

# Up from the Ashes: The Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant (SEMC) in Global Dialogue

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After the devastating conflagration of 1871, Chicago had a great need to resurrect itself. The upcoming 400th anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the Americas in 1692 appeared, at that time, to be exactly the kind of international event that could pull Chicago up from the ashes and place her clearly in front of the world's stage. However, starting in the early 1880s several other US cities put themselves forward as potential hosts, including New York, St. Louis, and Washington DC. The stakes were high, and tempers rose as competition over location grew increasingly heated. Yet no voices were louder than those from Chicago, prompting *New York Sun* reporter Charles A. Dana to complain that the city's politicians were "full of hot air" forever branding Chicago as "The Windy City," a title having nothing to do with the weather.<sup>1</sup> Midwestern "windbags" were not alone, however. So vociferous were the arguments that the government finally had to step in to finalize the decision.

By 1890, it was clear that the U.S. Congress would have to decide where the fair would be held and that the principal contenders, by virtue of their superior financial resources, would be Chicago and New York. New York's financial titans, including J. P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and William Waldorf Astor, pledged \$15 million to underwrite the fair

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1 Skydeck Chicago, "Why Is Chicago Called 'The Windy City'?" 2018. <https://theskydeck.com/why-is-chicago-called-the-windy-city/#:~:text=The%20Cincinnati%20Enquirer%20used%20the,and%20the%20rest%20is%20history>.

if Congress awarded it to New York City. Not to be outdone, Chicago's leading capitalists and exposition sponsors, including Charles T. Yerkes, Marshall Field, Philip Armour, Gustavus Swift, and Cyrus McCormick, responded in kind. Furthermore, Chicago's promoters presented evidence of significant financial support from the city and state as well as over \$5 million in stock subscriptions from people from every walk of life. What finally led Congress to vote in Chicago's favor was banker Lyman Gage's ability to raise several million additional dollars in a 24-hour period to best New York's final offer.<sup>2</sup>

Chicago would be the home of The World Columbian Exposition of 1893. It did not matter that delays caused by haggling and planning meant missing the actual quadricentennial date by one year. With robust fervor and plenty of political maneuvering, Chicago rebuilt itself up from the ashes, removing numerous homes and businesses at a site seven miles south of downtown over the newly expanded shores of Lake Michigan. On this prime location arose an impressive display of highly gilded Neo-Renaissance style (albeit temporary lath and plaster) buildings together called the "The White City." This event, variously called the World's Fair or the Columbian Exposition, would literally become a featured star in the Chicago flag, a city banner more familiar to most Illinoisians than that of their state.

The area was easily accessed by a new rail line, and people came by the thousands to be dazzled by the numerous sites and exhibits from forty-six countries, including G. W. G. Ferris Jr.'s great wheel of thirty-six cars hoisting passengers over 260 feet skyward and for many, the shocking experience of electric lights outshining the stars at night. Katherine Lee Bates referenced her July visit to the fair in the now-famous lyrics, "O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years; thine alabaster

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<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Rydell, "World's Colombian Exposition," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1386.html>.

cities gleam undimmed by human tears!”<sup>3</sup> Between May 1 and October 30, more than twenty-seven million visitors came —over one-third of the country’s population.

Not to be outdone by previous events such as Paris’s Exposition Universelle of 1889 with its famous Eiffel Tower, Chicago made every effort to proclaim the triumphant theme of its own transformation as well as the global impact of the Gilded Age. Prosperity would surely radiate out from this resurrected urban miracle across the country and then around the globe. To further catapult the universal impact of this event into a promising future, the word “world” was liberally applied adjectivally at every opportunity. In addition to constructing world-class architecture, installing world-renown landscaping, and displaying world-famous exhibitions, marvels, and innovations from every corner of the globe, the promoters desired to create a permanent literary collection of the global principles of the World Exposition. An organization called the World’s Congress Auxiliary was established with high-minded objectives:

To make the Exposition complete and the celebration adequate, the wonderful achievements of the next age, science, literature, education, government, jurisprudence, morals, charity, religion, and other departments of human activity, should also be conspicuously displayed as the most effective means of increasing fraternity, progress, prosperity, and peace of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

The World Congress Auxiliary divided their task into nineteen major thematic departments, inviting scores of the most prominent national and international leaders in the arts, business, education, the sciences,

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3 As inspiring as the patriotic hymn “America the Beautiful” has become, it is certainly not without controversy, as was the fair itself. Tears were not absent during the numerous tragedies such as kidnappings, murders, and accidents that occurred during the fair. See Erik Larson’s *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003). Extended closing ceremonies were cancelled when Mayor Harrison was shot and killed in his bed by a disgruntled city employee shortly after giving the closing address (“1893: Mayor Carter Harrison,” Homicide in Chicago 1870-1930, Northwestern University School of Law, 2012, <https://homicide.northwestern.edu/crimes/carter/#:~:text=The%20mayor%20was%20shot%20in,mental%20examinations%20Prendergast%20was%20executed>).

