



EPC

A Global Movement of Evangelical Presbyterian Churches

THE JEREMIAH JOURNAL

March 2018

Friends, thank you for taking the time each month to hear my thoughts on what God is doing in and through the EPC, and how as a global movement of Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical, and Missional churches we are acting on what we believe His mission and vision for the EPC are.

Before we jump into this month's topic, I'd like to take just a moment of personal privilege in this, my first Jeremiah Journal of 2018, to reflect.

When I graduated from Gordon-Conwell Seminary in 1980, I had the opportunity to go to Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, for one year and serve with Dick Halverson, who was the pastor there at the time. I had gone to high school in northern Virginia, so it was a chance to go back close to home. But more than that, Dick Halverson was a giant in American evangelicalism so I was excited about this opportunity.

Dick was a peer of Billy Graham. We mourned Billy's passing into glory last week and at the same time celebrated how God used him. I like to think of him with words he shared many years ago that you are probably familiar with:

"Someday, you will hear or read that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I have ever been. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God."

To the praise and glory of God, every follower of Jesus Christ can and should say the same thing!

The influence that Billy Graham had on Dick Halverson's life—and by extension, mine—was huge. Dick was also a peer of Bill Bright and had co-founded World Vision with Bob Pierce. Dick Halverson spent a lot of time in my year with him pouring his life and ministry experience into me.

To make a long story short, Dick left Fourth Church near the end of my year there to become Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. I stayed on another year, and another, and then another. By the time I left to become pastor of First EPC in Renton, Washington, I had served at Fourth for 14 years.



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It was about halfway through that time that the church joined the EPC. As part of that process, we attended the 6th General Assembly of the EPC in Livonia, Michigan, in 1986. What we saw, heard, and experienced at that Assembly helped the leaders of Fourth decide that the EPC was the denomination they wanted to join.

While many things have changed about an EPC General Assembly in the past 30 years—most notably, how many people now attend—much has stayed the same, including inspiring worship, dynamic preaching, great fellowship, as well as conducting the important business of the church. And that’s what I’d like to talk about this month: why you should attend the EPC General Assembly this year.

First, if you are under age 45, or even 50, the benefit of first-hand GA experience is one of the most effective ways to prepare you for the time in the very near future when this church is going to be under your leadership. Indeed, we want you involved now!

A major discussion that Boomer pastors and lay leaders have had with me in recent years has revolved around the question: “How can we help prepare the next generation of leaders to be as fruitful and effective as possible, and even take the EPC to new levels of effectiveness for Jesus Christ?”

Second, our annual meeting is a reminder that our Lord Jesus is doing a lot more than what He is doing in your local church and community. You know this already, but you are an important part of something bigger than your own ministry. You are part of the more than 600 churches of the EPC in the U.S., the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, and our fraternal brothers and sisters around the world. When we meet together at GA, we hear each other’s testimonies about how God is working in other cities, states, and countries.

A third benefit of attending GA is the celebration and practical application of the spiritual connection that we enjoy as believers and churches. The EPC is a just small part of the global church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes I refer to us as “this little band of churches called the EPC.” If you haven’t been to a General Assembly, you will love the music this little band makes when we’re together!

As I have shared many times, we are simply “better together.” And that includes when we gather together at our Assembly. We declare our distinctive, shared values that I mentioned earlier—we are Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical, and Missional. We want to encourage and strengthen these values in our churches and ministries.



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A fourth reason to attend is the “iron sharpening iron” opportunities at GA. We’re committed to equipping you to be more effective in your ministry.

This will be our fourth year to hold the Leadership Institute. We offer training events on Tuesday that will equip you to meet practical needs that you have said you need help with.

Our plenary speakers on Wednesday will challenge and inspire you to get outside of your comfort zone as you further develop your ministry for Jesus Christ. One of our plenary speakers is a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide in Africa. Her powerful testimony of God’s grace in the midst of some of the worst violence man can unleash is a word I believe we all need, especially in America right now.

Our Networking Lunches are times set aside on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday to connect with your peers across the EPC. One of the things I love about the lunches is that they offer learning opportunities in an informal setting, reinforcing the fact that in the EPC, we don’t take either a “top down” or a “one size fits all” approach.

We celebrate this broad diversity of ways in which EPC churches and leaders are effectively addressing the opportunities as well as the challenges that are inherent in ministry today.

Yet another benefit of attending our General Assembly is that when we gather together, we are making this statement to the American church: “In the EPC, we are in this together.”

We are willing to be responsible *for* one another and accountable *to* one another. We believe we’re not just “better together,” we are “much better together.” This is dramatically different from the “independent, go it alone” spirit that is so pervasive in American Christianity in the 21st century.

I could share many more reasons that you should attend GA, but I’ll just add one more: When you join us in June, you have not only a voice, but also a vote in the decisions that are important to the life and ministry of our church. Let me give you three quick examples:

- 1) In the wake of dramatic changes taking place in seminary education in the past 5 to 10 years, we addressed how to most effectively prepare those whom God is calling into full-time ministry in the EPC. Following a lively discussion of recommendations made by our Interim Committee on Ministerial Education a few years back, we



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improved and broadened the educational requirement of the EPC ordination process.

- 2) In light of important issues confronting our culture, we affirmed God's Word as it applies to human sexuality when we approved the Position Paper on Human Sexuality in 2016-17. We will vote on a Pastoral Letter on the same subject this year that offers guidance to churches and leaders when they need to address challenging ministry situations in this area.
- 3) In this and future Assemblies, we will address how to best fund the mission and vision of the EPC, while maintaining a commitment to minimize funding for the national level of the church. In short, we are committed to *not* building a bureaucracy in the EPC. This important discussion at the General Assembly can help address a question the National Leadership Team is working through. That is, "How can we help our churches and presbyteries in ways that only the national level can help, and how should the national level best support our churches and presbyteries in those things that are more effectively done at the local level?" We want you to be involved in that discussion!

Well, as I hope you can tell by now, our annual General Assembly is a critical part of who we are in the EPC. It reinforces our connectionalism, offers leadership development opportunities, provides avenues for fellowship, and a chance to pause, to refresh, and to recharge our batteries.

I would love for every one of our more-than-600 churches to be represented by a Ruling Elder or Teaching Elder at Hope Church in Memphis this June. The staff and congregation are going to roll out the red carpet, and they have a great variety of activities in store to give us a special Memphis flavor that I can promise, you will not want to miss.

Our Leadership Institute begins on Tuesday afternoon, June 19, and the Assembly concludes on Friday evening, June 22. West Tennessee is within a day's drive of more than two-thirds of our churches, and Memphis is an easy airport to get to from just about anywhere.

I hope you'll check our website often, as we are adding details frequently as they are confirmed. Links to our hotels with discounted rates are available right now, and online registration begins April 1.



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Thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you at Hope Church in a few months.

God bless you, and remember, my friends: He is risen!