

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
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“OVERFLOWING HOPE”

Greetings in the strong name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Carla and I thank you for your prayers on our behalf over this past year of transition. We have been humbled by the expressions of support not only from here at home, but also from our brothers and sisters in the global EC Church. As your new Bishop, I thought it would be best to use this time to share what God has been teaching and impressing on me for the future of the Evangelical Congregational Church.

We are all familiar with the history of Humpty Dumpty. In a nutshell, Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall and all the King's horses, and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Historians are not in agreement as to how or why Humpty Dumpty ascended to his position on the wall, but all are in agreement that he sat there. It seems his position on that wall became part of the community landscape. Records are unclear, but we could assume that over time people traveled to the wall to hear what Humpty Dumpty had to say. Groups of people of all ages came together at regular intervals to enjoy Humpty Dumpty's company. They celebrated life's milestones like births, weddings, and even funerals in his presence. His influence was recognized by all, even by those who didn't believe he should be there on that wall, and those who ignored what he had to say. Like all important historic landmarks, it seemed that Humpty Dumpty sitting on that wall would always be the center of the community, an important part of the fabric of the landscape.

Then tragedy struck. What caused Humpty Dumpty to fall is still a subject of great debate. Did he feel so secure in his position that he decided to try standing on the wall instead of sitting? Did his pride get the better of him, tempting him to try out new moves like standing on one foot or even dancing the Macarena? Was he distracted or bored in regard to his purpose, growing careless, perhaps even reckless, unaware he was drifting from his center, and all the while dancing dangerously close to that precarious edge? We simply do not know.

The records are clear however, his fall was great. Not “great” as in fantastic, but “great” as in momentous. It was one of those watershed events that marks history. People began referring to time as “before the fall” and “after the fall”. It was so great, so momentous that it captured the attention of the highest echelons of culture. When news reached the King, he immediately dispatched his brightest and best. “Spare no expense! Send all my horses and all my men!”

Unfortunately, they were at a loss of what to do. Ancient texts tell us that all the King's horses and all the King's men could not put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

History goes silent at this point. We do not know what happens next. Was there still a pulse when the King's men arrived? Was Humpty Dumpty able to say a few departing words as the life drained out of him? Did the King's horses and men take Humpty Dumpty back to the castle? Did they bury him at the base of the wall? We do not know. One thing we do know is, Humpty Dumpty no longer sits on the wall, no longer occupies the prominent place of influence in the community, and, to the surprise of some, life goes on with others taking his place on the wall.

I know you didn't expect to hear a message about Humpty Dumpty from your new Bishop, you expected to hear a message about the Church. But don't you find some disturbing parallels between that old nursery rhyme and the history of the Church in the United States? At one point the Church sat on the wall, occupying a position of influence, importance, and respect, even from those who didn't come to see us or listen to what we had to say. It seemed we would be on that wall forever. But then tragedy struck. To say the Church has had a great fall may not be accurate. It was more like an awkward slow-motion slide.

Church historians are still debating when we started to slide and if we're even at the bottom yet. The striking difference between our current reality and the nursery rhyme is the Church's fall from society's perch has not moved the hands of the highest political powers to dispatch horses and men, or any other resource to help. Some would say they are more than happy to replace the Church on the wall with their own voices.

When I was wrestling with God about the whole idea of serving Him and His Church as Bishop, Carla and I took retreat to a cabin in the mountains of West Virginia. I asked God the same two questions that every pastor sitting here today has asked on multiple occasions. Why and what. Why should I continue serving the Church? Why can't I switch careers, buy that house on the beach and simply be a church member instead of the pastor? I'm not alone. Recent surveys note that 29-51% of pastors are truly considering "calling it quits". Along with the question, of "why?" is the question of "what?". If I am to continue serving your Church, Lord, what are you doing with your Church? What does your Church have to look forward to? What is your plan for your Church?

I mean, look at what we are! The Evangelical Congregational Church was birthed in 1922. That means this year we are a 100-year-old mostly white, declining, blue-collar, evangelical denomination consisting of roughly 125 local congregations, where an overwhelming majority average less than 100 people in Sunday morning attendance, mainly scattered across three states with a couple of outliers. Coming out of a one-hundred-year pandemic, waist deep in what Ed Stetzer describes as the "cultural convulsions of disease, distrust, and disunity." Our sense of purpose and moral is so dangerously low that we can't inspire some pastors to complete a simple annual report, participate in their district gatherings or attend the National Conference sessions which comprise a whopping 48 hours of their year!

Believe me, I could go on whining and complaining about what we are, (and so have you) but thankfully here God stopped me in my tracks.

I did not hear His voice audibly, but God clearly said to me, “Randy, stop focusing on **what** you are instead of **who** you are!” And let me tell you, when I started considering who we are, I began to be filled with what I describe as supernatural optimism. The Bible calls this supernatural optimism, hope. Through Dr. Buckwalter’s excellent messages to us in this very room last year, God turned my attention to Romans 15:13 as the theme for this year’s National Conference.

“Overflowing Hope”. Listen to this truth again. *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit”*.

Our hope comes from **who** we are, not **what** we are! Consider with me who we are.

