

**The Evangelical Congregational Church
EPISCOPAL ADDRESS
National Conference 2024**

Greetings in the strong name of Jesus Christ! What a challenging and exciting time to live and serve as followers of Jesus. The sheer volume and complexity of worldwide changes we are forced to navigate often leaves us overwhelmed and wondering what will come next? We are not alone in our world-changing-wonderings. A few years back in the year 2006, John Mayer was a young man who was not happy with the conditions of his world and even more unhappy with the inaction of his peers in response to the current cultural conditions. So, like any good songwriter, he took up his pen and he wrote these award-winning lyrics.

Me and all my friends, we're all misunderstood. They say we stand for nothing, and there's no way we ever could. Now we see everything's that's going wrong with the world and those who lead it, we just feel like we don't have the means to rise above and beat it. So we keep on waiting (waiting) for the world to change. We keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change.

It's hard to beat the system when we're standing at a distance, so we keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change. Now if we had the power to bring our neighbors home from war, they woulda never missed a Christmas, no more ribbons on their door. And when you trust your television, what you get is what you got, 'cause when they own the information, oh they can bend it all they want. That's why we're waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change. We keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change.

And we're still waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change. We keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change. One day our generation is gonna rule the population, so we keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change. Now I keep on waiting (waiting), waiting on the world to change.

We keep on waiting (waiting), we're waiting on the world to change, waiting on the world to change, waiting on the world to change, waiting on the world to change. (Songwriter: John Mayer. Waiting on the World to Change lyrics@Reach Music publishing).

Fourteen times in this short, three-minute song the phrase, “waiting on the world to change” is repeated. It goes without saying that waiting on the world to change for the better is about as productive as waiting for water to run up hill, taxes to get lower, or stores to wait until Thanksgiving is over before they put out their Christmas merchandise.

In contrast, Jesus said, “I have come to change the world!” Actually, he said it like this on that Sabbath day in Nazareth.

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come.” (Luke 4:18-19).

And like this as he was deploying his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Since that day when Jesus ascended into the clouds and his disciples scattered to “turn the world upside down,” the followers of Jesus have not been content to simply wait on the world to better itself. We have been called, empowered, and commissioned to change the world with Jesus Christ! We boldly declare this in 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. Interdependence will be the distinguishing mark of the Evangelical Congregational Church as local churches network with one another and ministries beyond the EC family to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

A dynamic movement. Do you know what a dynamic movement is? Steve Addison in his book, *Pioneering Movements* says, “In simple terms, a movement is a group of people committed to changing the world. The spheres of politics, science, culture, and faith are shaped and remade by movements” (p.15). At this point we may need to hear again the words of Jesus to Simon after the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11. “Don’t be afraid, from now on you will fish for people” or if I you allow a slight paraphrase, “don’t be afraid, you’re going to join me in changing the world, one person at a time.”

This is the story of our movement beginning around 1790 when the Gospel reached into a small corner of eastern Pennsylvania to capture the heart of a farmer and tile maker named Jacob Albright. His heart was opened after hearing the gospel at his own children’s funeral and he cried out to God for salvation. This glorious salvation grew in Albright into a burning passion for God as he was discipled. 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 committed to changing the world, one person at a time. This dynamic movement spread from coast to coast in the United States, and now it reaches around the globe.

The dynamic movement 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 gives us, as the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 the ministry of reconciliation, imploring others on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled to God. And now friends, surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, it is our time to hear the words of Jesus, “come change the world with me.”

Over the past several months, I have been asking myself this question. What if the 10,000 evangelicals that worship in our EC churches on Sunday, wanted to change the world on Monday, how would we go about it? What would we need?

To Change the World, We Need Passion.

Not just any kind of passion. Not simply, “a strong emotion compelling to action” as the dictionary defines passion. No, we need a specific passion, a burning passion for God! A passion fueled not by our

emotions but by God's Holy Spirit. A passion that would allow us to sing praises in prison while still feeling the welts of the whip. A passion that would allow us to look the most powerful governmental and religious officials in the eye and respectfully answer, we must obey God rather than men. A passion that allowed a young teenage virgin named Mary to believe God's angelic messenger when he declares you will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. A passion that refuses to allow worship times and music styles, buildings and budgets, attendance numbers and clergy drop-out, progressive theology and poison politics or any number of other obstacles to stand in the way of our biblical mandate to be a dynamic movement of God.

