

Further in Mission, Together

Reflections on 40 years of service in the Covenant.

Gary Walter,
President of the ECC



As I near retirement, this is my final report as president. Being able to serve Jesus through this church for more than 40 years has been humbling and meaningful. I came to faith in high school through a newly planted Covenant congregation. The Covenant has continually nurtured my growth as a follower of Christ, and that of my family. It is the church whose dedication to God’s mission has been central to my own vocation. It is the relational center for so very many of our deepest and most cherished relationships.

For all of this, to you and every generation of Covenanters before you, thank you.

Overview: Our Mission

In this Annual Report, you will find updates from our various ministry areas that show the scope and progress of this partnership. Together we are “3StrandStrong”: congregation, conference, Covenant. We are reaching more lives in more ways in more places with more diversity than at any point since our founding in 1885.

This is the cumulative result of the faithful efforts of 875 congregations in the United States and Canada, attended by more than 300,000 constituents, served by 1,900 active clergy in an array of ministries, supported by committed and competent regional and denominational staff, augmented by the specialized ministries of various Covenant institutions and corporations, and extending to 58 countries around the world.

Taking the fullness of Scripture to heart, we distill our ministry this way: We join God in God’s mission to see more disciples, among more populations, in a more caring and just world.

We have then crystallized five priorities to live into that mission: start and strengthen churches; make and deepen disciples; develop leaders; love mercy do justice; and serve globally (undertaking those same priorities in an international context).

In support of those priorities are operations, finance, and communications.

Additionally, we have institutions and corporations that undertake specialized ministries: North Park University (including North Park Seminary), Covenant Ministries of Benevolence, National Covenant Properties, Covenant Trust Company, Paul Carlson Partners, Centro Hispano de Estudios Teológicos (Spanish language ministry training), and Bezalel Affordable Housing.

The Covenant is sometimes described as a denomination that fights above its weight class. Our missional impact is indeed beyond what one would expect of a partnership our size. Most importantly, as you read the reports that follow mine, sense the real lives in real places touched by the grace and hope of Jesus.

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Pivotal Moments: Initiatives and Innovations

Over the course of nearly 30 years and three presidencies, the Covenant has experienced a consistent trajectory of growing, growing more diverse, and growing more in the fullness of mission. Consider the following figures (US/Canada):

	<u>1990</u>	<u>2017</u>
Aggregate Weekly Attendance	94,950	223,387
Estimated Total Constituency	125,000	325,000
Number of Churches	615	876
Current Congregations Added Since 1990		391
% Ethnic Diversity of Churches	7%	32%
Size of Ministerium	930	1,880
Number and % Women in Ministerium	27, 3%	459, 24%
# Global Connections (includes CWR)	15	58

Having served in three roles at Covenant Offices during a good portion of that time frame, I have witnessed pivotal initiatives and innovations that have contributed to this growth. Among these are:

1990: *Bringing My World to Christ.* This annual emphasis on relational evangelism (with the simple rubric of prayer-care-share) helped attune the hearts of Covenanters toward sharing the hope of Christ. Today this has morphed into BLESS, with the same abiding hope of warming the temperature for evangelism.

1992: *Consultation on the Cities.* This major round table underscored the importance of ministry to the complex tapestry of cities. One key result was the establishment of a new ministry sponsored by Covenant Ministries of Benevolence named Compassion, Mercy, and Justice (CMJ). CMJ was later relocated directly into the church in 2007 as the newest department, and is now one of our five mission priorities, Love Mercy Do Justice.

1993: *Church Planting Initiative (aka Churches Planting Churches).* In a major recommitment to this mission field of the US and Canada, church planting was prioritized, systems re-engineered, and congregations directly engaged in the planting of new churches. To date, nearly 400 of our current congregations are the result of these sustained efforts.

1996: *Covenant Orientation.* Previously, to be ordained in the Covenant required either a degree from or a one-year minimum of resident studies at North Park Theological Seminary. An alternative Covenant orientation process was established where participants could remain in their ministry setting, undertaking proscribed orientation courses and other experiences over time. Today approximately 600 women and men are enrolled.

1996: *Seven Country Shift.* For a long period, the Covenant focused its international efforts primarily in seven countries: Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Congo (Zaire), Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand, coupled with relief projects in varying locations from year to year. Unsettledness in both Congo and Colombia required the temporary evacuation of missionaries which led to examining new possibilities for assignment. Combined with the maturation of partnerships with the other national churches, it became timely to evaluate expanding opportunities for missionary deployment and international partnerships. Today through our missionary team and national

partnerships, including Covenant World Relief projects, we are engaged in 58 countries, including the historic seven.