4 World’s Congress Auxiliary Pre-Publications, Programs and Circulars Collection, Special Collections, Chicago Public Library, accessed Sept. 2, 2023 (I understood this was not being added anymore, it does not show up in earlier electronic references I have footnoted), <https://www.chipublib.org/fa-worlds-congress-auxiliary-pre-publications-programs-and-circulars-collection/>.

and theology to organize over two hundred individual congresses to be held concurrently with the fair from May 15 to October 28, 1893. Most of these august assemblies would be held in one of the few buildings constructed for the fair actually intended for posterity, the Permanent Memorial Art Palace, later renamed the Art Institute of Chicago. The grand hall could seat several thousand people. Together these various congresses would include thousands of addresses, meetings, and symposia on nearly every possible topic from every known field of study in that day. The addresses were published into several volumes, providing a historical record collectively recording the achievements and aspirations of a forward-thinking Western humanity on the cusp of the twentieth century.

Among the hundreds of assemblies at the World's Columbian Exposition, one was self-acclaimed as the best attended and best publicized, namely, the World's Congress of Religions. This was later renamed "The World's Parliament of Religions." Bringing together some four hundred men and women representing forty-one denominations and religious traditions, this historic event was labeled a world's first. It lasted for seventeen days in September of 1893. Of all the congresses, the Parliament of Religions was by far the most popular with the public and the press. Audiences of four thousand or more attended each of the daily sessions.<sup>5</sup>

Conjointly during plenary sessions, several denominations and religious entities held their own small congresses. Among those listed in the records were the African Methodist Episcopal Congress, Seventh Day Baptist Congress, Catholic Congress, two from the Congress on the Society of Friends, Jewish Congress, three Lutheran congresses, Presbyterian and Cumberland Presbyterian congresses, Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant, Unitarian Congress, United Brethren Congress, Universalist Congress, Inter-Denominational Congress, Congress of Missions, Sunday Rest Congress, and others.<sup>6</sup>

Rev. Dr. John Henry Barrows, who oversaw the final publication of all the presentations, summarized that "to win the approval of all broad-minded men" the World's Parliament of Religion would pursue ten

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5 "1893 Chicago" Parliament of the World's Religions, 2023, <https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/1893-chicago/>.

6 John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 815–16.

major objectives. Using the language of his nineteenth-century context, these were:

1. To bring together in conference, for the first time in history, the leading representatives of the great Historic Religions of the world.
2. To show to men, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various Religions hold and teach in common.
3. To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faiths, through friendly conference and mutual good understanding, while not seeking to foster the temper of indifference, and not striving to achieve any formal and outward unity.
4. To set forth, by those most competent to speak, what are deemed the important distinctive truths held and taught by each Religion, and by the various chief branches of Christendom.
5. To indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism, and the reasons for man's faith in Immortality, and thus to unite and strengthen the forces which are adverse to a materialistic philosophy of the universe.
6. To secure from leading scholars, representing the Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths, and from representatives of the various Churches of Christendom, full and accurate statements of the spiritual and other effects of the Religions which they hold upon the Literature, Art, Commerce, Government, Domestic and Social life of the peoples among whom these Faiths have prevailed.
7. To inquire what light each Religion has afforded, or may afford, to the other Religions of the world.
8. To set forth, for permanent record to be published to the world, an accurate and authoritative account of the present condition and outlook of Religion among the leading nations of the earth.
9. To discover, from competent men, what light Religion has to throw on the great problems of the present age, especially the important questions connected with Temperance, Labor, Education, Wealth and Poverty.
10. To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 18.