When I got my hands on Steve Addison's book, *Pioneering Movements; Leadership That Multiplies*, I was immediately drawn to chapter ten, intrigued by the title, "What Would it Take To Stop You?" Listen to a few paragraphs.

We all face challenges. Yet it appears that movement pioneers are especially prone to these critical moments when their lives and ministries are on the line. David Watson had an effective ministry in a Muslim country before he was deported. Undaunted, he moved to India, where he worked hard for three years with very little fruit. Within eighteen months six men Watson had worked alongside were martyred. The Indian government expelled him and his family. More than twenty-five hundred miles separated him from the people in North India he was called to reach. Every day for two months he begged God to take away his call...and allow him to go home. God would not release him...

When Bill [Bill Smith trained and coached leaders across Asia who were multiplying disciples and churches] trains movement pioneers, he reads out a list of challenges they will face, based on actual experiences his trainees have faced over the years. He asks, "Which of these would prevent you from fulfilling your calling?" Here's a few real-life events from his list of twenty-five.

- *My spouse decided to call it quits and go home.*
- *My parents ordered me to return to my home country.*
- *No school is available to my children.*
- *My financial support is cut by 25 percent.*
- *My financial support is cut by 50 percent.*
- *I am diagnosed with a serious degenerative disease.*
- *My sending agency collapses.*
- *I am publicly discovered in sin and dismissed by my agency.*
- *My organization supervisor and I strongly disagree on strategy.*
- *One of my children is discovered to have leukemia.*
- *My spouse dies.*
- *I am offered a pastorate of a large congregation in my home country.*
- *After four years there are almost no measurable evangelism results.*

He goes on to say, *"I've seen plenty of leaders go through this dark night of the soul. Many of them never made it to dawn. They crashed and burned. They gave up the ministry. They lost the vision."*

What would it take to stop you? The outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was and is essential to the movement to change the world with Jesus. Without God's Holy Spirit empowering, encouraging and equipping us we will never be able to sustain the passion needed to engage in the fight for the souls of men and women. I encourage and implore you to create a rhythm in your life of prayer,

fasting, and feeding on God's Word, positioning yourself to continually receive that much needed infilling of a burning passion for God.

To change the world, we not only need passion, we need a plan.

Not a plan to add but a plan to multiply. As Scripture clearly teaches, God has a heart for multiplication. We see God's heart for this right away in Genesis 1:26-28. After creating Adam and Eve in his image and inviting them to join him in changing the world, he commanded them to, "be fruitful and multiply." Two people changing the entire landscape of the world? You can't accuse God of thinking small! He knows multiplication is the way to change the world. Later in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus repeats his Father's principle of multiplication on a worldwide scale in the Great Commission. He says, "Go make disciples of all nations." We know the pattern well. "Train others to train others", Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2. This plan of multiplication is not optional, nor is it theoretical, it is very personal. Jesus speaks these words to each one of his followers, "as the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

This plan must include multiplying our evangelism efforts. Brothers and sisters, can we please put the *evangel* back into evangelical? Think about it. If we remove *evangel* from evangelical, all we have left is i-c-a-l. We're just a bunch of "cals". A herd of Christians lazily grazing on God's goodness, following the same paths back and forth from the barn to the field, producing milk or meat for the church system. Friends, we are not called to be c-a-l's, to be Christians-at-large! We are called to be evangelicals! I realize that evangelicals are misunderstood by our world as mainly white, republican, members of the NRA, anti-women, anti-gay, haters of democracy with little intelligence. My problem is not with our misunderstanding outside the Church, my concern is for those of us who claim to be the Church. Do we realize that we are the people of the *evange!*? People of the Gospel? People of the Good News? We have been given the privilege of announcing, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 that God is in the process of changing the world, one person at a time, reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has invited us to change the world with him by giving us the ministry of reconciliation, as Christ's ambassadors, the people of the Good News, appealing to our friends, family, and neighbors on his behalf, be reconciled to God! Tomorrow, during the Church Health Community presentation and our Equipping Experience to follow, we will be inspired and challenged to multiply our evangelism efforts as individuals and congregations committed to changing the world, one person at a time.

