

Healthy Missional Churches: An Exploration of the Impact of the Veritas Seminar on Congregations

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The stated goal of the Veritas seminar is to produce healthy, missional churches. It was this goal that led to the question of my doctoral research at Luther Seminary: In what ways does the Veritas seminar enable congregations to increase their capacity for understanding and joining God's mission in the world?¹ My conclusion is that the seminar, in and of itself, does not produce healthy, missional churches. It does, however, assist congregations to better understand their current realities and so position congregations to begin a journey of revitalization that, if pursued, may lead to greater missional capacity and imagination. In this article I share what my research revealed about the ways Veritas positions congregations for revitalization and greater missional capacity as well as some assumptions it challenged regarding being missional within the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Perspective and Truth-telling

In order for congregations to increase their capacity for understanding and joining God's mission in the world, they must first have a sober and true accounting of their current reality, which requires honest conversa-

1. My research focused on local congregations' use of the Veritas seminar as it was presented in 2013. As such, the results do not reflect any subsequent changes to the seminar, nor do they address any other aspects of the vitality pathway, as presented by the Evangelical Covenant Church.

tions and communal discernment. The Veritas seminar provides “balcony space” for congregations to take an honest look at themselves.² It then provides a framework within which those congregations can have constructive conversations regarding their desired future and the steps needed to realize that future.

The data, both qualitative and quantitative, consistently revealed that congregations that participated in Veritas were given opportunity and language to address their current situations more constructively. While this may seem basic, participants identified this development as important and notable. One pastor commented that Veritas “will help you see where you are at.” Another pastor said that Veritas gave his congregation a “context in which we could . . . speak the truth to ourselves about where we were at and what pathway we could take.” For that pastor and congregation, Veritas offered space for honest discussions about their situation and gave them a clearer sense of where to go next. Veritas provided a starting point for missional discovery.

Veritas not only gives congregations the opportunity to begin observing their internal issues; it also initiates an examination of the congregation’s relationship with their wider context. This awareness is facilitated by an exercise in which participants locate their congregation along a congregational matrix, identifying themselves as a “healthy missional,” “stable,” “critical moment,” or “at risk” congregation. Congregations have an opportunity to take an honest look at their effectiveness within, and impact on, their community—as well as the community’s impact on them. Most of the congregations participating in Veritas are in some way aware that, at the very least, things could be better than they currently are. This awareness invites them to move from a survival mentality to a space where they begin to see how their congregation is connected to or disconnected from their larger context. This opening of the congregational system may be the most compelling aspect of the Veritas seminar.

In summary, the Veritas seminar does provide a starting point for improving a congregation’s missional capacity. However, if congregations are to continue in the missional journey, they must address critical ques-

2. “Balcony space” is a term from Linsky that is used in the Veritas materials. Heifetz and Linsky describe it as follows “We call this skill ‘getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,’ an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, ‘What’s really going on here?’” Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 51.

tions regarding the nature of mission and leadership. In the following sections I engage each of these areas, intersecting my research results with the history and affirmations of the Evangelical Covenant Church. I raise here critical questions regarding ways Covenant identity may hinder the pursuit of missional health. I additionally suggest points of Covenant identity that may offer solutions to these obstacles. The affirmations of new life in Christ, commitment to the whole mission of the church, the authority of Scripture, and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit all interact in important ways with the Veritas seminar.

Adaptive Leadership

My research revealed a disparity that raises questions regarding the kind of leadership needed and the kind of leadership congregations will accept in the process of revitalization. While 77.5 percent of participants indicated strong agreement that a spirit of collegiality and trust between leadership and congregants is vital for any congregation, less than 40 percent of respondents indicated that such collegiality and trust existed. Veritas is not a program that will “fix” or “rescue” our congregations but an invitation to a journey. That is, it provides a congregation opportunities to examine how it does ministry, to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and to articulate where it needs to change and adapt. It is a process that calls for adaptive leaders who are capable and willing to challenge and inspire the congregation to move forward into new ways of being and doing ministry. When a pastor begins to lead toward increased missional capacity, the chaos that is introduced into a congregational system can be significant.

The journey requires a high level of trust and collegiality between a congregation and its leaders. When there is a lack of trust between leaders and congregation, as revealed by my data, the church does not have the necessary leadership capital to begin to increase its missional capacity. In a congregation that does not have apostolic or catalytic leaders, it may be that change is being introduced by or demanded from the congregation without the support of official leadership. In such instances, Veritas can potentially serve as the instrument through which change is introduced into the congregational system. However, without the presence of a leader with apostolic, prophetic, or evangelistic gifts, any change introduced will likely be unable to overcome the resistance reflected in the distrust between leadership and congregation.

