

2009 EPISCOPAL ADDRESS

“Breakthrough: Embracing The Turnaround”

It is with thanks to the goodness of God and the grace of His people that I greet you today in the beloved name of Jesus. My “rookie year” as Bishop has been more stretching and satisfying than I’d imagined it could be. The faith journey I am taking with our Lord has been everything I’ve expected and a whole lot more. I can say without reservation that “I never lack for variety.” If that is the spice of life, my existence is well seasoned. What a joy it is to be a part of an outstanding leadership team consisting of the Conference Ministers, Church Center Staff, and all of you. I am finding all sorts of reasons to love the Evangelical Congregational Church and our Lord all the more.

As a theme text for this year’s National Conference I was led to Philippians 3:8-16, with a particular emphasis on verse 12. Let God’s word lay the foundation for what is on my heart for our church. *“What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.¹² **Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.¹⁵ All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”*

Our family has hiked the gorge at Rickett’s Glen state park several times. It’s a beautiful but rugged walk over some fairly rough trails. There are few handrails or fences, and at places the narrow path runs very close to a rapid stream with many waterfalls or by the edge of steep drop offs. For safety’s sake we had a fairly standard formation. Deb would lead the way, the four children would follow, and I’d bring up the rear. We had them covered or so we thought. Somehow as we turned a corner near the top of the highest waterfall in the ravine, my middle son John dawdled enough to drop behind me unseen. A few steps later I heard a strange scuffling sound to the rear, barely enough to catch my attention. I turned to see my seven year old hanging off a tree root at the side of the cliff, suspended over thin air. It was like Wiley Coyote in an old Warner Brother’s cartoon...but not funny in the least. He’d slipped, but never cried out...he didn’t even look panicked as he locked his pleading eyes on mine. I was on my knees faster than before or after, not to pray but to reach down and grab him by the back of the belt. As I hauled upward I felt his hands close tightly around my forearm. We gripped each other for all we were worth. A few seconds later he was on solid ground, and then carried securely in my arms for the next half mile or so. I needed another mile beyond that to gather up the composure to tell his mom what had happened.

I think of the grip we had on each other as father and son, every time I re-read Paul’s words, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me.” We need to grasp with all our might, the One who has already laid His strong hand on us. Especially in a time such as this when there is a sense that we are doing ministry right on the edge. We proclaim the good news to a culture that is highly resistant to the gospel. We serve Christ in a season where we know that some of our congregations are fighting for their survival, clinging by a thread next to the precipice of shrinking numbers, spiraling costs, and fading dreams. Yet at the same time we realize that we have not already obtained all that there is to know or do for God’s Kingdom. We have not yet been made perfect for the cause. There are congregations experiencing the power and promises of God. There are churches moving steadily towards health and growth, transforming former doubters into fully convinced followers of Jesus. There is something more to press on to, a prized goal that is calling us heavenward. A breakthrough to God’s best remains that I believe we have been turning towards over the course of many years now. There is a turnaround congregationally and denominationally, which we must deliberately and wholeheartedly embrace if it is to take place. Will you reach out for it with me?

The **barriers to turnaround** are real and substantial. Let’s not underestimate what confronts us. The apostle reminds us that we need to come to the place where we want to gain Christ more than anything. Have we reached the point where everything but the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus makes whatever impedes that

expedient? Are we ready to lose it all, and risk what is ours to take hold of Him? Do we love Jesus more than our church buildings, and the lost more than our routines? Breakthrough implies that there are obstacles to our usefulness to God that need to be broken down. There are walls to dismantle if we're to live up to what we are to attain.

Let's bring down the wall of indifference. It's a matter of heart and motive. You'll hear a lot this week about the benefit of physical wellness. All of us know the advantages of healthier living. Eat smarter and exercise harder. It's simple. We'd save ourselves a lot of grief and money if we did. So why don't we? Could it be because many serious conditions don't hurt enough at least early on when lifestyle change could make a difference? If my mild hypertension was as painful as my migraines used to be, I'd have fixed the problem yesterday! I'd refuse to live with it. Why don't we make disciples and plant churches? What are we waiting for to do what has to be done to reach lost people? Can we deny that in large part we fail to hurt for them? Do we really care that "whoever rejects God's son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him?" John 3:36

There's nothing more useless than an evangelical in name only – a man or woman who knows how someone can have a personal relationship with God, but tells nobody about it. My short opportunity to visit some of our churches, confirms what I long suspected. We have lots of wonderful people, enjoying beautiful friendship with each other...to be a part of those spiritual families is an awesome thing. But in too many of them we have forgotten about those still outside. Ministry has atrophied into an insider focused form of self indulgence. Let's do what we enjoy to care for ourselves. When lost people are forgotten the church fails in its mission. It ceases to be a real church. Though God desires that none should perish, perish they will if we cease to proclaim and be the gospel to them. If the wall of indifference is to be leveled, our hearts must be broken for the world over and over again. It is the burden we can't lay down in this life.