I am praising God for emails and communications I have been receiving over this past eighteen months that document the transformed lives saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. I can't share them all but celebrate with me the following:

- Fourteen children accepted Christ today in GCC's Bible2School program at Pequea Elementary School.
- Pastor Buddy Johnson of our Canyon Falls Kentucky Church shares that fifty-two people have made decisions of salvation or re-commitment through his prison ministry.
- Hope Church, Fogelsville reports that as they began a four-week vision series, three people came to Christ, fifteen signed up for new membership and three expressed interest in being baptized.
- Pastor Mike Knapp from Clark's Valley Zion EC writes in March, "God has poured his blessings on us in very tangible ways. So far in 2023, we have had 17 people make decisions for Christ and 38 people make recommitments." Later in July they had 20 children make decisions to accept salvation in Jesus Christ at Bible School.

We are the people of the Good News and God is indeed making his appeal through us, imploring others on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God!

This plan must include multiplying our discipleship efforts. We could spend our time and effort debating if evangelism comes before discipleship or with discipleship but as evangelicals we heartily agree that a person must be born again and must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that more and more agree that there is an urgency to multiply our discipleship efforts. Church statisticians tells us that of the approximately 350,000 churches in the United States, 80% of them are plateaued or declining. The churches growing are simply growing by addition, that is they are adding a few more people each year than they are losing. While we all would love to be growing by addition, we need to think like our Heavenly Father, we need to think big. To change the world, we need to multiply disciples!

At a recent Exponential cohort gathering in Nashville, denominational and church leaders were challenged by Ralph Moore to see our local congregations not as a mission field but as a mission force. Pastors, what would change if you began to see your primary calling as one who made disciples and sent them out into their communities to multiply? We know the norm of church culture is to get people to attend services, grow in their spiritual formation and use their gifts to serve, staying with the church until they move away or die. This model is not inaccurate, it is just inadequate if we are serious about changing the world.

Can you imagine this conversation at your church, "Wait a minute pastor, do you want me to lead my small group or make disciples?" Answer, yes! While you're leading your small group disciple others to lead their small groups discipling others to lead their small groups and now, we're multiplying faster than dandelions in the front lawn! Or, since I'm addressing pastors today, can you imagine this conversation, "Wait a minute Bishop, do you want me to lead my church or make disciples?" Answer, yes! While you're leading your congregation, disciple others to plant new congregations that will disciple others to plant new congregations. More dandelions on the front lawn! You might say, "Randy you're dreaming." I say, "No, I have a vision to be a dynamic movement of God that transforms plateaued and declining churches into healthy disciple-making, churches that reproduce themselves by planting churches in least-reached communities." What else would Jesus mean when he says to make disciples of all nations except to change the world one person at a time?

This plan must include multiplying our church-planting efforts. In my role as Bishop, I am usually visiting a different EC Church almost every week. The locations and architecture of the buildings differ greatly, the worship styles and liturgies are quite varied. The members come from numerous backgrounds, ethnicities, heritages, family dynamics and life experiences. The one thing that all these churches have in common is a vision. Before the property, building, people, programs, or any other aspect of the church was realized, someone or some group had a vision to plant that church! For some reason we believe it was easier, cheaper, and more convenient to plant churches yesterday than it is today. That is simply not the case. Many of our older churches were built during or just after the Great Depression and every one of our existing churches was built in the midst of spiritual warfare and a carnal culture. Even back then planting churches was considered too hard, too expensive, and not really necessary. There were internal and external obstacles threatening the vision of those who knew God was calling them to Kingdom extension. I am so thankful that those who came before us and planted our churches did not let those obstacles cloud God's vision for changing the world!

Planting congregations in 2024 and beyond will be just as much of a challenge as it was for our forefathers and yet we have advantages and opportunities that they would have loved to leverage. Our principle-based structure allows us to plant congregations that can fit and flourish within their contexts,

presenting the unchanging Gospel in ways each community can relate. Mobility, technology, and creativity are well-used tools in our church-planting work. Our district structure, interdependence, partnerships, and Kingdom Extension Community resources provide layers of support, wisdom, accountability, and synergy to multiply our church planting efforts.

