

THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
 NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2026

Greetings in the strong name of Jesus Christ, the name above every other name in heaven and on earth. Our conference theme this year is, "Built To Move!" from Acts 17:28 which says, "for in him we live and move and have our being." There is a lot of movement in Acts chapter seventeen. Consider the dynamic movement in verses 24-28.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' (NIV).

In this passage, God is on the move making the world and everything in it. God is active, not *resting* in man-made temples, but moving among his very creation giving life and redemption and purpose to it all. He creates mankind to move – to inhabit the entire earth as his redeemed children so that others would know about him and move to seek him, reaching out and finding him very near as he moves close to them.

We as God's people have been built to move!

Did you know that the average car is built with approximately 30,000 individual parts that work together over an average time span of 12-15 years reaching an average distance of 200,000 miles driven? That's eight times around the earth's equator, 36 round trips from New York City to Los Angeles, or 84 percent of the distance from the earth to the moon! What a shame it would be to allow that car that was intentionally and expertly built to move to simply rest, or I could say rust, in the garage or driveway.

Look under the proverbial hood and you will see that God has expertly built his children to move as well! Salvation in and through Jesus Christ is not just a ticket to Heaven someday but a total regeneration, a total re-build of our spiritual, physical, and emotional selves complete with a calling from God to join in his movement. Equipped with the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we run this race with the intentionality of a professional driver in tune with the 30,000 parts of his car working together in precision to overtake the opposition and win the crown at last.

Like our Heavenly Father, we have been built to move!

Our vision as a conference is to join God in his dynamic movement of making disciples of Jesus Christ from around the corner to around the world! The word *dynamic* can be described as vigorously active, energetic, powerful motion. In Ephesians 3:20, God clearly tells us in his Word that he, *"...is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his [vigorously active, energetic, powerful motion] that is at work within us..."* (my translation).

Since taking office as Bishop, God has captured my heart with our history as a pioneering, gospel-centered, dynamic movement of pastors and laity who have a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost. Added to our history is our heritage of conference leaders, pastors, and people centered on the Word of God and committed to the gospel, discipleship, and prayer. Leaders, both clergy and lay, who were wise enough to create a principle-based conference of churches allowing, we could say even expecting, local church structures and strategies to be contextualized for the maximum impact and effectiveness of the gospel in their respective communities. In other words, our heritage as a movement inspires and requires us to lay aside every weight and sin and as many institutional encumbrances that beset us and run in such a way to win!

Facilitating dynamic movement.

Speaking of moving, have you noticed that God is on the move in our nation? Pollsters are publishing polls showing an increase in church attendance, Bible reading, the importance of religion and an overall increase in those engaging in the Christian faith. I am happy to say that God is on the move in the Evangelical Congregational Church as well. The Annual Ministry Reports from our local churches celebrate an increase in professions of faith, a 105% increase from 2021 to 2025 to be exact! We are also experiencing an

increase in the number of individuals engaged in discipleship, an increase in the number of individuals involved in intentional prayer, and an increase in the number of individuals attending EC churches on a Sunday morning. I realize that reports that count noses and nickels may not be the only evaluation of a church's health and effectiveness, but the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers to record conversions, attendances, and offering amounts so I believe we're in good company. Speaking of recording nickels and noses, I want to express my appreciation to our pastors and church leaders for taking the semi-annual and annual Ministry Reports seriously and getting them to us on time. This year we broke a record with every chartered church except one, submitting their Annual Ministry Report.

We praise God for the glimmers of renewal and revival in our midst, and as a National Conference, we want to facilitate that renewal as much as we can. In September 2025, our senior leadership team that we call the BEDAS (Bishop, Executive Director, Associates, Vice Chair and Secretary of National Conference) gathered off-site for a strategic retreat where we spent time in prayer, seeking God's wisdom of how to nurture our denomination toward dynamic movement and renewal. We met again for a follow-up strategic day in January 2026 to begin implementing the plans made at the first meeting. The following points highlight the findings and planned direction of our times together as we focused on Jeremiah 29:1-14, embracing verse 11 which says, *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

We began with an honest look at our statistical realities.

1. Church attendance is trending upward from 5,853 in 2020 to 8,031 in 2025.
2. Church attendance breakdown from 2025 Annual Ministry Reports
 - a. 69 churches average 50 or less
 - b. 22 churches average 51-100
 - c. 7 churches average 101-150
 - d. 12 churches average 151 or greater.
 - e. 16% of churches are reporting growth
 - f. 84% of churches are reporting decline
3. We currently have 104 chartered EC Churches on our Stationing Report.
4. We have about 50 part-time pastors.
5. Conclusions:
 - a. The gap between larger and smaller churches is growing.
 - b. We are a financially generous group!
 - c. The National Conference is financially supported by fewer churches. Currently 15-18% of our congregations are contributing half of all Ministry Funds.