The wall of blame is due for demolition. Fighting yesterday's battles rarely advances the cause of Christ. Levels of trust have grown and there's a stronger feeling that we are allies and not adversaries. Yet strongholds of the "old school way of thinking" linger. The notion that without a certain small borough in Eastern Lebanon County all would be well persists... "If it wasn't for Myerstown!" May I let you in on a secret? There's enough blame to go around for all of us. Administrators make mistakes, so do pastors, lay delegates, and local churches. They always will this side of heaven.

I'm dismayed when I discover the blame game is being played, and people remain stuck in what was. The pastor did this, the board didn't do that, the stationing committee got it all wrong. Yes, they probably did at some point, but not always. Let's face it, we're in this together. The responsibility is shared by all. As the scripture points out, the way to the future only leads through the past in terms of what you can learn from it, and most importantly the things in it of which you need to let go. "But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead I press on toward the goal for which God has called me..." Phil. 3:13-14 Grace forgives and strives to forget. It doesn't have the luxury to get hung up on what was. Faith takes ownership for what is and what should and could be. It asks what can we do to please God now?

The responsibility for the church of tomorrow is ours together, not somebody else's. Please don't kid yourselves. If your church has no sense of its mission or purpose, if it isn't reaching pre-Christians and making disciples now – the abolition of ministry funds wouldn't change a thing of eternal significance. It might enable you to do what you're doing now a little bit longer, but if that isn't raising up a new generation of Christ followers, there's little reason to expect to hear your Master say, "well done" when you stand before Him. God can't work with complaints, only commitment.

At times it is the wall of traditionalism that get's in the way. I use that term as does Jaroslav Pelikan in his statement, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Tradition is great if it is an expression of biblical essentials. It's a poor taskmaster when it represents norms that are only grounded in our culture and practice. In just twelve months of getting to know our wider church family I'm thrilled by the healthy scriptural diversity reflected in our congregations. To me it expresses the greatness of Christ. His glory is wide and deep enough so as to be impossible for any one type of congregation to capture completely.

It's old news that you'll find E.C. Churches with a wide variety of musical style in worship – traditional, contemporary, and blended. But does it surprise you to know that some feel decidedly liturgical, using creeds and

responsive readings on a weekly basis while others are openly hi-tech featuring PowerPoint, videos, and drama? When our pastor's preach some wear suits, others golf shirts and jeans, and a few are robed or collared. You'll find churches who sing to pipe organs and others to rock bands. Some feature silent prayers, while in several people pray in tongues and dance in the aisles. We've got hand raisers, arm folders, and everything in between. And the wonder of it is our doctrine and policy makes room for all of them, it truly does. One of our untapped assets is the openness this fellowship allows to be unified on core issues yet varied in secondary matters. We have permission to build churches uniquely able to reveal Jesus Christ to the community He places them in. Personally, I have to tell you that I'm loving it and believe that our Lord does as well. He wants to get us out of the boxes we have made for ourselves, which are often based on our fears and the criticisms of others, rather than on pleasing Him. He prefers us to operate as our founders did, in the much bigger box of the freedom of His Spirit.

So what happens to our common identity? What defines an E.C. Church? It's having Jesus as our center that's most important, not a detailed list of dozens of boundary issues that distinguish us from everyone else. It's the core agreement of the essence of our theological heritage as captured in an old summation of the "four alls" of Wesleyan belief. All people need to be saved. All people can be saved. All people can know that they are saved. All people can be saved to the uttermost, that is, live a holy Christ like life. There's more than enough glue there to hold us together until Jesus returns, don't you think? The fences of traditionalism aren't strong enough to connect us, only Christ is.