To be brutally honest, we do not have a church-in-the-box-planting kit to offer. Church planting in the EC Church will take on different strategies, expressions, and results as we expand the Kingdom. Brick and mortar churches, rented facilities, house churches, micro-churches, multi-campus churches, multi-church charges and “all of the above” will be the norm as we fulfill our vision of reaching least-reached communities. From the human point of view, it will never look like the right timing, the right location, the right leader. We will rarely think we have enough money, enough people, enough church-planting-hacks to succeed. However, we must remember as Steve Addison quotes Roland Allen in his book, *Pioneering Movements*, *The spontaneous expansion of the Church reduced to its element is a very simple thing. It asks for no elaborate organization, no large finances, no great numbers of paid missionaries...What is necessary is faith* (p.15).

Faith, says Hebrews 11:1, is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not yet see. In this case I believe faith and vision are looking through the same lenses. As our Vision Statement illustrates, when we attain a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost, and when we are multiplying disciples who are also multiplying disciples in our healthy churches that are committed to evangelizing the communities to which they are called, we will not have to force-start church-plants in some distant greenhouse and then transplant them in a foreign neighborhood, hoping they will take root. No, if we do this correctly, they will sprout up organically from the seeds sown in healthy soil. Our task will be to feed and care for them and encourage them to keep reproducing to change the world with Jesus.

What do we need to change the world? We need a passion for God, a plan to multiply and we need a pioneering spirit.

To Change the World, We Need Pioneers.

A pioneer is a person among the first to explore new territory. A pioneer is an explorer, a trailblazer, a discoverer. A pioneer is often one of the first to blaze the trail, clear out the underbrush and obstacles and begin building a new community. Pioneers are visionary and see their hard work and sacrifices for the sake of those who will follow and future generations. Stewart, John, and Jenny were pioneers. They had a burden for the least-reached poor people in southern York County and began meeting in Stewart’s house, praying, worshipping, and making disciples until they could build a little church. One of the neighbors who responded to the Gospel donated an unusable piece of land right in the middle of Peco Hill. They took it as a gift from God. When they got enough money, this small group built the basement and worshipped there. Stewart worked a full-time job in construction to support his family while shepherding the growing flock. Finally, there was enough money to finish the second floor and many years later when I was almost graduating high school, they tore down the outhouses and installed proper toilets. Pastor Stewart, John, and my mom, Jenny never imagined themselves as pioneers. They could have never imagined that from that humble little church sitting on the side of Peco Hill, God would save countless souls, disciple hundreds of moms and dads, influence many, many teens and children and call a dozen or so pastors who would go on to repeat the process. Today that little church still sits on the side of the hill and although they do have flush toilets, it’s never grown much over 50 people and all its pastors have

been co-vocational, supporting themselves with outside employment, and all of its staff are volunteers, but that congregation is still changing the world one person at a time.

Even though my home church was not an EC Church, 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 pioneers today. When you hear the description of pioneer, are you tempted to think of one or two people besides yourself who fit that description? That would be a mistake. Pioneers are born 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 opportunity where others see obstacles. Like Jacob Albright we develop a burning passion for God and a missionary zeal to reach the lost, even at inconvenience, hardship, or cost to ourselves.

I am asking God to raise up more pioneering pastors and people in our churches who can see a way through this complicated landscape and who will blaze a trail for others to follow. For women and men who have a fire in their belly, not waiting for the world to change but joining with Jesus where they live, work, and play to change the world with him. I am praying for pastors and families who will see opportunity 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 2024 and beyond is going to take some determination, some stamina, a strong support system and family life, significant sacrifice, and a whole lot of pioneering persistence. Why do I say that? God gave me an epiphany 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 counties.

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, to change the world with him!

Even our international EC churches are located in some of the least important, most out-of-the-way areas of their countries. Perhaps God knew that he could send average people to other places to build mega ministries but to change the entire world, he would need pioneering EC folks willing to surrender, sacrifice and reach those people living in the harder places of the world.

I understand that at this moment you may not feel like a pioneer. We have leaders and pastors in our churches who feel stuck, overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of ministry in this ever-changing culture. I’ve been there. If you’re there right now, listen to this helpful advice from Steve Addison.