My conclusion is this: we do need to be honest about our current reality as a declining conference of churches and, at the same time we need to be hopeful about our vision of becoming a dynamic movement of God!

How will we respond to this reality as a National Conference?

1. The **Global Ministries Community** will re-align its breadth and scope to more closely match the other denominational Communities, focusing less on our international conferences and more on helping our local churches cultivate mission-mindedness, which we believe in the long term will increase our involvement in global missions through the work of local congregations and not a centralized National Conference office.
2. The **Ministerial Development Community** will expand student aid funds to cover our internal education program called Institute for Church Leadership (ICL) and perhaps discipleship training like the Exponential conferences; explore ways to help churches and pastors raise up the next generation of pastors; form a pastoral recruitment task force; and actively create a pastoral residency program that can be scalable throughout our conference of churches.
3. The **Kingdom Extension Community** will continue to encourage and oversee the planting of traditional and non-traditional church plants and extensions while developing a clearer vision for ethnic church planting, encouraging pastors and churches to help identify potential church planters while seeking a broader representation of members on the KEC from our conference of churches.
4. The **Church Health Community** will make church revitalization grants more purposeful, investing more into willing pastors and church leadership teams, utilizing church revitalization "boot camps" while intentionally evaluating potential "revitalization pastors" to ensure higher levels of success.

5. The **Missional Alignment Community** will seek to align our trajectory with our history and heritage as a dynamic evangelical gospel movement, founded on biblical faith and doctrine and fueled by intentional and powerful prayer.
6. The **shared ministry model** of denominational leadership will continue with the recognition that we are asking our Associates, District Field Directors, and other denominational leaders to go above and beyond in sacrificial ways for the sake of our movement, which as it grows will at some point require different leadership models.
7. The **District Field Directors** will intentionally educate our pastors and churches on our vision of a dynamic movement, communicating the various resources and opportunities available to help them while building the all-important relational connectivity between pastors and churches in the districts so that we are moving together towards Jesus' best for us.
8. The **Conference Network Team** (BEDAS & DFDs) will continue to promote discipleship multiplication, encouraging and equipping pastors and churches to develop discipleship pathways based squarely on the Word of God that will grow our movement both deep and wide as disciples make disciples in obedience to Jesus' Great Commission.
9. The **Stationing Committee** will actively work with churches to help create healthier pastoral transitions utilizing succession plans and professionally trained interim pastors while encouraging creativity in church partnerships, mergers, networks, and other scenarios while navigating a nation-wide shortage of pastors and praying for God's supply of "fit and flourish" pastors.
10. The **Finance Committee** will carefully steward the Ministry Funds given by our local congregations to resource our movement, being careful to spend in wise and timely ways to fuel our forward momentum while saving and investing in secure ways that ensure our financial health and longevity.

Much more can and will be explored and explained in each one of these areas of ministry oversight. But for now, I want to underscore the unity and determination of our conference's leadership teams, Communities, and committees to honestly face our current reality of a declining denomination with the hopeful determination to transform as a dynamic movement of God.

Now I ask, how will you respond to our reality as a local pastor and congregation?

This is the question at hand, is it not? This is the question I asked last year in my Episcopal Address at our National Conference celebration.

"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?"

The specifics of this answer will vary from congregation to congregation and context to context, but in keeping with our theme of being *"Built to Move,"* I do have a few mile markers for you. Obviously there must be a direction and a destination for a dynamic movement to move to! The destination for God's people in the book of Joshua was labeled as, "the Promised Land," but in all reality those following God there had very little idea of what to expect except to be assured that God would get them there; God would live with them there and God would empower them there to join him in his mission. The same is true for the Church of Jesus Christ in the United States, and more specifically for the EC Church. The destination where God is taking us may be obscure at the moment. However, we do know that wherever God is taking his Church, whatever he is planning to do in his Church in the next year or so, is going to be much better than where we are living now!

While the destination wasn't fully known to Joshua's people, the direction was crystal clear: break camp and follow God's lead. Joshua's people had the Ark of the Covenant, the Levitical Priests, and the physical miracles of God to mark their way. What do we have? What pathway, what mile markers, what is God giving us to make sure the people of the EC Church who break camp will be going in the right direction and will be as prepared as possible to join the dynamic movement of God? I'm glad you asked! I have spent quite a bit of time in prayer, fasting and contemplation with God about this very question. What strategy, what program, what biblical foundations should I as Bishop, should we as denominational leaders and pastors, be implementing to equip our people to follow God and prepare our people for whatever destination he has for us?

