

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
 NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2025

Greetings in the strong name of Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. Speaking of beginnings and endings, of past, present and future, wouldn't you love to be able to predict the future? Wouldn't it be great to be able to look around the corner so to speak and know what is coming before it actually gets here? To be totally prepared for what's next? This is indeed the anxiety that church leaders live with. We know the present state of the Church all too well. Declining attendance, interest, loyalty, resources, engagement, vision, optimism, and the list goes on. Many of us wonder what's next? What does God have up his sleeve? There are some bright spots on the horizon that seem to point to positive changes in the Church and culture and we're straining to see as far in front of us as we possibly can to get a glimpse. If God is up to something, if God is going to do something we want to be prepared, we want to prepare our people. We do not want to miss out.

This anxiety about the future, this fear about somehow missing out on what God may do next leads me to a very long, layered, but important question. How does a church leader discern what should be done or undone in the corner of the Church in which he serves, and how does he prepare his flock to fit into what God is up to in the Church, and how does he anticipate and plan for the opportunities and threats to ministry in the near and distant future? This is the question I have wrestled with many times as a local church pastor, as the Director of our denomination's Global Ministries and now as Bishop of the Evangelical Congregational Church.

It gives me some comfort to know that other leaders have also wrestled with this dilemma. Henri Nouwen in his little book, *In The Name of Jesus: Reflections On Christian Leadership* shares a similar frustration when being asked to speak on the future of Christian leadership in the new century. As he was struggling with looking ahead of himself for some idea of ministry in the future, he began to realize that a leader cannot lead beyond himself, or to put it another way, **leaders lead out of what God is doing in them right now!** As he says, *"The more I was willing to look honestly at what I was thinking and saying and doing now, the more easily I would come into touch with the movement of God's Spirit within me, leading me to the future. God is a God of the present and reveals to those who are willing to listen carefully to the moment in which they live the steps they are to take toward the future"* (p. 13).

I am becoming more and more convinced that the best way for the pastors, church leaders, and members of the EC Church to prepare their corner of the Church for the opportunities and threats of ministry in the future, and to make sure that they are prepared and positioned to join God in what he wants to do in the future, is to focus on what God is doing and wants to do in their lives right now! This makes a lot of sense to me because why would God be doing one thing in my life today only to pivot 180 degrees and do something totally different in his mission tomorrow? Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:25-33,

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?... ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

In other words, a dynamic movement of God needs women and men who are intentionally pursuing a deeper, fuller, closer relationship with Jesus and his Church, with a burning passion for God **TODAY!**

The Vision Statement of the Evangelical Congregational Church illustrates this very well. We understand that our vision of tomorrow directs our lives today. Let's take a moment to remind ourselves of that 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. 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.

You will notice that I emphasized the words, "Healthy churches". It is my conviction that a healthy movement of God is comprised of healthy congregations led by healthy pastors and healthy church leaders. For the past two years we have focused on church health, encouraging congregations to utilize the **Church Health Check Up** survey, which is still available on our website. While we continue to work on church health, this year we want to expand our focus to the health of our pastors and local church leaders.

Our vision of a dynamic movement requires spiritually emotionally healthy pastors, families and church leaders! Over the past year we have been researching, vetting, and sharing resources that will help our pastors grow healthy in their spiritual, emotional and physical lives. We have partnered with ServingLeaders, a ministry group that offers care, counseling and resources to pastors and their families. I love their mission statement: *We exist to revive, restore, and resource ministry leaders and their families, enabling them to pursue health and excellence in their call to ministry* (<https://www.servingleaders.org/what-we-do>).

Dave Wiedis from ServingLeaders came to the Conference Network Team's strategic retreat in October to lead us through the topics of stress, burnout, and trauma in ministry leaders' lives. I have invited Dave to lead our Equipping Experience here at our National Conference celebration on Thursday afternoon focusing on emotionally healthy spirituality.

Our National Conference theme: "Mindful Leadership" complements our vision of "transforming plateaued and declining churches into healthy disciple-making churches" by focusing on healthy pastors and church leaders.

