



Evangelical Congregational Church

TO KNOW CHRIST AND MAKE HIM KNOWN

April 9, 2020

Pastoral Relations Committee
Bethesda E.C. Church
23 Meadowbrook Drive
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

Dear PRC members,

This letter is in response to a question from Steve Reiter, Chairman of the Bethesda Pastoral Relations Committee. His question to me as Bishop was if the Evangelical Congregational Church had an official statement on or definition of contemplative prayer and/or spiritual formation in the *Discipline*.

The short answer is “no,” the denomination does not have a specific definition. I trust you understand how difficult it is for a denomination to predict what are going to be the “hot button” issues in the next few years, write an official statement, and then go through the five-year process of including it in the *Discipline*.

The longer answer is that while we do not have a short simple statement, there are numerous statements in the *Discipline* that describe our denomination’s desire for all of our members to be involved in discipleship, grow in their faith, and be formed in the image of Christ.

Allow me to take just a few references from published denominational documents for your information.

Our denominations Purpose Statement is “To know Christ and to make Him known.” Obviously, the statement “to know Christ” speaks to our understanding that we are to be formed by God’s Word and His Holy Spirit to have an intimate personal relationship with Christ. This comes out of our strong pietistic heritage. Nearly twenty years ago Bishop Mike Sigman wrote a brochure: “Streams Of Influence.” One of the four streams of influence for our denomination is the stream of pietism. It is noted, “After [Jacob] Albright trusted in Christ for his salvation, he had a hunger for God’s Word and a desire to obey God’s will. He forsook the religious formality with which he had been familiar and sought after personal piety or an ever-deepening devotion to the Lord nurtured by the disciplines of the Christian faith.” “From its beginning, our church tradition has emphasized the necessity of a growing devotion to Christ as evidenced by prayer, Bible study and spiritual accountability.”

Our Article of Faith on “The Witness Of The Spirit” states “The witness of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God, the heavenly Comforter, immediately convinces the regenerate believer that he has passed from death unto life, that his sins are all forgiven, and that he is a child of God.” This “inward impression on the soul” is a vital aspect of the relationship between the individual believer and our heavenly Father.

Further, I call to your attention the in this same Part I of the *Discipline*, “Chapter II – Christian Perfection” as well as our statements in “Chapter III – Christian Practice,” particularly the

paragraphs on “Spiritual Standards.” These sections speak to our understanding and practice of what I would describe as spiritual formation within the denomination.

Part Three of our *Discipline* lists nine leadership principles for the local church. The second principle is “Prayer.” “A healthy church is intentionally committed to discovering the heart of God through the discipline of prayer.” “Prayer allows us to hear the voice of God and to discern His good, pleasing, and perfect will.” When I read those statements, I am reminded of the psalmist who was inspired to write “Be still, and know that I am God” [Psalm 46:10]. Prayer is more than simply listing all our need for God as if he didn’t already know; but focused time spent with him, to listen and hear his voice; his Word and his Spirit.

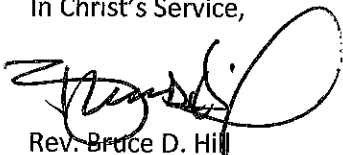
The last item from the *Discipline* to which I will refer, which I believe indicates our understanding of spiritual formation is found in the questions every member of a local Evangelical Congregational Church answers when they join the church. “The Bible itself, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit, is our standard of Christian life and practice, and the denomination’s *Discipline* seeks to be a faithful interpretation of scriptural standards of the Christian life. Are you willing to seek to live by the teachings of the Bible as the Spirit guides you, and will you seek to contribute to the harmony of the local church by following the rules of the *Discipline*? Will you submit in the Lord to the government of this church and in case you are found delinquent in doctrine or life, will you submit to its discipline?”

I believe that through a careful study of these statements and a clear understanding of our denomination’s history you can see that while we do not have an easy to quote statement or definition of contemplative prayer or spiritual formation, we are a church that believes in and endeavors to experientially live by God’s Word and His Holy Spirit.

Allow me, as Bishop, to make one more point. I believe we must be very careful how we understand words and terms. We do not condone or hold what some groups may describe as contemplative prayer or spiritual formation. But we also cannot allow others to define what that means to us. For instance, the Evangelical Congregational Church believes in marriage; but not in marriage as it is defined by our culture. We cannot, nor will we as a denomination, stop using the word “marriage” simply because someone has defined it differently that what is found in God’s Word. We believe Jesus came into the world to reveal the Father [Luke 2:32, John 17:6] and has provided His Holy Spirit to guide us in all truth [John 16:13].

Therefore, the individual follower of Jesus and the corporate body that we know as the Evangelical Congregational Church have the same purpose “To know Christ and to make Him known.”

In Christ’s Service,



Rev. Bruce D. Hill
Bishop