I believe that to prepare our people to move with God and to be prepared for whatever destination God has for his Church in the future, we need to focus on our GDP. You're probably thinking of GDP as the acronym for *Gross Domestic Product*, which is the total market value of all the goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period. My use of the acronym GDP does not stand for *Gross Domestic Product* but for Gospel, Discipleship and Prayer. Let me explain. Without going into too much detail here, to be best prepared for today and for wherever and whenever God's movement breaks among us, our energy and focus needs to be concentrated on making sure our movement is as deep as it is wide or that the following foundation forms our members and churches.

Number One: The Gospel

We are evangelicals, the people of the Good News, and the importance of evangelism cannot be overstated. When I use the word gospel, I am indeed speaking to the plan of salvation as clearly revealed in Scripture, but I am also talking about God's metanarrative of redeeming all of creation through the finished work of Jesus Christ. God's desire to forgive, redeem, restore, and resurrect life from death needs to be the center of our preaching, teaching, and worship. When we are preaching and teaching through any book of the Bible or biblical subject, or when we are engaged in corporate worship, we should intentionally connect God's "big story" of redemption to each person's individual story of God's desire to redeem their life through Jesus Christ. Our congregations should be so gospel-centered that both young and old believers can not only rehearse the plan of salvation, but they can also help others connect the dots to see how God's big story of redemption throughout the pages of the Bible applies to their own individual redemption story and share that with others who need salvation through Jesus Christ.

Number Two: Discipleship

Before ascending to his Father's side, Jesus commissioned his followers to, "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-20). To use a phrase I have been quoting in my recent sermons, "*Jesus started the church the way he wanted it, now he wants his church the way he started it.*" Every local church should have a discipleship pathway, a simple repeatable strategy for teaching new and not-so-new followers of Jesus how to live as Christians. Why do we think it important to teach our people the basics and mechanics of things like baseball, soccer, ballet, tennis, theatre, cooking, cross country, history, archery, tax preparation, crafting, driving, mathematics, and every other discipline, but when it comes to living as a Jesus follower, we expect they will learn about salvation, assurance, the Bible, forgiveness, prayer, stewardship, holiness, faith, spiritual gifts, and other foundational essentials by osmosis? How many of us were **intentionally** disciplined in the basics of the Christian faith? My guess is not many. Most of us have been **accidentally** disciplined, picking up what we can as we stumble along in our faith.

Number Three: Prayer

Did you know that prayer is listed as a foundational principle in the list of the nine principles that define the Evangelical Congregational Church? Let this sink in: "*A healthy church is intentionally committed to discovering the heart of God through the discipline of prayer. Effective, fervent prayer of the righteous draws upon the power of God to move in His church*" (EC Discipline 304.3.1). Every pastor and local church leadership team should intentionally cultivate a culture of prayer within their congregation. We should teach our people why we pray, how we pray, and give them multiple opportunities and venues to exercise their prayer muscles. We do not pray to manipulate God and cajole him into doing what we want, we pray to position ourselves to receive the presence, power, and communication from God we need to follow him and to be prepared for his dynamic movement among us. Every major revival and movement of God in history began with serious, intentional prayer.

What's your GDP?

What is your congregation's GDP (Gross Domestic Product)? What are you producing in the lives of your members? What are your members producing in your community? I am convinced that if our people fully understand and live out the gospel of God's redemption; if they are engaged in being disciplined and discipling others in the essentials of the Christian faith; and if they are cultivated into a praying people, then no matter what God does among us, whether it be a blazing revival or a slow burning renewal, our people will be as prepared as possible to join the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a dynamic movement of God.

We are better together

Most of those 30,000 parts in your car are as useful as a paper weight if separated from the others. I am generally not a conspiracy theorist, but in some cases, a clear conspiracy exists. The Bible is clear that our enemy conspires to divide and isolate and conquer God's people. Pastors be warned: Satan would love nothing more than to disconnect you and your people, pull you out of the race, and keep you in the garage! As Bishop Hill wrote in the brochure, Better Together, "*We are created to do life together. That means to live in connected relationships with others. We need interaction with fellow believers in order to grow and mature; to be disciplined.*" Pastors, this goes doubly for you! Please do not neglect connecting with other pastors in your district and with those outside of the EC Church.

If we believe that like those 30,000 parts in our cars we are better together, then we need to behave like it. We celebrate our transition from a rule-based denominational structure to a principle-based community structure that allows for contextualized church governing structures, worship styles, and congregational strategies. Indeed, my philosophy of denominational leadership involves what I call, “permission with parameters.” However, pastors and lay delegates, you are charged with the responsibility of knowing and teaching these parameters to your congregations. Check out section 300 of the Discipline and specifically the nine principles that serve as the “nuts and bolts” that hold all of our parts together. Know them, teach them, and use them as the guide rails, road signs, and mile markers of your race.

