As David Brooks, a conservative political and cultural commentator for the New York Times has put it, for the past two years, and counting, we have felt “disoriented, disturbed, unmoored... in a yawning chasm of mutual incomprehension. The atmosphere within many Christian organizations has grown more tense and bitter. Pastors are exhausted – partly because of Covid but partly because every word they use is scrutinized to see if it passes this or that theological litmus test.” And it all happened with startling speed.

The past eleven years and certainly the last two years have helped me understand what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11:28) It is in response to this burden that one of my last projects as bishop will be a series of videos in which I, along with Steve Brubaker, Counseling Pastor at Grace Community Church of Willow Street, and Dr. Ken Miller, will address how we deal with the hurts and woundedness so many are dealing with today. I believe we all can identify in some way with the prophet Jeremiah when he wrote, “I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss” (Jeremiah 3:20) I pray this series of short videos will be helpful in moving us toward healing hurts, binding wounds, and preparing us all to move forward with overflowing hope at National Conference 2022. And there are reasons for hope.

The Lord prepared the Evangelical Congregational Church for such a time as this, 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. Our 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 cultural upheaval.

The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study of more than 15,000 congregations revealed some amazing statistics. Half of all churches have fewer than 65 people in their weekly worship services; 65% had fewer than 100 in weekly attendance. But their research also shows, “Smaller churches have high levels of member commitment. The congregations have greater percentage of member participation in weekly worship. Participants give more money per person and are more likely to volunteer. These smaller churches give the highest percentage of their budget toward missions and charity.”

While we are concerned about the number of small congregations that make up our denomination, I believe we must also recognize the unique opportunity we have to minister to the neighborhoods surrounding our churches. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us leverage the positives of smaller churches in ways that will bring people closer to Jesus. Large churches with multiple programs and ministries are a part of who

we are as the Evangelical Congregational Church, but we can never lose sight of the reality that each of us live “to know Christ and to make him known.” While our culture and even some within the evangelical movement struggle with that word, we must remember that we are Evangelical – people of the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus. Paul wrote very simply in Acts 20:24, “My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.” So too, our programs and ministries, are worth nothing if they don’t provide the opportunity to lead people to faith in Jesus. We are “congregational.” I stepped on toes a few years ago at National Conference when I asked, “Can we please get off the ‘congregational’ means that the congregation is in charge bandwagon?” Congregational isn’t about power; it’s about ministry. We’re “Congregational,” because that’s where the action is. The sharing of the Gospel in our culture does not depend on how attractively we package it, but on whether congregations and individual Christians are living it out and talking about it in their daily lives. The Gospel is not a short story; it is an unfolding narrative written in the hearts of normal people like you and me for a world that is lost and desperately in need of a Savior. I am thankful for the heritage of the Evangelical Congregational Church and that we are each called to serve in that line of witnesses.

Speaking of our heritage, I had been involved in a number of conversations with a few United Methodist congregations looking for a denominational home when the United Methodist Church splits. These churches are conservative, Bible believing, evangelical congregations. They could migrate to the new Global Methodist Church, but they are interested in being part of a smaller denomination where “everybody knows your name.” Unfortunately, the UMC’s decision to postpone their General Conference until 2024 has caused greater confusion and mistrust on how congregations and pastors can leave the progressive denomination. I know Randy Sizemore will continue these conversations after I leave office. Please join me in praying for these brothers and sisters.

Earlier this month I attended my last meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals Board. I was thankful Randy could come along and I could introduce him as my successor to Walter Kim, NAE President, some of the NAE staff, and a number of fellow board members. One of the responsibilities of serving as bishop is to serve on the NAE Board. I have appreciated the bonds that I have formed with other denominational executives through the regular Board meetings and the annual Denominational Executives’ Retreat. The National Association of Evangelicals represents us well as they interact with national media as well as national and world leaders. The NAE has launched a new Advocacy Center to help member churches and denominations “raise your voice.” Current campaigns include immigration reform, religious freedom, protection for Afghan allies, refugees, safeguarding life, and ending poverty. You can explore the Center and the campaigns, which will change and be updated regularly by using your smart phone camera and this QR code.