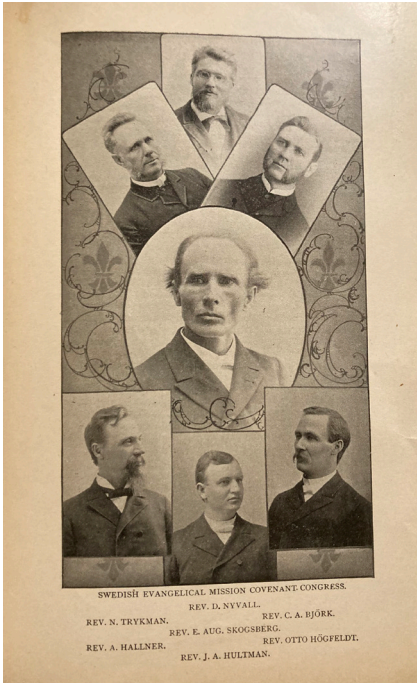
## The Covenant Goes to the Fair

It was a remarkable year for the fledgling, eight-year-old denomination known at the time as the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant. After years of emotional discussion, the contentious decision was finally made to move the Covenant's seminary and school program from Minneapolis to the growing metropolis of Chicago. Indications were that Chicago would be the new center. Some vocal leaders in the Covenant were caught up in the attraction of The White City and some opposed.

The history of the 1893 World's Fair, its devils and deceptions, its pompous platitudes and broken promises, and its innovations and impact on the development of Chicago, has been a source of fascination for this author since I first learned of it. When I discovered an original two-volume set containing all the presentations of the 1893 Parliament of World Religions, I bought it. Thumbing through these essays from a previous era, I found most of the nearly two hundred papers vitriolic in nature. Imagine my surprise when amid these papers I ran across a short essay with photographs entitled "Presentation of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant in America." The Covenant Church was present with these leaders of other religions in 1893! How did this group of Swedish immigrants end up presenting on the venerable platform of the World's Parliament of Religions with leaders of so many other faith traditions? With the help of North Park University's archivist, Andy Meyer, we are able to read the words of David Nyvall himself:

At the time when the school was ready to be moved to Chicago, the Mission Friend Publishing Company dominated everything in sight with the Covenant including the University Land Association through whose real estate services the school was located in North Park. Our first dependence on the company was a large benefit. It was in the year 1893 when the World's Fair and the Parliament of World's Religion were held in Chicago. [Andrew] Hallner, was the editor of the "Missions Vänner," who at the time was one of the very few Swedish Mission Friends speaking English with ease, a man of large visions and generous implications, saw to it that the Covenant was properly represented at the denominational program of Christian churches. Through his services the small and probably the youngest of all denominations had a voice in the Parliament of Religions, to tell briefly yet distinctly

its aim and its faith, and this Covenant declaration became a part of the minutes of the Parliament and a historical fact for all who ever care to know. It was a great opportunity, and a grand welcome to Chicago, thanks to our powerful friends.<sup>8</sup>



For a fledgling group this was indeed a great honor and opportunity. Contrary to other mainline Christian denominations whose absence ranged from gracious to bombastic, at the Swedish Mission Covenant's annual meeting in June of 1893, the delegates "voted to participate in the World's Congress of Religions in connection with the Colombian Exposition of Progress."<sup>9</sup> It was understood that leaders fluent in English would present.

The Covenant evidently followed the trend of many other groups and celebrated their own "Covenant Congress," held at an

unknown location on Monday, September 25. Several papers and formal addresses were given in Swedish by President C.A. Björk, as well as Nils Frykman and Otto Högfeltd. David Nyvall presented a ten-page paper in Swedish titled "The Characterization of the Swedish Mission Covenants in Sweden and America." The original Swedish version of this paper appeared in the October 4, 1893, issue of *Missions Vännen*. Eighty years later an English translation by Eric Hawkinson appeared in the 1973 issue of the *Covenant Quarterly*.

The next day, Tuesday, September 26, 1893, a celebration of Covenanters was held at the site of what would soon become the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant College campus on Chicago's north side.

8 David Nyvall, *The Swedish Covenanters: A History* (Chicago: Covenant Book Concern, 1930), 81.

9 Leland H. Carlson, *A History of North Park College: Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary 1891–1941* (Chicago: North Park College and Theological Seminary, 1941), 84.