2004: *Five-Fold Test Regarding Multiethnic Ministry.* Through the relational networks of pioneering ethnic leaders and the Church Planting Initiative, the Covenant made significant advances in becoming more ethnically diverse through the 1990s and into the 2000s. The five-fold test was developed as a way to make sure intentionality matched relationality in journeying towards a multiethnic future. It serves as a set of values as well as a resource by which progress can be assessed—progress that shows the Covenant being the first Euro-immigrant denomination to pass 20% diversity (today 33%), with what is likely the most diverse senior leadership team of any denomination.

2006: *Congregational Vitality.* In our desire to support every church regardless of age in its pursuit of a healthy missional future, a major thrust in congregational vitality was initiated that to date has served more than 400 congregations.

2010: *Initiating Organizing for Mission.* Growth had caused Covenant organizational structures to be stressed, along with other considerations. Building on a 2001 constitutional revision enhancing collaboration, an extensive multi-year review of organizing was undertaken. Eventually the previous departmental structure was dissolved, replaced with a new streamlined, cost-effective, and more collaborative design focusing on five mission priorities.

Other specific developments could be pointed out, and each mission priority, institution, and conference could identify pivotal moments within their own areas. I identify these as significant for the impact on us as a whole. Their effect has been enduring, setting in motion developments that continue to unfold. In combination, they are noteworthy contributors to a trajectory of growth—growing more diverse, and growing in fullness of mission.

Enduring Character

Each president of the Covenant has had a unique set of challenges for the time and context of their service. Each successive president will as well. The incline for ministry is only getting steeper and more complex, both within and beyond the local church, conference, and Covenant.

And yet I see three enduring compass bearings related to our internal life that have informed navigation for over a century, and which can serve that purpose moving forward.

1. The Covenant works because it is a covenant, an engaged partnership. It is easy to underestimate what it really takes to see a voluntary partnership like ours progress. There is no mandatory giving, service, or participation. It all emanates from a lived and earnest desire for connection and partnership, friendship and mission. Our legacy in this regard is pronounced and requires continuous nurture. The fruit of mission emanates from a root of connectivity.
2. The Covenant makes major strides through aspirational discipleship. Every time we have taken on a major emphasis or challenge I have seen the convergence of three elements. First, it is biblically rooted. We are convinced it is aligned with the heart and call of God. Second, it calls out the best in us as disciples. There is a compelling posture of hope and

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rightness, generating a “we can do this” resolve. Finally, there is life-change that reinforces momentum. We sustain it because we see real difference in real lives.

3. The Covenant’s identity as missional Pietists is uniquely important in keeping us centered. In 1910, the year the Covenant turned twenty-five, then president C.V. Bowman gave a lecture identifying and reflecting on four key organizing principles to our faith and practice. In combination, they generate and nurture the character of the Covenant. First, biblical. We want the word of God to be our authoritative frame of reference for all of life. But it is not enough to simply know about God; we want to *know* God. So the second is devotional, emphasizing new life in Christ and cultivating an ever-deepening walk with God. But even that is not enough. So, third, we join God in God’s mission; we are missional. Finally, it is all better done together, so we are connectional. Biblical, devotional, missional, and connectional. The interplay of those four values gives rise to who we are at our best; removing any makes us less than we could be.

Gratitude

One of God’s great gifts is others for the journey. God’s goodness to me through the people of the Covenant – laity, clergy, and colleagues alike – is a sure sign of God’s care in my life. I have been encouraged, challenged, mentored, stretched, and shaped. Thank you.

A special note of appreciation for Chris Hagberg, who has been my administrative partner for 17 years. As she has synched with the rhythms and demands of various roles, she has been highly productive and unfailing in her worship of God and engagement with people.

Finally, my family. Nancy, Amy (Chase), Alissa (Nod), Lauren (Mark), and our four granddaughters Lucia, Sophia, Madeleine, and Luna have all been a deep well of joy, respite, and pride. First as a couple, then as a family, we have sought to weave life, faith, and service as an integral whole. And now Nancy and I look forward to more time with them (across nine time zones) and other deferred interests.

And so, beloved Covenant, may we walk into the future as obedient, humble servants, seeking to go deeper in Christ and further in mission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C.V. Bowman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.