Pastors, please hear my heart. If we are to be a dynamic movement of God, it will not be because of a Bishop, a Community Associate, or a permission-giving structure. If we are to achieve dynamic movement it will be because of pastors and laity who have a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal for the lost. Pastors, we have been called by God, examined, credentialed, and supported by the EC Church. We have taken vows as part of the itinerancy which the EC Discipline describes as, “a self-disciplining body of ordained Elders who accept the priority and cause of Christ in the service of the Lord and who are committed to service under the authority of the EC Church. (507.5.1). When we fail to connect with our fellow pastors and our districts, when we fail to gather with our co-laborers at National Conference; when we fail to submit two simple ministry reports per year; when we fail to disciple our congregations in the EC ethos; nine principles of incorporation, and keep them engaged in our vision; when we fail to support the EC Church financially or in other ways, we are failing to uphold our vows made before God and his people. We are failing our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are failing in Christ-like character. The difference between a declining denomination and a dynamic movement of God is the number of pastors who believe we are better together and behave accordingly.

To ensure that we are not only better together but also work better together as the Conference Network Team and Conference Support Team, I asked each Associate, District Field Director, and Church Center staff to complete a self-evaluation (twenty-one in total). After the completed evaluation was received, I scheduled a conversation with each team member to review their responses. I appreciated the attitude that each team member approached this process with and the honesty of our conversations. I have learned a lot about my teams and feel I am better able to serve them as they serve our conference. We are better together and I am so thankful for each of the teams that serve our conference, the Associates, the District Field Directors, the Church Center staff, the army of committee members throughout our conference, and our pastors and lay delegates. I cannot list those I am thankful for without mentioning my life and ministry partner, Carla. This year marks our thirty-ninth year of marriage and thirty eight of those years have been in active ministry to the EC Church.

Pastors and Congregations

Since coming into office in 2022, I have intentionally encouraged a focus on the spiritual, mental, and physical health of our pastors. Last year’s theme of “Mindful Leadership” and the partnership with ServingLeaders continues to bear good fruit among our pastors and their families who are focusing on health for a lifetime of ministry. I appreciate the work of the Church Health Community, providing resources and direction for those pastors and congregations seeking health. We praise God for those new pastoral candidates who have completed the Pastoral Assessment Center and those at various stages in preparation for ministry. Recently, I joined a few other denominational leaders and Kairos University in the formation of Novare Center, a five-year collaborative initiative designed to identify, develop, and support pastoral leaders for today’s congregations. Our goal is to identify, develop, and support 3,000 pastoral leaders over the next five years. Closer to home, I am working closely with the Ministerial Development Community on strategic initiatives to identify and encourage those men within our conference of churches that God is calling to pastoral ministry. Pastors, delegates, and church members, will you join me to actively pray for and seek out men who have a calling to pastoral ministry. The reality is, as long as this world stands, there will be a need for God-called shepherds and local expressions of the Church of Jesus Christ. Oh that God would empower us with holy imagination to see men called to pastoral ministry from our congregations! Not possible, you say? Raise your hand if you as a pastor or church leader here today have never been part of a local congregation.

The stationing of pastors with congregations so both can fit and flourish continues as a year-round endeavor. We are regularly working with churches who are seeking pastors or are seeking God’s will for the continuation of their congregational ministry. We have enjoyed a growing and successful relationship with Next Step Church Services and their professionally trained Transitional Interim Pastors (TIPS), who have helped our congregations move from anxiety to anticipation while searching for their long-term pastor. While we are encouraging succession plans and creativity in placing pastors who fit and flourish with their congregations, we are committed to our rule and practice of the Stationing Committee, chaired by the Bishop, being the final authority in the assignment of pastors. I sincerely appreciate the work our Stationing Elders are doing as they shepherd congregations through the anxious period of pastoral transition. It goes without saying that the role of Stationing Elders within our conference has grown greatly in importance with our vision of dynamic movement.

Looking ahead

Friends, we are built to move! Our rate of speed and forward progress may seem a little slow at times, but we are moving forward. We are intentionally investing in strategic initiatives like pastoral residencies, church partnerships, and networks. We are encouraging creativity and giving permission with parameters. We are expecting God's Holy Spirit to move within and among us in powerful ways. Because we are not creating a new movement but joining God's movement as recorded in the scriptures, we can have both an honest evaluation of ourselves as a declining denomination and a God-given hope that he is indeed on the move inviting us to join him! As long as I have the privilege and responsibility to serve as your Bishop, all my energies will be focused on helping the EC Church join in God's mission as 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! I will endeavor to keep our forward movement connected solidly to our biblical evangelical gospel heritage, giving permission with parameters, inviting those initiatives that propel us forward while reviewing and removing those things that threaten to perpetuate our decline. What an exciting time to serve our King and his Kingdom together as the EC family. How true it is that in him we live and move and have our being! We are built to move!

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