I talk to a lot of leaders who are stuck. They think they have to rewire their whole lives and ministries before they can implement change. It’s the all-or-nothing syndrome. If we don’t do it all, we’ll do nothing. In response, I tell them. “Don’t change anything about your life or ministry. Don’t impose this on your unsuspecting congregation. Just free up two hours a week, find a partner and begin doing it yourself. See what God does and then build on that. Take a step of obedience, watch what God does and build on that” (Pioneering Movements, p.24).

Changing the world with Jesus is not about our ability as much as it is about our availability. Like God’s people camped by the Jordan River in Joshua 3, we 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 requires a pioneering spirit. Too many settlers are unwilling to consider such a bold move. However, as I have been preaching in our churches, the difference between a settlement and a movement is the number of God's people willing to break camp and follow him. If 10,000 or even 10 of us decide to change the world with Jesus we will need a burning passion, a multiplication plan and a pioneer spirit.

The state of the Evangelical Congregational Church

Usually, an episcopal address includes some sort of evaluation of where we are as a denomination and what the future holds. If you've spoken with me about the EC 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 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 our BEDAS team, 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. I am proud of our Church Center staff: Kevin, Jodi, Shirley, Bethany, Wendy, and Dee. We 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.

What a privilege to be called by God, to be invited by Jesus to change the world with him! As the Evangelical Congregational Church, we are at an exciting, yet awkward place. Like a gangly teen going through puberty, we are growing rapidly in some areas and still lacking in others. We envision what we can be while we reluctantly give up what we were. Some days our hair, skin and body parts all work to our advantage and other days we don't even want to look in a mirror because we just can't seem to get it together. We are declining in some areas and growing in others. We are training new pastors but struggle with stationing all our churches. Some of our local churches are pioneering new ways to change the world with Jesus and some of our local churches simply will not, period. We are planting churches and closing churches. More of our pastors are in shared ministry and are partially supporting themselves as co-vocational pastors. Some congregations and leadership teams are willing to evaluate the health of their congregation and the job description of their pastor, and some congregations still hold to that eternal definition of insanity: they keep on doing the same things while expecting different results. Some of our pastors and families are saying, "here I am Lord, send me" and some are saying, "here we are Lord, leave us be."

The future is bright for this growing, maturing movement because we have been blessed with a heritage of pioneers who know a thing or two about changing the world with Jesus. We have been called into salvation by the grace of God, and as Luther's eternal hymn declares, "the Spirit and the gifts are ours." Our former bishops and denominational leadership teams have prepared the way for us by keeping us centered on the Word of God and the proclamation of the Gospel. We enjoy a principle-based, community structure that is permission giving, context-oriented, and pioneer-friendly. We embrace a vision of a dynamic movement, motivated by passion for God and a missionary zeal for the lost, mobilized by healthy congregations multiplying disciples and planting churches that repeat the process.

While this world seems to be in the grip of all the demons in hell and Satan himself, we resolutely believe Jesus when he says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And we eagerly accept his great commission to change the world with him by "making disciples of all nations." And we gratefully acknowledge that regardless of our successes and failures, he is with us always, to the very end!

On a personal note, I want to express my gratitude to you, my EC family. You have been gracious and patient as I grow into this office of Bishop. Carla and I have received much encouragement and support from you in a variety of ways. A growing number of you have been early adopters and are not only owning the vision of being a dynamic movement, you are bringing your congregations along as well. Almost weekly I learn of another individual, group or entire congregation committed to prayer and fasting, praying through the vision statement prayer guide, asking God to give us that burning passion for him and a missionary zeal to reach our lost neighbors. Thank you!

A special note of thanks to our Bishop Emeriti for their support, guidance, and counsel and to my BEDAS team and District Field Directors. What a joy to work with men determined to change the world with Jesus! To the team at Church Center who work behind the scenes to make sure that this movement moves. Thanks to my assistant Jodi, who helps keep things from falling through the cracks, and deadlines from being forgotten and emails from going unanswered and for making me look and sound as good as possible. Finally, my love and appreciation to Carla, my life-long ministry partner, a true pioneer for Jesus. I would not want to change the world with anyone else by my side.

Let us not be found waiting for the world to change. Let's go and make disciples of all nations. Let's change the world with Jesus!

Respectfully submitted,

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

Randy Sizemore, Bishop