

EPISCOPAL ADDRESS 2023

Hope overflows to cast a vision.

Greetings in the name that is above every other name, the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Last year I stood before you as your newly elected Bishop with a story about Humpty Dumpty and God's eternal promise of overflowing hope from Romans 15:13. After one year in office I am happy to report that I see a growing hope, fostered by God's Holy Spirit in our National Conference. I will freely admit that measuring hope is a challenging proposition. A portion of this growing hope is expressed in tangible, observable ways and other portions of this growing hope are felt in the heart and soul and expressed in our worship services, leadership gatherings and individual conversations. However it is measured, it is on this foundation of hope that we are determined to grow as a dynamic movement of God.

Our vision is to become a dynamic movement of God.

As I was searching for a way to communicate what I believe to be the passion and direction of God for the EC Church, I found myself drawn to our Vision Statement which captures the direction God is placing in my heart for our Church. Listen again to the slightly shortened version of our Vision Statement:

The Evangelical Congregational Church will be a dynamic movement of God 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.

This vision is rooted in our history and heritage.

The challenge with vision statements is that we often put them in notebooks labeled, "strategic planning" and we place them on our websites under headings like, "who we are", and we print them in our publications as colorful graphics, as if somehow this is where they were born, this is where they live and yes, this is where they die. The vision statement of the Evangelical Congregational Church did not germinate from a committee of creative minds as a cleverly crafted way of describing a one-hundred-year-old church. This vision germinates from the heart of God in His revealed Word and flows from our history and heritage as far back as the conversion of the Wesley brothers in 1738, the Great Awakening and the 1740 revivals up and down the east coast of America through evangelistic campaigns. It grows from what is sometimes called the Second Great Awakening some fifty years later that reached into a small corner of eastern Pennsylvania to capture the heart of a farmer and tile maker named Jacob Albright who after experiencing the evangelistic preaching of Anton Houtz at his own childrens' funeral went back to his brick kiln and cried out to God for mercy and salvation.

This glorious salvation began to grow in Albright as a burning passion for God. Jacob's thirst for God and his Word grew through personal conversations with men like Adam Riegel, a United Brethren lay minister and through organized Methodist class meetings led by Isaac Davies. The book, Evangelical From The Beginning describes Albright's passion. "A new Jacob Albright was emerging like wheat from buried grain; a man of prayer, a student of the Word, zealous to speak, not eloquently, but lovingly about his Jesus" (p.29).

Albright's burning passion for God led to his missionary zeal to reach his lost neighbors, as a circuit riding evangelistic preacher and the founder of a dynamic movement that even after his early death in 1808 continued through his young co-laborers in this new America, still recovering from the Revolutionary War. History documents that our early Evangelical preachers followed the move of the frontier people into the wilderness to build the Kingdom even as they built our nation. By 1816, Albright's people had grown from a single man's burning passion for God and missionary zeal for the lost to a dynamic movement active in five states. As much as I would love to continue sharing our exciting history, I will leave it there. My point is this, the Vision Statement of the Evangelical Congregational Church flows from our history and heritage, it is who we are, and more importantly, it flows from the heart of our Heavenly Father who so loves the world that he sends his Son Jesus, not to condemn the world but to save the world through him. And so we boldly declare,

The Evangelical Congregational Church will be a dynamic movement of God 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.

This is a comprehensive vision.

Let's examine how this Vision Statement guides and directs us as a dynamic movement of God. As the graphic below portrays, a dynamic movement must include forward progression.



A dynamic movement of God must begin with burning passion for God. A burning passion for God leads to a missionary zeal for the lost. As Jesus teaches us in the Great Commandment, we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). Just like in Albright's day, as we share Jesus with our neighbors and the lost are saved, we invite them into local expressions of the Church. Contextualized healthy congregations where together we are discipled to live out Jesus' teachings, multiplying ourselves as we share the Good News and plant new congregations who repeat the vision. This is our vision not because it sounds good from the pulpit or looks good in our publications, this is our vision because it flows from the very heart of God our Father.