Last in this list of walls, is the wall of pride. It is the peril of all Christians, but particularly of those of us in the western world to rely far too much on ourselves, techniques, and tools than on the Lord Himself. None of us know for certain how long the economic crisis affecting the entire world will last or what it's long term implications will be for ministry. It is not producing the financial equivalent of the post 9/11 surge in church attendance. The dechurched and unchurched are not turning to Christianity for solace in great numbers. Perhaps they are angry at God for depriving them of the prosperity they believe they deserve. Perhaps it is a reflection of how much the church has lost its voice in the public arena due to our lack of Christ like love.

What the fall out from Wall Street's meltdown has compelled us to do is re-examine our resources for ministry. And with it comes the blessing of rediscovering that money has never been the main thing. We're given the opportunity to pare back to the ministries that really matter and relearn that it's always been more about people and relationships than programs and places. The hospitality, service, friendship, and time together which are truly the life blood of witnessing and disciple making usually cost little or nothing in terms of cash. Neither does it have to take place in a church building. It's about being available and obedient to love God and love others. It's what some refer to as the simple church. Getting back to the basics that our international brothers have shown us in places like Liberia and Nepal. It's following Christ where he leads you, bringing Jesus to whomever He takes you to just a few at a time.

Don't lose sight of the fact that a genuine turnaround is always anchored in prayer and in a sense of desperation for the Lord rooted deep in our spirit. In fact a common scriptural synonym for turnaround is the word repent, which can literally refer to a change of direction or an about face. How desperate are you for new beginning? Let those internal walls come down. Let's humble ourselves in response to the Savior who says to the church "Repent and do the things you did at first." Rev. 2:5 Embrace the promise of Zechariah 1:3 "Return to me, declares the Lord Almighty, and I will return to you." God is turned to us. Let's keep turning towards Him.

The momentum for turnaround can be recognized and celebrated in several initiatives that are already under way or will be launched in the coming year. Most of these represent the "fruitfulness" of our commission structure or purpose created task groups. They are the outcome of the body of Christ at work together.

Intentional Disciple Making remains the keystone to be embraced in our turnaround efforts. Imbedding a process for developing committed Christ followers must take place in all of our churches if we are to be obedient to the Great Commission. Effective discipling requires that opportunity exists for truth to be communicated in a relational setting where there is accountability and application on a regular basis. This "life to life" approach builds from the grass roots up and thrives in small groups or one on one settings. It contains the capacity to multiply disciples and leaders.

I urge our churches to take advantage of our partnership with the Navigators in order to get this design up and running in their ministry. We have scholarship funds for the training that are going unused. This is an investment we want to make. Eight churches have formally engaged Navigator's staff members to guide them through the process of retooling their ministry to better align with the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Many others have benefited from related training events and informal consultations offered over the course of the last several years. Additional churches are pursuing disciple making strategies of their own. This must be celebrated and sustained.

The ability to consistently train disciples expands the root system necessary to produce the harvest of workers who are willing and able to share their faith and make other disciples. Churches that raise up disciples become healthy enough to birth new congregations. Don't equate knowing the importance of deliberate disciple making with doing it. Get involved and never stop.

Church Planting flows directly out of disciple making. I ache for the day when no one in our church family needs convincing that planting churches is God's priority for reaching lost people. It is where and how the Kingdom grows. We must not permit missteps or incomplete attempts at bringing a church into the world deflect us from this purpose. Birth always comes with risks, but to fail to reproduce is to guarantee death. Churches are meant to have congregational offspring. We will remain committed to this. I am eager to work with our Church Planting Commission to find ways to come alongside congregations that are being led to launch a new church to share the costs and "jump start" this process, perhaps by means of a matching grant approach. I am convinced that once we have a few "real life" examples to show us the way, many more will follow. We'll rediscover what we were once good at, that churches can plant churches with or without denominational help, on their own, in partnerships, or even as a District. Pray in that direction will you? The biggest point of need is for church planters to be there to fill the opportunity when it presents itself.

The same is true with church restarts. We are learning and growing in this strategy as we go. It is not always possible to begin a new work where one has ended. At times ministry has run its course for us in a facility if not community. Yet where a church closes it can still leave a legacy for eternity. Not only in the lives it has touched and the people it has sent out, but in the assets it can bequeath for reinvestment in a new launch whether nearby or far away. It is not a case of church planting versus helping existing churches as some frame the question. There are resources for consulting and guiding a church that is truly interested in renewal, available for the asking. We are experimenting with new ways to resource congregations with genuine passion and potential for being revitalized. Am I partial to church planting? Absolutely and without apology; it's the most effective means of evangelism! It has the greater potential of success. I've said it before and I'll do so again, "It is easier to give birth than to raise the dead." It's God's means of bringing spiritual life to a dying world. Every church should dream about finding the role they need to fill in "having churches as their children."

