

## **PREFACE**

The Evangelical Congregational Church *Discipline* is meant to provide historical, creedal (or doctrinal) and operational governance for the denomination, its Commissions, and affiliates, including the local churches. Additionally, it provides guidelines for the conduct of the rituals, the organizational structure for a local congregation, and outlines the responsibility of the National Conference and her ministers.

All of the above are charged with tasking the work of the total church through a people-centered ministry having the mandate: "to know Christ and make Him known." This vision is captured with the mission statement, which directs the denomination to raise up healthy churches by proclaiming Christ to a needy world in obedience to the Great Commission stated in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28.

To this end, the *Discipline* reflects denominational response to the mission and vision established with these core values:

1. Possessing a passion for Christ as demonstrated by our commitment to the authority of the scripture, the centrality of prayer and the pursuit of holiness.
2. Having compassion for the lost as demonstrated by evangelism and acts of mercy on a world-wide basis.
3. Utilizing servant leadership as demonstrated by training and developing persons for mission and ministry.
4. Sharing concern for healthy ministries through changed lives within culturally sensitive congregations and denominational affiliates.
5. Functioning as a unified body of Christ by networking with Evangelical Congregational churches with the goal of extending the kingdom of God.

Our vision is to be a dynamic movement of God led by pastors and laity with a zeal to reach lost souls for Christ and His Church in a global endeavor as together we fulfill God's purpose on earth.

## **THE LORD'S PRAYER**

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6: 9-13 KJV)

## **THE APOSTLES' CREED**

I BELIEVE IN God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; that He descended into Hades, the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead; I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy general church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCIPLINE

## HISTORICAL STATEMENT

### 1. Foundations

The church, as the Body of Christ, is God's chosen instrument for spreading the message of redemption through Christ's death and resurrection (the *Evangel*), but over its history the church has required fresh outpourings of God's Spirit in reform movements to bring it back to its mission. Among these were the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, German Pietism in the 1600s, British Methodism in the 1700s, and successive American Great Awakenings in the 1700s and 1800s.

All of these reforms converged in one German-American farmer and tile maker named Jacob Albright, who was educated under the influence of Lutheran Pietists and brought to a deeper level of spirituality in the fervent life of a Methodist class meeting near his home in the area of Ephrata, Pennsylvania, even though at first he understood little of the preaching because the Methodists preached only in English. The Methodists granted him an Exhorter's license in 1796, and he immediately left his farm to travel from village to village preaching to his "erring brothers" in German. Gradually, he attracted converts and organized three classes in 1800. His co-laborers declared Albright a "genuine evangelical preacher" and ordained him in November 1803, and the "Albright People" held their first regular conference at the home of Samuel Becker near Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania in November 1807. Six months later (May 18, 1808), Albright was dead from tuberculosis, worn down by exhausting travel and constant extortion, but his followers carried on. Since the Methodist Church would not endorse German preaching, Albright's "Newly-formed Methodist Conference" organized as a new denomination, the Evangelical Association (*Evangelische Gemeinschaft*).

### 2. The Evangelical Association

The EA flourished through the nineteenth century, growing to a membership of 150,000 in 1891, mainly by following the huge immigration of Germans to the American Midwest. It developed revival meetings and camp meetings, Sunday Schools, and missions at home and abroad (Germany and Japan). Back in Pennsylvania, however, new generations of Evangelicals were imbibing American ideals of democracy and equality and learning English. By the 1880s personal rivalries among church leaders and disputes over the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection had become intertwined with issues of democratic and minority rights and a clash between American and continental German worldviews (the so-called "language question") in a bitter struggle for the soul of the Evangelical Association. The result was that two bodies convened on October 1, 1891, one in Indianapolis and one in Philadelphia, each claiming to be the sole General Conference of the Evangelical Association and each excommunicating the other's leaders. After three years of legal maneuvering, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that the German-oriented "Majority" faction (led by Bishop Esher) was the true Evangelical Association. The "Minority" (led by Bishop Dubs), including the three Annual Conferences in Pennsylvania, had to take a new name, the United Evangelical Church, and therefore lost all of its properties, which had been deeded to the Evangelical Association for the sole use of EA ministers.

### 3. The United Evangelical Church

The first General Conference of the United Evangelical Church in 1894 included delegates from eight annual conferences and claimed a membership of 61,120. It established the structure of the church, adopting Articles of Religion and a new *Discipline*. The Articles were based on a doctrinal statement by Methodist theologian Milton Terry that more clearly set forth their beliefs on regeneration, repentance, witness of the Spirit, sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the future life. The *Discipline* gave each congregation lay representation at Annual Conference and ownership and control of its property. The powers of the General Conference and bishops were limited to provide each Annual Conference with autonomy for independent initiatives.

The accomplishments of the UE Church were undeniable. Its membership increased to 90,000 in 1922; it supported three colleges, including Albright College in Myerstown, Pennsylvania; numerous camp meetings, mission churches, and a missionary enclave in China; women found affirmation for their ministries; youth work prospered under the aegis of the Keystone League of Christian Endeavor. UE congregations in eastern Pennsylvania, then at the height of its industrial-age prosperity, could afford to build new churches, bigger and better than the ones they had lost to the EA, but congregations in the Midwest and Northwest struggled to build even simple structures and survive, and many longed for the support a larger denomination could give them.