This is who we are and the direction we have set as the Evangelical Congregational Church. As your Bishop I am committed to leading us in organizing ourselves, stewarding our resources and implementing the strategies of this vision to grow the Evangelical Congregational Church as a dynamic movement of God. This is an encompassing vision which will require an intentional commitment of our time, talent, and treasure. I encourage you to familiarize yourself and your congregation with this vision statement because this will be our road map, our way forward, our GPS for the long foreseeable future.

This vision begins with a burning passion for God.

For our time together during these sessions of our National Conference gathering, I want to focus on the first sentence of our vision, *The Evangelical Congregational Church will be a dynamic movement of God led by pastors and laity who have a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost.*

A burning passion for God does not flow from a conference theme, a strategic planning committee or any other human source. A burning passion for God flows from God himself. During the last few months, we have witnessed an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit across our country upon those willing to position themselves through confession, humility, repentance, and surrender to receive an awakening, a renewal, a revival, a burning passion for God. Like God's people camped by the Jordan River in Joshua 3, we too must be willing to trust God enough to break camp and follow Him through the obstacles before us into a new land where he promises to do amazing things among us! Breaking camp, leaving the places where we have been living a little too comfortably is upsetting and many are unwilling to consider such a bold move. However, as I have been saying for the past three months, the difference between a settlement and a movement is the number of God's people willing to break camp and follow him.

Pastors, lay delegates, church leaders, are you willing to break camp, to pull up the stakes of your dwelling, to get your spiritual, physical and emotional stuff together? Are you willing to allow God's Holy Spirit to evaluate those things you have been holding onto and carrying around unnecessarily? What would we say to Joshua's people who wanted to hold tightly to their cloth tents and meager earthly belongings, rather than giving them up to inherit houses they did not build and vineyards they did not plant and wells they did not dig. What would we say if they would rather live in their current less-than-perfect reality than to break camp, consecrate themselves and follow their God who promised to do amazing things among them? What would those who are watching us in 2023 say if we are not willing to break camp and follow God?

This is where we must begin. While this burning passion for God must come from God, we are not helpless, nor should we be sitting idly by waiting for it to happen. We must take every opportunity to position ourselves as denominational leaders, pastors, lay leaders and the people of God to receive this renewed passion through God's Holy Spirit. This is indeed the practical fulfillment of the overflowing hope promised in Romans 15:13! To this end I have charged the Prayer Mobilization Team to lead us in a conference-wide prayer strategy that will keep us centered in and on the only One who can awaken and renew. I challenge you pastors and lay leaders to join Carla and me in prayer and fasting asking our Father to move within the EC Church, filling us with a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost.

This vision of passion involves practical strategies.

Movements are fueled by passion and facilitated by practical strategies. Therefore, I am challenging our conference Communities, Teams, Associates, District Field Directors, committees, congregations and pastors to ask the strategic question, "How does what we do help us become a dynamic movement of God?"

Our Conference Support Team led by Executive Director Kevin Henry has taken my challenge seriously and we have added two staff positions at Church Center, an Administrative Receptionist, and a Communications Coordinator to facilitate the mission of the conference and serve our local congregations. We welcome Bethany White and Wendy Beard to the Church Center team! I also want to thank Dee Jaramillo for her over-and-above service to both the National Conference and the Global Ministries Community over the past year while we were filling these two positions. Dee is now serving exclusively as the Deputy Director of the Global Ministries Community. I also would like to publicly thank Dave King who recently retired from serving as our Benefits Administrator. Bethany and Kevin are picking up his duties but no one will be able to replace Dave's "dad jokes" or should I say bad jokes? From updating

software to reducing the amount of printing, postage and handling paper, we continue to strive for that healthy balance of maximum service at minimal cost, keeping Ministry Fund percentages as low as possible so that more resources are available for local ministry initiatives. Well done Kevin Henry and Church Center staff!