Leland Carlson described the scene fifty years later:

On the afternoon of September 26, a large crowd was gathered in North Park for the festive occasion. The people were surprised to see that part of the building [of Old Main] had already progressed to the second story. Many of them climbed up the scaffoldings to enjoy the beautiful view and to survey the new subdivision. The service began with the singing of the hymn “Nearer My God to Thee.” Then a box was filled with a Bible, two song books—*Sions Harpan* and *Cymbalen*, the latest catalogue of the school, the Covenant’s yearbook, copies of several Swedish and American newspapers, samples of the latest coins, and pictures of Björk, Nyvall, and Skogsbergh. Also several essays presenting historical and statistical summaries of the Covenant were included. Thereupon the box was placed within the cornerstone and the latter was put into its proper position and sealed.<sup>10</sup>

On Wednesday, September 27, a much-abbreviated version of the address given at the Covenant Congress two days earlier was presented in English at the Parliament of World’s Religions. Following the Parliament’s fourth objective, “to set forth, by those most competent to speak, what are deemed the important distinctive truths held and taught by each Religion, and by the various chief branches of Christendom,” the following brief presentation introduced perhaps for the first time to a wider American audience, the essence of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant. As mentioned by Nyvall in the quotation above, this report appears in the published minutes of the Parliament and is printed here in its entirety for the first time in the *Covenant Quarterly*.

### **PRESENTATION OF THE SWEDISH EVANGELICAL MISSION COVENANT IN AMERICA**

This Congress was held on September 27 [1893], and papers were read on the history and present condition of this body. The history of the Free Religious movement from its rise in north Sweden to its appearance in America and growth in the United States is full of interest to the lovers of spiritual religion. Its first leader, Rosenius, who by his preaching and

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<sup>10</sup> Carlson, 84.



through the influence of his magazine *Pietisten*, was the means of starting a profound and lasting revival of religion in many parts of Sweden. He did not withdraw from the state church nor did he encourage others to withdraw, though he set in motion the impulses which brought about separation. Upon his death in 1868, his work was taken up by Prof. P. Waldenström, Ph.D., D.D., an eminent clergyman. Under him, *Pietisten* became a greater power than before. Rosenius had marvelous insight into the human heart and knew how to touch and move men. Waldenström's strength lay in his insight into the Word of God and his power of literary expression. The work culminated in a great revival, which in the seventies spread all over Sweden. Doctrinal differences, and especially the question as to who should partake of the Lord's Supper, whether believers in heart or also those formally members of the state church, led to the formation of free societies and the establishment of a new missionary society called the Swedish Mission Covenant, and E.J. Ekman, D.D., was chosen as its President. Waldenström's position towards the movement has been friendly, though he has not identified himself entirely with it. The Covenant has engaged in widespread mission activity both at home and among the heathen.

The Free Mission movement in America is an offshoot of the original Swedish Covenant, its members being either directly connected with the home body or influenced by its literature and ideas. In 1868, in Chicago, the Mission Church was established and incorporated with a charter permitting the ordination of ministers. Other churches springing up in various towns united with this church to form the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Synod in 1873. Another Synod, the Swedish Evangelical Ansgarii Synod, was organized in 1874. The two bodies united in 1885 into the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant in America.

The Covenant body in Sweden numbers about 800 churches, with a membership of about 130,000. It has missions in China, Persia, Russia, and Siberia, and in the Congo, under about fifty missionaries. It is more difficult to give statistics of the American movement, as many churches work in its line without formally uniting with it. There is no exaggeration in saying that it comprehends a membership of from forty to fifty thousand, including about 350 churches, of which 116 have formally joined the Covenant, with about 250 ministers and ten missionaries in Alaska and five in China. The college and seminary had last year 150 students, and five professors and instructors. The hospital, called the Swedish Home of Mercy, located at Bowmanville (Chicago), Ill., accommodates fifty patients.

The basis of the movement is the Church idea, that a Christian church is a free union of persons united by the same spiritual life on the foundation of a common faith in Christ and brotherly love and confidence, and that this union ought to be held open to everyone believing in Jesus Christ and leading a true Christian life, without consideration of different creeds as far as these do not deny the Word of God and the authority of Holy Scriptures. Each such church is self-governing and owes no authority above its own in all local matters. Through the Covenant each church is bound closely together with all the other churches. This Covenant is not a church organization in the ordinary sense, but a mission society having churches as its members. These churches have consolidated because of the missionary spirit which led them to missionary enterprises too large for any single church to undertake.