After EA Bishop Esther died in 1901, those who saw his authoritarianism as the sole cause of the division began to wonder if reunion of the UE and EA churches might be possible. Merger negotiations started in 1911, but the EA refused to accept changes to its Article of Religion and democratization and decentralization of its church government that the UE considered essential. The deadlock was finally broken when the UE commissioners agreed to concessions in a *Basis of Union* that was approved by the 1919 EA General Conference and given to each UE

Annual Conference in 1921 as an amendment to the *Discipline*. As the UE Annual Conferences approved the *Basis*, opposition to it as a betrayal of the ideals of the United Evangelical Church mounted in eastern Pennsylvania. The 1922 East Pennsylvania Conference session refused to even vote on the *Basis* because of the irregular way it was brought before them, but the General Conference meeting at Barrington, Illinois in October 1922 rejected the pleas of the East Pennsylvania delegates and approved the *Basis of Union*. The merger was consummated at a special General Conference in Detroit, resulting in what was declared to be The Evangelical Church. The East Pennsylvania delegates affirmed the continuing existence of the United Evangelical Church under Bishop William Heil.

#### **4. The Evangelical Congregational Church**

The sons and daughters of Jacob Albright in eastern Pennsylvania, the land of his birth, believed that the *Basis of Union* was a betrayal of his ideals and vision. This remnant felt that they had to remain true to their democratic ideals even if it meant starting over again and building a church on their own. A special session of the East Pennsylvania Conference, convened on November 14, 1922, unanimously endorsed the position taken by their representatives of the 1922 General Conference and reaffirmed the polity and doctrines embodied in the church since the time of Albright. When the East Pennsylvania Conference met for its first regular session after the merger on February 23, 1923, it included representatives from 136 churches (82% of the pre-merger conference) with 18,675 members plus four churches from Ohio Conference, four churches from Illinois, and nine churches from Pittsburgh Conference. The churches in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania organized as the Ohio Conference in 1924, and this became the Western Conference when the congregations in Illinois united with them in 1931.

The non-merging UEs did not lose their properties this time, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled against their use of the name “United Evangelical,” so in 1928 they adopted the name “Evangelical Congregational” to emphasize their heritage in evangelical doctrine and evangelistic outreach and their concern for congregational rights in controlling church property and determining church affiliation. Denominational cohesion would be maintained through the itinerant system, in which pastors were assigned to congregations by the denominational leadership. The ECs lost their stake in Albright College, but once the Evangelical Church had moved the institution to Reading it was happy to sell the campus property to the EC Church in 1931. By the 1950s the site was home to Church Center Press (later the EC Church Center), the Burd and Rogers Memorial Home (later E.C.C. Retirement Village), and Evangelical School of Theology. The church survived the challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. In 1963 church membership topped 30,000 but the increasing secularism of the late twentieth century brought new challenges to a denomination [centered in an industrial “rust belt” that was losing population]. Old ways of worship, education, communication, and evangelism did not touch people as they once did. The EC administrative structure, designed for a much larger denomination, drained needed resources.

Denominational renewal came with a reorganization of the church structures to reflect efficient management practices, rather than historical precedent, that was initiated by the Board of Missions and approved by the 1976 General Conference. Changes would affect Christian education, church planting initiatives, church leadership, stewardship, church publications, and even denominational property and investments. Toward the end of the 1980s the church began to shift from “maintenance ministry” to growth ministry by facing a challenge to increase church planting, evangelism, and outreach to urban ethnic cultures. Between 1974 and 2002 the EC Church successfully launched twenty-four church planting projects, and denominational leadership took an active interest in the viability of existing churches. EC missionaries spread the *Evangel* around the world, and EC Mission Conferences were organized: Liberia (1973), Latin American (1977), Japan (1983), India (1986), and Costa Rica (1999).

The 1998 General Conference approved an alternative structure for local congregational leadership and authorized repositioning of the church to facilitate a proactive approach to ministry and evangelism. A Vision 20/20 Core Committee and Task Force formulated Purpose, Mission, Values, and Vision (PMVV) Statements for the denomination and measured current denominational structures against PMVV statements so as to make restructuring a transformative process. EC members bathed the discernment process in prayer. The General Conference Transformation Team evaluated every procedure and institution inherited from the church’s EA and UE ancestors and proposed a *Basis of Union* for the merger of the two Annual Conferences (East and West) and the General Conference into a new National Conference.

The *Basis of Union* was adopted in 2002, and the first session of the National Conference was held in May 2003 after a transitional period of education for clergy, laity, and churches throughout the conference territories. The *Discipline* continues to guarantee congregations the largest freedom consistent with fidelity to the essentials of Christian belief and the orderly and efficient administration of the affairs of the church. The church is called upon to be a dynamic movement of God embodying a passion for Christ, compassion for the lost, servant leadership, healthy ministries, and unity in the body of Christ.

From its simple beginning under Albright and his associates, through the rigors of schism and adversity, has come the Evangelical Congregational Church to which we give allegiance. Now it takes its place in the twenty-first century, targeting a society far different from that of its founder but intent on serving the Christ of the Ages.