The Conference Network Team, which includes the Associates giving leadership to our Church Health, Kingdom Extension, Global Ministries, Ministerial Development and Missional Alignment Communities are also strategically evaluating the members, committees and scope of their communities repositioning themselves to facilitate the vision of becoming a dynamic movement of God. At this conference you will enjoy presentations from the Church Health, Global Ministries, Kingdom Extension and Ministerial Development Communities and hear first-hand how they are helping us become a dynamic movement of God. As a vital part of the Conference Network Team and the connecting point of a burning passion for God and the practical work of the local church, our District Field Directors continue to serve the pastors and people in their districts with excellence educating, encouraging, and equipping them to know Christ and to make him known. On behalf of all of us as the Evangelical Congregational Church I want to express gratitude, appreciation, and thanksgiving for the tireless efforts of our Associates and District Field Directors who are on the front lines of our mission!

This is a vision of fit and flourish.

If you're reading anything church related you know that the number and average size of local churches in the United States is declining. Most of the churches in the U.S. are averaging below 100 in weekly attendance. The EC Church is no exception. Approximately 89% of our churches averaged below 100 people in worship on any given week. Now please hear me clearly: the decreasing size of churches in the U.S. is not necessarily a bad thing, **IF** we plant more of these right-sized gatherings of believers who are willing to missionally contextualize the Gospel for the communities they are called to reach. I believe the future of the Church in the United States will require a multiplication of both larger and smaller, or "right-sized" congregations with full time and co-vocational pastors who will invest a larger portion of their budgets into ministry rather than maintenance. This strategy is laid out clearly in our own Vision Statement. God in his grace has positioned us to flourish in this new landscape as his Church! Of course, along with birthing new churches we recognize the life cycle of other congregations will come to an end. Our goal must be to birth more new congregations than those we say "good-bye" to.

Critical to carrying out this right-size-church multiplication strategy is the challenge of pairing pastors and congregations. In this increasingly non-traditional culture of doing church, traditional models of stationing pastors do not always work. The Stationing Elders and I are committed to creatively working with churches and pastors, trusting God to provide guidance in stationing assignments that fit and flourish pastor, congregation, and community for mission and ministry. As a dynamic movement we will need God to raise up more pastors. These pastors, like the pioneering pastors of our heritage, will most likely need to be co-vocational and will need to be evangelistic and will need to be missionally motivated to share the gospel of Christ in their local communities through the contextualized ministries of the local congregation. It goes without saying that we will need biblically sound and contextually expedient methods of training the pioneering pastors we seek. I am working closely with Rev. Matt Hill, Ministerial Development Associate and the Ministerial Development Community to evaluate how we recruit, assess, train, and credential those men God calls to pastoral ministry in the EC Church. We are committed to implementing the changes needed to supply our dynamic movement with biblically sound, culturally aware, and missionally motivated pioneering pastors who embrace our evangelical heritage and passion. As H.M. Stanford wrote in our 1910 denominational publication, The Evangelical, *"It should never be forgotten that we are essentially an evangelistic church, and if the day should ever come when we cease to be such, then there would be no longer any reason for us to exist as a church"*.

This must be a personal vision.

Visions cannot be borrowed and returned like local library books. Visions must be bought by those willing to pay the cost, visions must be brought home and broken in, visions must be studied, underlined, outlined, and lived with until they show signs of being well-handled and well-loved. I believe God's vision for the EC Church has become my vision, but in all honesty if it never becomes your vision, it will make little difference. Carla and I have been praying and fasting that God would fill our pastors and people with this vision. Our heritage is full of individuals who personally bought the vision. Listen to this description of your spiritual ancestors from the book, *Evangelical From The Beginning*.

“The early Evangelical Association did not have a missionary society; it was in fact, nothing else but a missionary society, and all its ministers were missionaries. Early conferences sent out up to one-third of their members to form new circuits in new counties and states, and as Evangelicals moved west, circuit-riding preachers followed. Sometimes laypeople formed classes and asked the nearest Annual Conference for a preacher. Sometimes preachers tracked down Evangelicals who had moved out of the church's territory. Sometimes preachers rode from cabin to cabin making appointments to preach on their next time around the circuit, and the people called their neighbors together for this opportunity to hear a preacher” (p. 47-48).