We are not the first movement to understand the importance of health. The biblical writer John in his greeting to Gaius, a church leader in the provinces of Asia, connects the importance of spiritual, physical, and emotional health in the lives of church leaders. He writes, "*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you even as your soul is getting along well*" (3 John 1:2).

Like Gaius and all who come after him, church leaders must be **mindful leaders**, that is they must be intentionally aware of their physical, spiritual, and emotional health and how that health impacts their ability to lead. We are beginning to understand more and more as church leaders how important emotionally healthy spirituality is. A dynamic movement of God built on healthy, disciple-making churches requires healthy, mindful leaders! Healthy, mindful leaders understand that when they allow God to work in them today, God is also preparing them for what will come tomorrow.

Why is this focus on pastoral health so important? Pastor and psychologist Bill Gaultiere, in his article, "Pastor Stress Statistics" says, "*Pastors and other ministry leaders are often under so much stress that they may find themselves*

just hanging on by a thread, about to burn out from exhaustion or blow out morally. Pastor stress statistics paint a stark picture.” He goes on to lists twenty-four points that reflect many pastor’s stressors and the lack of soul care. I will highlight a few edited bullet points here; you can read the full list and the entire article at Soulshepherding.org.

- 75% of pastors report being “extremely stressed” or “highly stressed”
- 91% have experienced some form of burnout in ministry
- 18% say they are “fried to a crisp right now”
- 70% constantly fight depression
- 50% feel so discouraged that they would leave their ministry if they could- many feel they can’t
- 80% of ministry spouses feel left out and unappreciated in their church
- 77% feel they do not have a good marriage
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend
- 50% do not meet regularly with an accountability person or group
- 72% only study the Bible when preparing for sermons or lessons
- 21% spend less than 15 minutes a day in prayer
- 44% of pastors do not take a regular day off
- 31% do not exercise at all

I know this is a lot of heavy data to process. While every pastor does not struggle with all of these issues, most pastors are dealing with some of these issues. Here’s how we are responding to this reality. Along with offering counseling, coaching and care resources for our pastors and their families, we have also been actively encouraging pastors and lay leaders to intentionally connect with one another in their districts for prayer and support. Our District Field Directors are deployed to provide the first line of care and ministry to our pastors and their families. I want to express my deep appreciation to our District Field Directors who minister to and care for our pastors and congregations in their districts. More pastors and congregations are considering and planning sabbaticals for their pastors that will allow them to be renewed and refreshed for a new season of ministry. We are working on updating and expanding resources that will assist congregations and pastors in planning for and experiencing successful sabbaticals.

Speaking of pastors, we are thankful that God continues to call men to pastoral ministry within the EC Church. Beginning last summer and continuing through our January Pastoral Assessment Center we assessed six couples and one individual who felt called to pastoral ministry. We also are scheduled to complete three on site pastoral assessments of pastors already stationed in what we are calling, “PAC on the road”. We are praising God with these couples and individuals for how God has led them to this point in their calling and preparation for ministry and we are excited to assist them in the next steps of that process. I am also encouraged by the fact that God continues to call non-EC pastors to consider joining the EC Church and our vision of a dynamic movement. I am so thankful to Rev. Matt Hill and the Ministerial Development Community for their faithful work of shepherding our pastoral candidates through calling, education, and credentialing. Speaking of educating our pastors, now that Evangelical Seminary has merged with Kairos University, the Board of Examiners and I are actively working with Kairos President Greg Henson to ensure that our students who wish to utilize the Kairos platform will experience pastoral education and spiritual formation that reinforces our EC theology, history and heritage.

The Stationing Committee has been keeping busy on a year-round basis working with congregations and candidates discerning God’s appointments of pastors who will “fit and flourish” with their congregations. While the Stationing Committee continues to be the denomination’s final authority, we recognize that the traditional models of stationing are changing, and we are embracing new methods and ideas while keeping the stationing process firmly anchored to the Discipline and Rules of Conference. We are encouraging congregations to be patient, flexible and creative as we navigate a new landscape with fewer pastoral candidates, more part-time pastoral positions, and increasing layers of

spousal-work-family responsibilities that prevent the ease of moving as in years past. We continue to trust Jesus, the Lord of the Church to provide shepherds for his flock.