WE ARE THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST.

The Bible describes us in Ephesians as those called out of darkness to be light. Those who were once enemies of God, now His children. Those filled to full measure of Jesus Christ, empowered with supernatural gifts and graces, the people of God, a holy Temple, the very dwelling of God through the Holy Spirit. We desperately need to understand the goal of our salvation is not just deliverance from the reality of Hell and the assurance of a place in Heaven, we are saved to be God’s Church.

Robinson and Wall in their book, Called To Be The Church, remind us:

“The consistent witness of Scripture...is that God’s intention is to form a people, a community, a visible body. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis and continuing through to Paul’s letters and to the book of Revelation...God means to have a people who will be a blessing to all peoples of the earth”...(p.3, Eerdmans, 2006).

The Church is God’s idea, God’s invention, God’s “plan A” and he assures us through His Word that there is no “plan B” in the works! It is not about **what** we are but **who** we are!

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are - so says our *Discipline* in section 300, **Evangelical!** What does that mean? I’m glad you asked. Here’s our answer in section 301:

“Believing the Bible to be the authoritative, inspired, infallible word of God, we affirm that people are saved by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Compelled by this good news, and commissioned to make disciples of Jesus Christ, each local congregation prayerfully and strategically carries out this commission to its own community and beyond”.

Pastors, brush up on your Ecclesiology. Preach and teach your people who they are and let hope overflow.

WE ARE THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST GATHERED IN LOCAL CONGREGATIONS.

Jim Wallis, founder and editor of Sojourners magazine is credited as saying,

“The greatest need in our time is not simply for the preaching of the gospel; nor for service on behalf of justice; nor for the experience of the Spirit’s gifts; nor even for the challenging of the king. The greatest need for our time is the call simply to be the church, to love one another and to offer our lives for the sake of the world. The creation of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is the foundation of all other answers”.

The Apostle Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians, “Formerly, you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God. But now you are... fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household...” Those of us born again by the gospel of Jesus Christ have been spiritually, physically, and emotionally joined together as the expression of Jesus Christ in our respective communities. We belong to each other, and the Bible declares we need each other. Now so, more than ever! Friends now is not the time to sort ourselves into ideological camps of Democrat, Republican, pro-vaccine or anti-vaccine, for masks or against masks, conservative, fundamental or progressive. God is leading us into these difficult years of exile which will require unprecedented unity centered on the conviction of the centrality of Jesus Christ, navigated with civility and offered to our culture with compassion!

Local congregations of the Church of Jesus Christ exist as sanctuaries in the Babylonian land in which we live, raise our families, and worship God in exile. Our hope overflows when we understand the Church is not a building but God’s people! We are the Church whether we have two people meeting in a garage or two thousand meeting in a grand auditorium. Our *Discipline* celebrates this scriptural truth in section 302 stating:

“Empowered to be unique, and owning the responsibility to be healthy, local churches intentionally, actively, and collectively pursue God’s mission...within its local context...”

Or as I like to say, the Church is like Jello. Think about Jello with me for a second. The ingredients remain the same but when activated by water, Jello has the ability to take the shape of a variety of molds. So it is with the Church. The ingredients remain the same, recorded for us in Scripture for all eternity, but when activated by the Holy Spirit, God’s people have the ability not only to survive but thrive in any number of contexts, even unfriendly ones! The Equipping Experience on Thursday afternoon is designed to show us that God’s Holy Spirit has gifted enough people in our congregations to join in His mission now, even as we pray, plan and disciple more! Thank you for your willingness to complete the surveys and learn about your spiritual giftedness and team styles!

We are in the best possible condition we could be in to thrive as the Church in any community because God has determined that our existence does not depend on politics, pandemics, economics, or infrastructure but on his Holy Spirit and each other. Hope overflows when we

understand the flexibility and resilience of the Church and the importance of our congregation's presence in our communities.

If one local church can be used of God so effectively in its immediate context, imagine the impact when churches intentionally connect in a district, a region, a National Conference! We are not merely **Evangelical**. We are not merely **Congregational**. We declare in section 303 of our *Discipline* that we are also **Connectional**! Listen to these revolutionary and timely convictions.

“With the understanding that the local church cannot carry out the Great Commission alone, we surrender self-sufficiency and autonomy to join together in love. Embracing our common Discipline and our common purpose – to know Christ and make Him known – EC Churches will pray together, fellowship together, develop leaders together, plant churches together, perform acts of mercy together, pursue justice together, and celebrate God together”.

Hope overflows when we understand the flexibility and resilience of the Church, the importance of our congregation's presence in our communities and the impact of connecting with other EC congregations in our districts, regions and beyond as the people of God, positioned for His purpose.

WE ARE THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST, GATHERED IN LOCAL CONGREGATIONS, CONNECTED WITH ONE ANOTHER AND SHEPHERDED BY PASTORS.