I have one more international trip on my schedule right after Easter. Rev. Ted Rathman, Global Ministries Associate, and I will be traveling to Northeast India to worship and fellowship with our brothers and sisters of the Evangelical Congregational Church of India. This brings my mission trips full circle as Northeast India was the first trip I took as Bishop in 2011. I am thankful for the faithful service of all our international church

leaders. During my tenure as bishop, I have had the privilege of visiting and ministering in India, Liberia, Ukraine, Japan, Mexico, and Nepal. The plan is for us to go there to encourage them; but I always come back having been encouraged by their love for the Lord, faithful service, and concern for us. It is amazing to see the numbers of people accepting Jesus as their Savior, in many cases the numbers of young people involved, and how the church is growing. That is not the experience in so much of the western world; but Christianity in much of the developing world is spreading and growing rapidly. Praise the Lord!

A number of years ago Rev. Nobuo Abe, Chairman of the EC Church of Japan, met with me at Church Center to talk about our ministries. That was during the time of our restructuring and in particular moving to shared ministry leadership positions. I asked him what insights he had about that. His answer was simple: he was glad to see the church in the US was learning a lesson from the international churches. I pray we will learn other lessons as well: joy in the Lord even in challenging circumstances, spiritual vitality, unity in the face of what is often an adversarial culture.

We cannot slip into a siege mentality. We cannot trust any political party or strategy to make our work easier. It is faith in and dependence on the power of God through his Holy Spirit. I trust you join Bishop-elect Sizemore and me when we say we hope and pray to recapture some of the qualities of a movement of God that enhanced our effectiveness in the past. God is still at work. He is calling individuals into pastoral ministry and missionary service, but we ask him to call more from the harvest for the harvest. Even our smaller churches have services and ministries where more than Jesus' quorum of "two or three gathered together in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) The last two years too many people have slipped away from meeting together – but Jesus is still there! He has promised to be there with us. Do we really believe that? Do we realize the power in that promise? Think about it this Sunday when you head for the worship service.

I don't know how many attendees you will have, but you can count on Jesus; Jesus will be there, the power of the Holy Spirit will be there. Pray for it. Expect it. Celebrate it. Enjoy it.

There are many thoughts that flood through my mind when I think about the past eleven years as bishop. Chief among them are the many opportunities I have had to get to know our local pastors and lay leaders. As a pastor myself, I was able to recognize many of our pastors and leaders, but simple recognition was pretty much the extent of it. These years have provided me with opportunities to sit and talk with pastors, their wives, and many of their leaders. Each one has a personal story, a journey of faith; each one has a unique mix of gifts and graces; but everyone has a deep love for Jesus. I have been so thankful to serve with brothers and sisters like that in the Evangelical Congregational for forty-six years, eleven of those, almost a quarter of my ministry life, as Bishop. I couldn't serve any longer or I'd be giving myself the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of EC credentials certificate at Conference. That would be awkward.

If you know anything about me, I hope you understand how important team ministry is. I want to express my appreciation to those who have served with me in denominational leadership over the years: Conference Ministers, Gary Brown, Chuck Campbell, Gordy Lewis, and Gary Kuehner. Our Associates: Jeff Byerly, Les Cool, Gary Kuehner, and Ted Rathman. Our National Conference officers: Gary Brown, Kirk

Marks, and Deb Patterson. I am grateful for and indebted to the Church Center team I have had the joy to serve with: Kevin Henry, Randy Sizemore, former Director of GMC, Dee Jaramillo, Dave King, Brenda Long, Shirley Long, Pat Strain, Pat Wolfe, Abi Zimmerman, and last, but certainly not least, my Assistant, Jodi Earhart. I will miss serving alongside you, the many conversations, phone calls, emails, and text messages. Well, there are some of those calls, emails, and texts I definitely will not miss. Of course, one person will still be around, and I am very grateful for that. Gloria – my wife, my friend, confidant, and partner in life and ministry for forty-six years. Finally, thanks be to God who is so, so, very good. I am blessed far more than I deserve.

Every day I walk into Church Center and see the pictures of all our past Bishops, and there on the end is my portrait. That still just seems odd to me. It really does. The Lord called, I answered (somewhat reluctantly), and tried, with the Holy Spirit's help to follow him and lead us faithfully. I would like a few "do-overs" but instead will rely on mercy and grace. Thank you, members of the National Ministry Team for your commitment to Christ and the church. I know the Lord will continue to bless the Evangelical Congregational Church with Randy Sizemore as our Bishop. I know the Lord has called Randy to this position and Randy has answered (somewhat reluctantly). I look forward to watching as we take the next steps as a movement of God, leading people to a saving knowledge of Jesus, and living lives of discipleship through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:20)

In Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce Hill", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Bruce D. Hill  
Bishop