Anthony Wallace asserts that “with few exceptions, every religious

revitalization movement with which I am acquainted has been originally conceived . . . by a single individual.”³ In his view, revitalization movements most often begin when one person, whom he identifies as a prophet, has a divine vision or supernatural revelation and then shares that vision with others. That chain of events begins a revitalization movement within that culture, organization, or people group. Through the personal transformation wrought by his or her vision, the prophet begins to gather followers and adherents to the vision.

How, then, does revitalization happen in a system where strong personal leadership is not only distrusted but often rejected? Collaboration and congregational polity are highly treasured values in the Covenant Church. The group exercise discussed above (p. 32) has the potential to introduce significant dis-equilibrium into the congregational system. While this chaos is introduced through the input of the group, a strong leader is needed to maintain and guide this disequilibrium or chaos long enough for the necessary changes to occur.⁴ And yet the Veritas seminar does not recommend empowering those leaders with any formal authority. The vitality team is to address change as advisers and influencers only. Interestingly, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, warn that one of the tactics a system will use to avoid change is exactly this type of behavior: “This work avoidance can take numerous forms, such as *creating a new committee with no authority* or finding a scapegoat.”⁵

In the early years of the Covenant, David Nyvall made the remark that what the Covenant had at the time was apostles when what it needed was local pastors.⁶ Today, by contrast, the Covenant tends to have local pastors but is in need of apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Kyle Small points out that apostolic gifting demonstrates both “commitment to God’s history, and a vision for participation in God’s future.”

Apostles refuse to leave any stone unturned and are willing to explore new ideas and territory. Apostles yearn to see

3. Anthony F.C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 270–73.

4. Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 107–16.

5. Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 31, my emphasis.

6. Cf. Philip J. Anderson, *A Precious Heritage: A Century of Mission in the Northwest 1884–1984* (Minneapolis: The Northwest Conference, 1984), 42.

where God is acting in the world: even more, they invite the people of God to join them in these spaces. . . . The office of the apostle needs to continue today in the leadership of the church.⁷

If a culture of collegiality and trust is to be fostered so that congregations can move forward in mission, that work must be undertaken by the congregation as a whole, under the guidance of a leader with these necessary gifts.

The Mission of the Missional Church

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile have raised the concern that the question “What does a missional church actually look like?” may simply mask “a more discrete how-to list.”⁸ The ten missional markers of *Veritas* have the potential to be viewed as one such list. Indeed, the ten missional markers provided the only definition of “missional” some surveyed pastors used. Yet even if these markers contain some repackaged church growth ideas, they also include missional impulses. One must not lose sight, in the midst of church growth relics, of markers like “transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice ministries” and “global perspective and engagement.”⁹ These markers point to a recognition that being missional is about more than church growth and health. They point to God at work in the world and the imperative that the church join this work.

Even so, my research revealed that many Covenant pastors/congregations equate being missional with the work of evangelism—and it is here, in the conflation of evangelism and mission, I found the ongoing influence of the Church Growth/Health Movements most evident in the *Veritas* material and in the life of the congregations I studied. When asked to name hallmarks of a missional church, pastors’ responses often were

7. Kyle J. A. Small, “Missional Ordered Ministry in the Evangelical Covenant Church: Moving toward Apostolic Imagination,” in Craig Van Gelder, ed. *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity*, pp. 198–234 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 231. Cf. Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 256.

8. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 68.

9. The ten healthy missional markers are centrality of the word of God; life transforming walk with Jesus; intentional evangelism; heartfelt worship; compelling Christian

limited to evangelism. Some representative examples include, “There are people coming to Christ on a regular basis,” and “We are doing what the mission calls us to do and that is to make new disciples, not just make disciples, more and better disciples, but to make new disciples and to spread the gospel and so one of those markers is that you have people coming to faith on a regular basis.” This tendency was marked by a sense that community needs were addressed more as a means to an end than out of a sense that meeting those needs would, in and of itself, be participating with God in mission.