Coaching is a tool you'll be hearing a lot more about in the coming year. It's come as an answer to prayer. I've long felt that we've known what we need to do as a denomination. What we've been searching for is the means to get from here to there...to make it happen. The developing of a reproducing team of qualified coaches and the creation of a coaching culture is a solution God is pointing us to. Don't let the word put you off. Steve Ogne defines coaching this way. "Coaches help people develop their God given potential so that they grow personally and make a valuable contribution to the Kingdom of God." Coaching is what Jethro did for Moses and Moses for Joshua. It's what Barnabas gave to Paul and Paul to Timothy. It's what Jesus invested in the Twelve and what His Holy Spirit is doing in us.

A coach is more than a mentor who pours into the life of an apprentice. A coach is different than a consultant who pours out knowledge and expertise. A coach is one who knows how to draw out what God is placing in some one's life. A coach is equipped to ask the right questions to help almost anyone in any situation find God's leading and follow it...to obtain what is needed to move things to the next level. The truth is, we're not large enough as a group to train or retain enough specialized experts. But we can raise up enough coaches and enable them to train others to do the same. We have discovered that other denominations who are experiencing renewal have embraced coaching as a pathway to turnaround. The Church Health Commission will be leading our efforts in bringing this concept into being.

Strategic Planning is the last momentum sustainer I'll highlight within this message. Attached to this address is a specific recommendation, endorsed by the National Ministry Team requesting National Conference approval for me to initiate a long range planning process named "Transformation" with the intent of identifying a short list of goals and action plans to guide us through the next season (approximately five years) of ministry. This initiative will give us an opportunity to further evaluate and refine the substantial changes we have made in the last decade, determine necessary areas to upgrade, and establish key aiming points on which to focus our efforts over the next several years.

Since the Global Ministries Commission and Evangelical Theological Seminary are also embarking upon strategic planning this year, we have an extraordinary opportunity to take this journey together. It is our intent to build in opportunities along the way for ongoing dialogue and the sharing of dreams and concerns so that we might reinforce and multiply each others' labors. We trust that the God of all wisdom will show us His will and how to bring our objectives into alignment so that we can accomplish together more than we could on our own. I am pleased to announce the appointment of Rev. Jeff Byerly to chair the National Conference strategic planning group. The recruitment of the rest of the team will occur by the end of summer with a timetable of beginning to meet this fall in order to report back to National Conference 2010.

It's a lot harder this time around to determine what not to include in this "state of the church" summary, but to round out the snapshot I have to give you a glimpse of what I see once the breakthrough has come.

On the other side of turnaround I anticipate at least three things. It's the vision I would cast for you this 27th day of May 2009. Embracing the possibilities the Lord of the church sets before us would help become:

A movement of God going about the Father's business. As I constantly pare down my own job description to it's basics I keep coming back to this. I want the denomination's structures and initiatives to glorify God and empower local congregations to make disciples who make disciples and be churches planting churches. You can roll that discipling and planting replication out to infinity. That's our job until Jesus returns. The methods change but not the message or the mission.

We are moving in that direction and turning to face those objectives full on. I want to thank you for responding to my appeal for submitting your annual reports on a timely fashion. This year as I worked on my first draft of this address, there were only eight congregations we hadn't heard from. The data you provide is needed early in the new year to measure our progress and make projections and mark trends for the budget process. I can give you a clearer and truer summary of where we stand. These are our current vital signs for the year 2008. Membership 17,508 (up 901); AM Attendance 10,360 (up 259) and professions of faith 532 (up 128.) However, it is likely that the increases are a factor of more churches turning in their reports this past year than for 2007. With your help next year's evaluation of some of the things that matter will be more meaningful. I fully realize that numbers alone are just a part of the picture. But we need benchmarks to assess our progress, and in this case those numbers represent people. People are very important to God and must be to us as well.

