



121 South College Street
Myerstown, PA 17067-1299
p: 717.866.5775 • 800.532.5775
f: 717.866.4667
www.evangelical.edu

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Mr. Steve Reiter
Bethesda EC Church
23 Meadowbrook Drive
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

Dear Steve, Members, and Leaders of the Bethesda EC Church:

I write in response to your invitation to inform you of how Evangelical Seminary approaches matters like spiritual formation, contemplation, guided prayer, and the like.

Evangelical was founded by and remains in covenant relationship with the Evangelical Congregational Church; our Board of Trustees has always had a majority who are members of the EC Church. While decades ago the Church encouraged the seminary to serve other broadly evangelical constituents, we still root ourselves in EC values, beliefs, and practices. Those EC distinctives are themselves rooted in Wesleyanism, the broader movement that emerged in the late 18th century from the revival work of John and Charles Wesley and others. And the Wesleyan revivals were themselves rooted in Pietism, which continues to be the guiding impulse behind evangelicalism in North American and around the world.

This little bit of history matters because Pietism's guiding principle was that it was not enough to merely know about God; one must know God personally. And, as all the revival preachers since have preached (including Jacob Albright, the founder of the EC movement), to know God means knowing Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Again, it is not enough to merely know about Christ ("even the demons believe, and tremble"); we are invited into a personal relationship with him. As the apostle Paul testified, we too "want to know Christ" (Phil. 3:10). And he assured us dozens of times in his epistles that when we do, we are "in Christ" and Christ is in us, and that union of our spirits is what makes us one with God and one with each other. That truth is not merely a theological assertion; it's something to be experienced, which is why every altar call is an invitation to know and to trust, not merely to believe a doctrine.

The words, title, and labels used to describe things may change from one generation to another, but this foundation of trusting, intimate, experiential relationship with God in Christ is the foundation for everything Evangelical Seminary does, has ever done and, Lord willing, will ever do. That is particularly true in the core program that we have offered from the first day until now—our Master of Divinity, created for the training of Christ-centered pastors. In that program and in all the others we have endeavored throughout our entire history to ensure that those who serve the body of Christ are well prepared in the head, heart, and hands to lead others to this same experiential knowledge of Christ. And that will remain true as we move into our new partnership

with Sioux Falls Seminary, for we have chosen them precisely because they share that same biblical perspective and commitment.

In this generation many evangelicals are using the phrase “spiritual formation” to refer to a holistic understanding of what it means to become spiritually mature in Christ in much the same way that “Christian education” was taught when I was a seminary student 30 years ago. This is true of evangelical seminaries and churches across the world, which is why one can today see many Bible-believing, Jesus-loving churches with spiritual formation directors or other such titles. Because we exist to serve the Church, today at Evangelical Seminary we have courses, even an entire master’s program, in spiritual formation. That curriculum does for this generation what we have been doing for each preceding generation—helping our students mature in their personal relationship with God, while equipping them to help others do the same.

One of the blessings of this generation is that we are able to benefit even more than those before us from the rich resources of the history of our faith, particularly the wisdom of the early church. Therefore, we sometimes now use language that the saints of God in the past have used to describe what God’s people have been doing all along. For instance, we speak at Evangelical on occasion about “contemplation” or “contemplative prayer” as one ancient way to describe a prayer life in which we listen to the Spirit, instead of doing all the talking. It’s what some have called “practicing the presence of God,” or what the psalmist described as being still and knowing that He is God (Psalm 46:1). We might on occasion speak of “guided prayer,” which is what Billy Graham and every revival preacher does during an altar call, or what a pastoral counselor may do in a private session with someone who is not sure in the moment what to pray, but wants to connect intimately with the Spirit of God for grace, wisdom, and courage. Occasionally, others misuse those words in new or strange ways, but their misuse should not deter us from the treasures of the faith offered to us by the saints of old.

Therefore, we teach, model, and practice these things ourselves because this is what Christians, particularly those who believe in a personal relationship with Jesus, have done all along. And because it is what Evangelical Seminary has done all along. And we do so also because it matters—because the power of Christ is at work among those who know him, who are transformed by him, who are in intimate relationship with him. Everything we do is, at its core, about Christ, who is “before all things and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17).

I’m pleased that we share this common, enthusiastic commitment to a personal, experiential knowledge of Jesus Christ with the Evangelical Congregational Church and with Bethesda EC Church in particular. I’m glad that your pastors and lay leaders share this commitment, earnestly and wholeheartedly, without faltering, for this is what our broken world needs most, right now and always. May God bless the ministry of Bethesda EC Church as you continue to preach, teach, and practice this gospel... this good news... about Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord!

Grace,



Tony

Anthony L. Blair, PhD, DMin
President