In the Covenant Church, there is a deep commitment to the value of intentional evangelism, reflected in the Covenant affirmations of the necessity of new birth in Christ and the commitment to the church as a fellowship of believers. Add to these affirmations the revivalist impulse of early Covenanters and the heavy influence of the Church Growth/Health Movements in the last thirty years, and one begins to understand why this conflation occurs. All of these factors and the success of the church planting initiative may make it difficult to hear this challenge to our current practices, but movement toward increased missional capacity necessitates embracing a more robust gospel that impacts every area of life.¹⁰

The challenge is to move away from an exclusively soterian gospel. Evangelism must become about more than people making a decision for Jesus; it must involve a commitment to follow and become kingdom people. David Bosch makes the distinction, with the help of Howard Snyder, between church people and kingdom people. “Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world.”¹¹ Veritas does emphasize personal conversion and seeing people regularly coming to Christ, and that is certainly an aspect of the mission of God. The challenge is to integrate that call more tightly with the need for evangelism that encompasses the wider work of God in the world.

community; transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice; global perspective and engagement; sacrificial and generous living and giving; culture of godly leadership; and fruitful organizational structures.

10. For a fuller discussion see Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

11. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 378.

The need for evangelism to go beyond simply making a decision for Jesus fits under the affirmation of commitment to the whole mission of the church. The challenge is to more tightly integrate evangelism with that whole mission. The church's whole mission is identified in Veritas through the markers of "transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice ministries" and "global perspective and engagement." In these two markers there is the most potential for Veritas to break free of the Church Growth/Health model and move into missional territory. Bosch describes what a commitment to the whole mission of the church looks like: "The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving."¹² The Covenant has a history of robust Pietism that, at its best, is not simply a personal devotion but a faith that expresses itself in communal transformation and global engagement in God's mission.

This is the direction taken by one of the churches I interviewed. That congregation is increasing in missional capacity, not because of Veritas per se, but because of a commitment on the part of the congregation to engage in life with their community. As they engage in that life, opportunities to serve arise and they are present to come alongside in the name of Christ. This is evangelism in the new post-Christian context where the right to be heard and taken seriously is earned through investment in the lives a congregation seeks to help and serve.

Interestingly, another significant finding of my research was the lack of actual evangelism taking place in congregations studied. The high *expressed* value placed on evangelism did not correspond to an equally high level of practice or identifiable pathways for evangelism in the ministries of the congregation. Rather, the quantitative instrument showed only slight agreement that there were identifiable pathways for evangelism in the congregations and that people were actively building relationships with those who did not yet know Christ. The pastors interviewed in the qualitative portion of the research strongly identified mission with evangelism, but the behaviors and systems in place in these congregations indicate that while evangelism is a stated value, the practice of evangelism lags behind.

I suggest that this lag follows from a truncated understanding of the gospel that does not take into account the fullness of the *missio Dei* and the church's role in it. Bosch provides a much needed word to denomina-

12. *Ibid.*, 375.

tions like the Covenant Church that have a commitment to evangelism through church planting. He argues that the church needs to focus on more than the “planting of churches” and “saving of souls,” widening its focus to participate in the mission of God in the world so that it includes the struggle against the principalities and powers of this age.¹³ Here is an intersection with another of the Covenant affirmations, a commitment to the whole mission of the church.

In the quantitative instrument, responses to questions addressing global engagement showed slight agreement at best on awareness of and participation in global engagement, revealing an overall lack of missional imagination and practice in this area. Veritas is somewhat helpful on this point. It does raise the issue of global engagement, listing it as a marker of a healthy, missional church. This is a step forward from the Church Growth/Health Movements’ focus on conversion and attractional ministry. It raises awareness that there are issues and opportunities for engagement in the global community. The problem is that beyond raising the issue, nothing in the Veritas materials addresses why global engagement is important, nor do they provide any clues as to how a congregation might more meaningfully become engaged in the global community.

The challenge is that for years mission has been partitioned off as a particular area of ministry done by someone else far away and supported by the giving of the local church. Those partitions show up in the very organization of the Covenant Church and most of its congregations with departments and committees named missions, evangelism, Christian formation, etc. Mission is relegated to the activity of missionaries overseas, whereas church growth and evangelism happen domestically. Church planting here in the continental United States is seen as a form of evangelism more than as an outworking of the mission of God in our midst. One major hurdle that these ministry partitions create is the lack of a sense of mission for the local congregation. Local congregations seem to have little sense of their call to bring the gospel directly to bear on the problems of their own communities in the same way that a missionary in Thailand might seek to address community issues as an outworking of being a kingdom presence in their community.