We know that church attendance and membership in the United States is declining at an alarming rate, with the average Sunday morning worship attendance now around fifty. We also know many churches across the nation have or will soon close their doors. A quick look at our own records will show a decline from 144 chartered churches in 2003 when we began as a newly merged National Conference to 108 chartered churches today. The good news is, we do not have to surrender or acquiesce to declining church attendance and the slow death of local congregations. On the contrary, our Vision Statement declares, ***we will transform plateaued and declining churches into healthy disciple-making churches committed to evangelizing the communities to which God has called them.***

The question is, how? How do we reverse the decline against the tide of cultural and spiritual factors challenging us? The answer is simply difficult. Allow me to explain.

We simply do what Jesus instructed us to do, that is make disciples that make disciples that make disciples and thereby we will grow the Church the way Jesus intended, which will lead to an increase in evangelism, an increase in attendance, and increase in community impact, an increase in pastoral and missionary candidates, and an increase in the planting of new congregations. We will be a dynamic movement!

The difficult part is convincing our pastors, church leadership teams and members to make the paradigm shift toward discipleship multiplication, knowing that it will be challenging, and it will require a faithful investment over time before we begin to see major results. As Bishop Hill stated in his episcopal address before this body in 2018, “We often talk about discipleship like it’s optional...But we also understand that Jesus gave each one of us the Great Commission to go and make disciples. It’s not an option.”

The great news is church leaders do not have to tackle this paradigm shift alone! The Kingdom Extension Community is offering Discipleship Pathway cohorts, and the Church Health Community is hosting Church Revitalization cohorts and other resources to help make this a reality in any local church! Even the Global Ministries Community, under their newly restructured GMC 2.0, is offering Mission Discipleship experiences, combining short-term mission trips with an intensive discipleship component. Pastors and church leaders if you are not engaged in the simply-difficult-great-commission-discipleship-plan of Jesus, may I ask, what are you doing? You will hear me say over and over again that if there is a “silver bullet” to turn the tide and transform us from a declining settlement to a dynamic movement, it is discipleship multiplication.

This is not just my passion, our entire denominational leadership team including the Associates of the Kingdom Extension Community, The Global Ministries Community, The Ministerial Development Community, the Church Health Community and the District Field Directors are all intentionally helping us focus on discipleship multiplication. To quote many speakers and leaders of the discipleship multiplication movement, “Jesus started his Church the way he wanted it, and now he wants his Church the way the started it”! We are committed to giving Jesus his Church the way he started it as a discipleship multiplication movement!

To do this, to join Jesus in his mission of Church as a discipleship multiplication movement, we need pioneers. A pioneer is a person among the first to explore new territory. A pioneer is an explorer, a trailblazer, a discoverer. Pioneers are visionary and see their hard work and sacrifices for the sake of those who will follow and future generations. If you read the history of the Evangelical Congregational Church, you will read accounts of similar pioneers across the United States and abroad and the good news is, God continues to call pioneer pastors and congregations today. Listen to Bishop Mike Sigman’s challenge as he writes in *Evangelical From The Beginning; The Story of the Evangelical Congregational Church*

Too often the church behaves more like a settled institution on earth than a dynamic movement of God. "Institution" evokes the image of an immovable building to which people are invited to come, while "movement" evokes the image of an active body of people influencing the cultures to which they go. An institution preserves boundaries; a movement pursues new frontiers. An institution is marked by caution; a movement is marked by risk. An institution has its eyes fixed on itself and is content with itself; a movement has eyes fixed on a goal and is moving toward it...The Evangelical Congregational Church must again become a movement of God. (p.349).