I want to speak directly to my brother pastors at this point. This conference marks my thirtieth year of pastoral ministry. I think I have a pretty good understanding of who pastors are, what pastors do, and how pastors think. At the beginning of this pandemic, we were exhorted to applaud and appreciate our medical workers, our teachers and our first responders. I did and do applaud them but, did you also get the feeling that what you were doing to lead your community through this crisis wasn't applauded, appreciated, or even acknowledged? When my small city gathered the community leaders to address the pandemic, my phone remained silent even though at the time I served as the president of the Christian ministerial association representing over one hundred area churches. It seems the only time the church came in the spotlight was when pastors were arrested, taken before the judge, or tried on social media for being super-spreaders.

Listen to me pastors. According to God, you are the first responders for your congregation and community. Not only are you dealing with keeping the unity of the congregation over differing opinions of mitigation measures, pivoting from in-person to live-streaming services and meetings, adjusting expenses to keep the budget in balance, chasing down volunteers, you are also called upon to help those dealing with unprecedented anxieties, increased suicide risks and family burn-out from stay-at-home-work-and-school schedules. Oh yeah, you better have a sermon prepared for Sunday and it better be good because not only are your people not coming to church weekly, they're also exploring the plethora of professional preacher's podcasts now available on the internet.

Pastors, let me encourage you. As you're brushing up on your ecclesiology, take some time to study what the Bible has to say about pastors & shepherds. Let your hope overflow as you realize that just like the church is God's "plan A" with no "plan B" in sight; and just as the local congregation is God's "plan A" with no "plan B" in sight, the calling, examining, training, and stationing of pastors to shepherd God's people is also his "plan A" with no "plan B" in sight! We are going to spend the majority of our time together on Friday morning celebrating the calling, credentialing, and values of our pastors. You are the God-called, Church-ordained elder, pastor, priest, shepherd who lives with and among his people and the people of his community to lead, to equip, to encourage, to exhort. You are called to stand between Almighty God and those around you as priest, offering intercession, holding out the Gospel of Life and administering the Sacraments on behalf of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Pastors, I am convinced that if the Evangelical Congregational Church is going to thrive as part of God's plan for this country of ours, you are the key! The future of the EC Church does not necessarily depend on the Bishop, the Associates, the District Field Directors, it depends on our pastors understanding and executing their God-ordained calling with excellence. As your Bishop, and I know I speak for the Associates and District Field Directors, we want to come alongside you to encourage you, equip you and yes expect excellence from you as you fulfill God's calling to your church and community.

CONCLUSION

I'm not sure how to bring my Humpty Dumpty story back around for a dramatic finish. He had a great fall. I would like to say that Jesus showed up at his tomb and called out, "Humpty, come forth!" But that didn't happen. The Church in the United States is experiencing a great fall. Maybe that's for the best. We probably had no business being on the wall in the first place. As I recall, Jesus avoided lofty perches, except for the cross, and encouraged his followers to minister from street level. Perhaps we'll learn a whole new ministry perspective down here as the Evangelical Congregational Church of Jesus Christ gathered in local congregations, connected with one another and shepherded by pastors.

Whether you call it supernatural optimism or **Overflowing Hope**, God has given it to me, and I desperately want it for you. Carla and I have been praying for all of you this way. I am convinced that if we truly understand who we are as the Church of Jesus Christ and execute that well, we will witness a great re-awakening of sorts among the Evangelical Congregational Church. We will be a growing movement of God! That is not to say that it will be easy. God is not calling us to the same, simple, and safe that we are used to. He is calling us to the changing, challenging, and costly of being His Church in a post-Christian context. To be brutally honest, I expect we will experience a continued decline in our numbers because not every pastor, not every parishioner, not every local church will want to engage on the level a true movement of God requires, especially in the early stages where we do more peddling and pushing than coasting and coaxing.

Here's the good news. Over the past decade or so, our denomination's leaders, under Bishop Bruce Hill's excellent direction has put us on solid footing, transforming the Evangelical Congregational Church from a fixed corporate structure of hierarchy to a flexible community structure of the Church. Perhaps we could say this has helped us embrace our awkward slide off that wall with grace and purpose, keeping us intact enough to become a movement instead of a monument!

I have no idea what the Evangelical Congregational Church will look like in the next five to ten years, but I do know we will either become a missional movement, or, like our friend Humpty, we will be no more. My goal as your Bishop is to help us dream again of what we can be for Jesus. I want to help us think missionally, using our imagination and creativity to embrace this missional shift that began under Bishop Mike Sigman and Vision 20/20. We can leverage our smaller congregations and communities. We can plant a variety of new churches through the multiplication of healthy churches. We will give permission to try new things and take risks and to fail at some while we are succeeding at others. We can achieve and maintain a comprehensive unity within our broadly evangelical family. We must do all of these things being centered squarely on Jesus. As Frost & Hirsch so rightly declare, "Our Christology informs our missiology which in turn determines our ecclesiology" (The Shaping of Things To Come, p.25).

There is much more to be said. This is just the beginning of the conversation. There is more to be explored, fleshed out and evaluated. Invite me to speak at your church and I'll continue this conversation with you from the book of Acts and what it looks like to "return to Jerusalem" as a mighty movement of God. For now, let me underscore this: God is not done with His Church. God is not done with local congregations and God is not done with you pastor!

"May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit". (Romans 15:13)

Respectfully submitted,

Randy Sizemore, Bishop