My research revealed only slight agreement that Veritas increased congregations’ awareness of and engagement in community transformation. This gap between awareness and practice seems to reinforce the need for a

13. *Ibid.*, 391.

re-examination of what it means to be church in a post-Christian context. It would be unfair to expect a seminar like Veritas to undo decades of cultural influences. While Veritas does not seem to directly increase the capacity of congregations to meaningfully engage global issues, it does, at the very least, begin to place those issues on the radar of participating congregations. In so doing, it gives the Spirit room to begin to stir the missional imagination of the congregation, hopefully to fuller participation in the *missio Dei*.

One key to a more robust community and global engagement lies in our trinitarian theology. Van Gelder and Zscheile suggest that a “sending” view of the Trinity can result in viewing the world and people as a “target of mission,” fostering an ecclesiology where the “church primarily exists to do something.” This is an apt description the results discovered in this research.¹⁴

The Covenant Church would do well to embrace a robust Trinitarian theology that encompasses not only the *sending* nature of the Triune God, but also the *relational* nature, as exemplified in the perichoresis. Jürgen Moltmann urges just such a communal understanding of the Trinity: “But they [the trinitarian persons] work together in a unified movement that liberates and unites the creatures who are separated from God. We live in Trinity; our lives are trinitarian lives.”¹⁵ The work of the healthy, missional church is really the work of the Trinity, and we participate in it through the power of the Spirit. The Covenant’s commitments to new life in Christ, a believer’s church, the whole mission of the church, and so on could all be elevated with a richer understanding of the communal nature of the Trinity. Van Gelder and Zscheile offer helpful insight into this possibility: “The mission implications become clearer if the church sees its own life not as an *imitation* of the Trinity but as a *participation* in the life and mission of the Trinity.”¹⁶

Perhaps for congregations seeking to become more healthy and missional, a release from the presumed need to *do* something into a deeper knowledge that, because of the work of God in Christ, they already are a part of what God is doing in the world would foster new energy and faithfulness. Bosch suggests that the church is at its most effective not when it is seeking to be copied or joined but when it is inviting others

14. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 106–107.

15. M. Douglas Meeks, *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology* (Kingswood Books, 2000), 120.

16. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 109.

to join in following Jesus.¹⁷ It is in following Jesus that the church is invited into participation in the trinitarian life of God in the midst of the world. The Veritas seminar can serve as an invitation to participate more deeply in that life through difficult, honest conversation and the work of the Spirit as it seeks to bring a holy openness to congregational systems.

The Covenant affirmations position the denomination to enter into a rich participation in the life of the Trinity in ways that not only honor our historical commitments but elevate them. This elevation requires an expanded understanding of the nature of the church and evangelism as one step on the journey of joining the life of the Trinity in the world.

Conclusion and Generalizability

Viewing Veritas as a program that produces healthy, missional churches inevitably leads to disappointment. On the other hand, if one views the Veritas seminar as the first step in a journey toward discovering God's missional purposes for the church, they will find that it positions congregations to begin that journey. It is this facet of the research that is most translatable to other denominations and congregations: revitalization and missional health are only possible in congregations willing to have honest conversations about their current realities.

What is generalizable from this study is the importance of truth-telling. Any effort by a congregation to become more aware of and involved in God's work in the world must begin with an honest and frank assessment of the challenges and realities at work in that particular congregation and its cultural context. This may perhaps seem fundamental or obvious, but in the experience of this researcher it is not. Congregations function with a heavily modern conception of their congregational system that rarely examines its own situation and cultural context.

Finally, I continue to wrestle with a cultural tension in the Covenant Church that was revealed to me through this research. Early in our history, the Covenant Church was known simply as *Mission Friends*. In the early years, mission seems to have flowed naturally outward, but soon the relational side became more and more important. One pastor I interviewed commented that he imagined there were congregations out there who would participate in the Veritas seminar and realize that: "We're just a stable church. We're just kind of sitting here. We might be healthy but we are in no way missional. We're just friends—we're not

17. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 376.

mission friends.” There is a strong tendency in the Covenant ethos that values friendship over mission. That is demonstrated especially when there are hard conversations to be had or difficult directional decisions to be made. We generally seek to preserve friendship over mission. If we are truly to live into the missional ecclesiology that I believe is at the core of our DNA as a denomination, we have to recapture the tension between mission and friendship. If we continue to value relationship over mission we will continue to see our established congregations, for whom the Veritas seminar was developed, languish and decline. Alternatively, if we embrace the wind of the Spirit and the gifts given to the church, we may yet see healthy, missional congregations emerge.