This union for missionary purposes led, however, to a more intimate consolidation because of that new responsibility which this union gave each church, not only in regard to the common missions, but also in regard to the very character of every other church. To the annual general assembly each church, large or small, is free to send two delegates. And as the churches themselves, through the delegates, are the true members of the assembly, they are responsible for the decisions made. Only the general assembly has [the] power to admit new churches into the Covenant. And should a certain church fall so grossly in errors of doctrine or life as to forfeit its right to be further called a Christian church, the assembly has the power to sever such a church from the union. Accordingly, each church stands to the Covenant in the very same position as each individual to the church. Both stand there of free choice, both have their free vote, and both are, after the vote is cast, bound to the decision of the majority.

There is no common fixed creed or special doctrine which binds the church together, yet they are harmonious in faith and preaching, being in sympathy with evangelical orthodoxy and holding to the New Testament as the standard of life and thought. Where differences of theology coexist with a pure Christian life and faith in Jesus Christ, these are permitted to exist as unavoidable in our imperfect knowledge of truth. Neither is there a common ritual or discipline, not even for baptism, the Lord's Supper, marriage, etc. Each preacher and each church is free to adopt their own order. The harmony in the midst of this diversity is largely owing to the lively and intimate intercourse of churches and preachers. Hospitality is especially insisted on, and the mission conferences held by each church once or twice a year are attended by all the preachers in the district. Thus the churches know

all the preachers and the preachers are at home in all the churches. Great emphasis is laid in preaching on the word-for-word exegesis of a Bible text, on the ground that the pulpit finds its only justification for existence in expounding the very words of the Word of God.<sup>11</sup>

### **Covenant Returns to the Fair**

Fast-forward one hundred and thirty years to 2023. Covenanter Kaleb Nyquist is a member of the Board of Directors of what has been renamed the Parliament of World's Religions (PoWR). Plans were made for a week-long celebration of this significant anniversary of the original event to be held at McCormick Place in Chicago. At Nyquist's invitation to North Park Theological Seminary, a group of us were encouraged to submit a topic for a panel workshop. Because I have taught a course on Religions and Cultures at the seminary for the last seventeen years, I suggested that we invite our friends from the Jewish and Buddhist communities, as well as recent students from my class to be part of this presentation. Together, on August 16, 2023, one hundred and thirty years after the first Parliament, we hosted a breakout workshop entitled "The Power of Interfaith Teaching in Seminary Education." Our panel consisted of Rabbi Andrea London of Temple Beth Emet in Evanston, Illinois, a longtime friend of North Park Seminary; my colleague and co-instructor Obed Manwatkar, originally from Nagpur, India; current seminary students Tori Mack and Barry Zhang, and myself. I was encouraged to see my good friend and Theravada Buddhist monk, Dr. Boonchu of Wat Dhammaram, Chicago, in the audience along with a couple of dozen other attendees.

According to the summary comments of the Parliament, over seven thousand participants coming from over ninety-five countries attended the week-long event, viewing hundreds of exhibits representing over two hundred and ten different traditions. The conference theme was "A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights." Part of this movement centers around the formation, support, and implementation of a new Global Ethic.<sup>12</sup> In the words of the Rev. High Priestess Phyllis Currott, 2023 PoWR Program Chair:

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11 Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 1514–17.

12 For a complete manuscript of PoWR's Global Ethic statement see <https://parliamentofreligions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Global-Ethic-PDF-2020-Update.pdf>.

Today we are all standing at a pivotal moment where history seeks to repeat itself. It is a moment of urgency—an existential global scourge has returned...It is a stark reality that transcends borders, cultures, and faiths. A reality that demands our collective action and moral courage. As people of faith and spirit, we have a singular responsibility. Here is the truth we must all confront and change. Despots are misappropriating religions to justify the unjustifiable. Tyrants proclaim themselves saviors posturing with religious symbols and exploiting language to affirm their power. And tragically, there are religious leaders who stand beside them and religious communities who cheer them.<sup>13</sup>

The task to reach beyond the narrow confines of those in agreement stands before us all. The call to participation and action will require building bridges beyond our familiar sects. In our small way, North Park Theological Seminary was privileged to carry on a tradition begun several years ago by the visionary founding leaders of our denomination for the glory of God and our neighbor's good.



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13 Stephen Avino, “A Message from Our Executive Director,” email message, August 25, 2023.