When you hear the description of pioneer, are you tempted to think of one or two people besides yourself or one or two other congregations besides yours that fit that description? That would be a mistake. Pioneers are not simply born, they are born-again from within. As we surrender ourselves to King Jesus and his reign in our lives, we find ourselves asking different questions, pioneering questions. Instead of, "why?", we ask, "why not?". Instead of, "what!?", we ask, "when?". We begin to see opportunities where others see obstacles. Like Jacob Albright we develop a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost, at inconvenience, at hardship, or even at cost to ourselves. Pastors and Church leaders, let me ask you a question: *What is your calling costing you?* Here's two other bothersome questions Larry Walkemeyer, from Exponential, asked me that I now ask you: *Is what you're doing worth your life? Would you trade your life for the greatest Kingdom impact?*

I am asking God to raise up more pioneering pastors and people in our churches who will blaze a trail for others to follow. I'm asking for women and men who have a fire in their belly, not waiting for the conditions to change but joining with Jesus where they live, work, and play to make disciples with him. I am praying for pastors and families who will see opportunities where others see none. Pastors who instead of immediately discounting that small, struggling congregation will seek God's face and say, "God if you call, I will go, if you need me, I will stay." Brothers, I'm here to tell you that answering God's call to pastor in the EC Church in 2025 and beyond is going to take some determination, some stamina, a strong support system, significant sacrifice, and a whole lot of pioneering persistence. Why do I say that? As I shared with you last year, I believe God spoke to me while I was sitting in a mega church in Austin, Texas, where they have more people attending their various church services than we have living in most of our towns. Here's the message: ***God has not called most of us to the Bible belts, the major cities and population centers of our country. God has called most of us to the villages and valleys, to the counties and communities, to the towns and townships of what some would consider unimportant America, in order to make disciples with him!***

I view 2025 as a pivotal year in the EC Church. Beginning my third year, I will undergo the scheduled evaluation of the office of Bishop but more importantly, with two years under my belt I have a good working knowledge of where we are as a conference, where God is calling us forward, and I have been able to assemble great teams of Godly, passionate women and men to help us get there! I will be utilizing this "evaluation year" to conduct evaluative conversations with my Associates, District Field Directors and Church Center staff. I am excited to see how God will build on the work He is doing in and through us this year and I continue to pray for an outbreak of revival in the EC Church.

If you've spoken with me about our Church, you know that I am genuinely optimistic and excited about the future of our dynamic movement. And why shouldn't I be? God has given us a great commission vision and has blessed us with excellent leadership teams and support staff. In other reports and presentations at this National Conference gathering you will hear of the focused and creative work of the Associates and Communities who are equipping and empowering us as a dynamic movement. We celebrate with thanksgiving the over-and-above ministry of our District Field Directors who shepherd the pastors and congregations of the EC family and do the holy work of keeping us connected. We have a top-notch Church Center staff. Kevin, Jodi, Shirley, Bethany, Wendy, and I have grown into a

team and each one approaches their daily tasks and responsibilities of supporting local congregations and pastors as a calling to be carried out with excellence.

Personally, I thank God for my life and ministry partner, Carla who for the last thirty-eight years has committed her life to me, our family and the Evangelical Congregational Church family both here in the states and around the globe. She has given her life to serve Jesus through the EC Church in up-front, along-side and behind the scenes ministry. The EC family is our family, and we count it a privilege to serve our King with the great people of this dynamic movement.

I recently heard a speaker remind his audience that they would all die. "You will all die", he said, "and when you do friends and family will gather and say some nice things about you, then they'll eat food and go home and you will not" Knowing that reality faced everyone in his audience, he challenged them to live large, think big, take risks, and live a life worth living. Good advice for the average person but you are not the average person. You are the born-again, Holy Spirit indwelt, son or daughter of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and he has redeemed and empowered you to do more than think big or live large. You have been given a calling and a commission to make disciples of Jesus who will repeat the process. As pastors and church leaders let's practice mindful leadership. Let's covenant to intentionally pursuing a deeper, fuller, closer relationship with Jesus and his Church, with a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost. Let's be a dynamic multiplication movement!

In Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Randy Sizemore". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Randy Sizemore
Bishop