Go back with me many more years to Joshua chapter three. You know the story as well as I do. God's people have been delivered from Egypt under Moses. They have wandered in the wilderness for forty years and now stand before the flood-swollen violent waters of the Jordan River challenged to trust God to get them across that river, following a new leader named Joshua. Invited to engage the enemies and obstacles of the Promised Land, called to be his people in his position for his purpose. There are so many lessons and applications for our personal lives and congregational lives here that I would love to share, and I will if you invite me to come and preach at your church. At this moment, I want to explore the application for us, the pastors and lay leaders of the Evangelical Congregational Church and our desire to be a dynamic movement of God with a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost. I will condense my application to three points since apparently that's what all good Evangelical preachers do.

How do we realize this vision?

First, realizing the vision of what God wants us to be in the future begins by believing what God is saying now – even when we cannot see it! God is asking Joshua's dog-tired, discouraged and dismayed people to look beyond where they are (in the wilderness), beyond what they have (not much), and beyond what's in front of them (insurmountable obstacles and enemies), to what they cannot see. They are being asked to believe God that a flooded river will suddenly stand up in a heap, that the many and mighty armies of the new land will flee before them, that they will enjoy the blessing, success and presence of God in their lives as never before. They are being asked to believe that God will use them in ways they could never imagine as a dynamic movement to accomplish his plans for his world. Realizing the vision God has for us in the future requires we believe God for that vision right now!

Secondly, believing God right now for a future of becoming a dynamic movement requires that like Joshua's people we are willing to break camp. When the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant of God went before the people, they were instructed to break camp and follow God to a new land, a new life, a new vision. Breaking camp is hard work. Breaking camp is about pulling up stakes, leaving the known behind. Breaking camp is about getting our spiritual, physical and emotional stuff together. Breaking camp often involves confession of favored sin, reconciliation with God and fellow believers, surrender of pride and the need to be in control. Breaking camp requires us to keep our focus on God in unity with our leaders and those who are also following God. Do not underestimate the

importance of focus. We are currently witnessing the unprecedented division and destruction of denominations and congregations that could be dynamic movements of God but are not because they have lost their focus on God's mission. They have abandoned God's Word, God's ways, and their gospel heritage. They are insisting others follow them instead of God as they forge their own way across the river. We in the EC Church are not immune to such temptation to lose focus. As your Bishop, you need to know that I consider keeping us focused on God's vision my main priority.

Finally, breaking camp to follow God as a dynamic movement requires a willingness to get our feet wet. In Joshua chapter three the plan of God for crossing the river was announced. Nothing changed. The people broke camp. Nothing changed. The priests picked up the Ark of the Covenant and began walking. Nothing changed. The priests' feet touched the water. Everything changed! Need I say more? Pastors, lay leaders, people of God in the EC Church, are you willing to engage in the vision of being a dynamic movement? How is God asking you to get your feet wet with Him? The difference between a settlement and a movement is the number of people who are willing to get their feet wet, the number of people willing to engage in the vision. As Jacob Albright predicted before his death in 1808, "men will appear among you who will be able to accomplish that which I shall not be able to do. It is the work of God, and it is in His hands, He will provide for it."

Conclusion

Here we stand, as it were, on the banks of the Jordan, the people of Albright who throughout our journey have been blessed by God's faithful presence and provision. He has given us visionary leaders committed to his Word and his ways. He has formed us into a spiritual family of brothers and sisters with a common identity in Christ that flows from our shared history and heritage. He has successfully brought us to this point in our journey with him and is now inviting us to believe him for much, much more as we enter a new land of obstacles, opportunity, and promise. A dynamic movement of God led by pastors and lay leaders who have a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost. If you listen closely, you can just begin to hear it – the sound of a wet-footed church on the move, following their King!

Respectfully submitted,



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Bishop