These figures could and will be stronger. Should 10,360 ECer's who come to church most every Sunday really only have 532 conversions to report? That's a conversion growth ratio of 5%. On the average it takes 19 of us to make 1 disciple and an expenditure of \$32,456 (dividing gross income by professions of faith.) These trends are better than the norm in the American church. Still, we cannot be content. But we must be patient. It will take time for the healthy yeast of disciple making and church planting to permeate the whole. The seed is germinating, the stalk is growing, but the harvest is still to come. And I must be blunt. The consequences of having lost our focus for a season on the truly important things will continue to be felt for some time. The financial crash has hurried some churches over the edge. We will close more churches this year than we open. Those are the facts, but I hate it anyway. We will see more churches transition from full time (fully funded) pastoral assignments to part time (partially funded). That's not an entirely bad thing. Bi-vocational pastorates can be used to sustain and plant ministry were it might not exist otherwise. It can reinforce the biblical concept that ministry is for everyone and encourage lay leadership. But we will need to rethink our expectations and even regulations in order to embrace this trend and convert it to a positive.

Yes, we've got to "move further" to be a movement. But I came across a wonderful quote that calmed and emboldened my heart over concerns I've felt about how big we need to be in order to remain viable and effective.

“A denomination isn’t too small if it’s growing.” That’s key isn’t it? The fact that just a handful of believers, 17 to be exact, gathered in 1803 to declare Jacob Albright a Bishop and start up the Evangelical Association didn’t prevent God from birthing a discipling/church planting powerhouse. It’s difficult to be too little when you serve such a big Lord. It’s time to embrace turnaround and the need to grow numerically as well as spiritually without reservation or apology.

A changer of lives and shaper of communities. As a pastor I’d ask myself periodically “if this church disappeared would anybody miss it? Other than those who attend would it make a difference in the neighborhood if we were gone?” I think about that in regard to the E.C. Church. Do you? Will you? The answer has nothing to do with being widely known or famous in this short lived world. It does have everything to do with the places where God has right now and in the days ahead. It’s more than just who will be in heaven because they have seen Jesus in us and heard about eternal life through us. It’s the hope that because Christ gave us “the gospel of the Kingdom” Matthew 24:14 to proclaim, this world will be a better place wherever it finds us. We’ll have been the presence of Christ, a little colony of heaven on earth demonstrating the just and loving reign of God in how we live and how we relate to everyone. We will have an impact.

A place where totally committed followers of Jesus want to serve Him. I long for our family of churches to be a place where those who are passionate about taking Jesus to those who know Him least, feel at home. They must sense a welcome here, knowing their passion for discipling the lost and found is also ours. It’s not unusual to find believers who are drawn to our doctrine and polity. They love what they see on paper. We say almost all the right things. But the impression’s not always the same when they meet us first hand, or visit in our churches. There’s too often an unnecessary gap between how evangelical we really are in practice or how Christ like our expression of holiness truly is. We can do something about narrowing that chasm can’t we? I want to stop the spiritual equivalent of the “brain drain” that has caused some innovative and creative leaders to leave us. We ought to be a church where those most effective at reaching pre-Christians with Christ want to be. It starts with us. I want to be part of a Jesus loving cause, among whom His presence is so undeniable that Zechariah 8:23 is fulfilled in our experience. “Men from all languages and nations will take firm hold [of us] ...and say ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” That’s what comes of being a missional people with a missional purpose. It’s a lifestyle that brings Jesus right into every place that we live and situation we face. And people are drawn to Him.

There’s a final Bible passage that God’s Spirit repeatedly brought to mind as I prepared this message, “the parable of the talents.” (Matthew 24, Luke 19) We know the man in the story we don’t want to be. He received the master’s assets, wrapped it in a cloth and buried it in the ground. Later he digs it up, hands it back to his lord explaining that it was the master’s hard and demanding nature that drove him to do so out of fear. There’s no “well done” for the servant’s caution, only the master’s displeasure that his resources were not invested, if only in some low risk, low return venture. We don’t want to play that part in the drama, but we often have. Underestimating the grace of the Heavenly Father to His children we’ve chosen the safe, familiar, but frequently little faith options. We’ve been happy to do the same things with the same results.

If we’re content to act as caretakers only, we’ll end up being undertakers. Jesus calls us to be risk-takers with what is His and blesses us for trying. It’s time to go where He leads us even if it’s on rugged trails that hug a cliff side without guard rails. The scenery is usually best there anyway. And it’s pretty much guaranteed that we’ll slip and fall more than a few times in that terrain. But what’s to fear when we can always take hold of the One who holds fast to us so firmly.

For the sake of the Turnaround and the dream of the Breakthrough,

Bishop Kevin Leibensperger