

New Life at Bethlehem

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Bethlehem Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, wanted revitalization. The congregation had been in gradual decline for thirty years and was rightly concerned that a smaller group of people was taking on a larger burden of responsibility. As the church shrank, the temptation to look inward increased. The congregation was in danger of prioritizing self-preservation above evangelism, outreach, compassion, mercy, and justice.

Bethlehem sought revitalization by following the congregational vitality pathway of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), which aims to help churches become healthier and more missional. John Wenrich, director of congregational vitality and creator of the congregational vitality pathway, defines “healthy” as “pursuing Christ” and “missional” as “pursuing Christ’s priorities in the world.”¹ These definitions beg the questions, what are Christ’s priorities, and how should we pursue them in the world?

In the four years spent on the pathway, Bethlehem Covenant Church changed. There are now signs of new life. People are making new commitments to God. Attendance, membership, and giving have increased. The staff expanded to fill new needs. In 2012 the congregation launched a second, contemporary worship service. Several small group Bible studies were formed. The congregation began an outreach ministry to Bhutanese

1. John Wenrich, *EPIC: Empowering People, Inspiring Change Workbook* (Department of Church Growth and Evangelism, Evangelical Covenant Church, 2008), 6.

refugees and voted to plant a Spanish-speaking Covenant church in the church building. There is a palpable sense that the Holy Spirit is moving.

The vitality pathway challenged Bethlehem Covenant Church to look beyond self-interest and consider how it might participate more fully in what God was already doing in its neighborhood, and it gave the congregation permission to challenge old patterns. The process was broad and democratic. We examined how the neighborhood was changing and discerned that Bethlehem was not changing with it. We tried new things; we sang a new song to the Lord. While numbers are not everything, the congregation is right to celebrate its first growth spurt in decades.

Certainly God's mission cannot be reduced to increased attendance or even the ten healthy missional markers that are highlighted in the vitality pathway.² As Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile write,

To begin with, the horizon for church renewal is not just attracting more people into the congregation or even church "health" as defined by certain lists or criteria. It is God's coming reign, as embodied and proclaimed by Christ and manifested partially in the here and now through the presence of the Holy Spirit. There is a decidedly theological focus to missional church renewal that is often lacking in other approaches [of church renewal].³

It would be a shame if the missional conversation were co-opted by the Church Growth Movement or its stepchild, the Church Health Movement. What is needed is a theologically formed approach to missional church renewal that is not exclusively about numbers but, at the same time, is not embarrassed by outreach or evangelism. I want to help invite my neighbors and congregants into a growing sense of God's coming reign with practical consequences in the here and now.

To that end, my doctor of ministry research evaluated to what extent

2. The Evangelical Covenant Church defines the ten healthy missional markers as (1) centrality of the word of God; (2) life transforming walk with Jesus; (3) intentional evangelism; (4) transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice ministries; (5) global perspective and engagement; (6) compelling Christian community; (7) heartfelt worship; (8) sacrificial and generous living and giving; (9) culture of godly leadership; and (10) fruitful organizational structures. John Wenrich, *EPIC: Empowering People, Inspiring Change Workbook* (Department of Church Growth and Evangelism, Evangelical Covenant Church, 2008), 40–41.

3. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*; The Missional Network (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 16.

and in what ways the ECC's vitality pathway impacted health and missional identity at Bethlehem Covenant Church. Bethlehem was the first congregation in the denomination to complete the revised pathway with the strategic planning component. It was therefore in a unique position to examine the pathway's perceived impact. Two doctor of ministry projects have focused on Veritas, the first step in the vitality pathway,⁴ but no one, to my knowledge, has researched the entire process. This topic deserves careful attention and evaluation.

I implemented both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the impact of the pathway on Bethlehem's health and missional identity. I began with three focus groups comprised of both those actively involved in leading the vitality process and active membership not directly involved in the process. Taken together, they understood the process from the inside and out. Some were sympathetic participants while others brought a critical, external perspective. I concluded my research with a random sample survey of the membership with questions that emerged from focus group conversations. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided both a deep and broad understanding of revitalization at Bethlehem Covenant Church.

My research suggests that the Congregational Vitality Pathway played an important role in developing the health and missional identity of Bethlehem Covenant Church in three primary ways. (1) A conflict-averse congregation, Bethlehem was inspired to engage *conflict* in a more redemptive fashion. (2) The vitality pathway helped *change* the church culture to value participation in God's mission, even at the risk of stability. (3) After thirty years of decline, the vitality process helped us *grow* in markers of congregational health and missional identity. I will elaborate on each of these three dimensions—conflict, change, and growth.

Conflict

The vitality pathway should be understood as a well-orchestrated conflict. Veritas is about telling the truth about revitalization, even if this means the church ultimately acknowledges that it does not have the vision, intention, or means to continue in ministry. Churches are encouraged to create a behavioral covenant at the beginning of the pathway that sets the

4. Corey Johnsrud, "Healthy Missional Churches: An Exploration of the Impact of the Veritas Seminar on Congregations" (Doctor of Ministry, Luther Seminary, 2013); Charles Wahlstrom, "An Analysis of Factors Affecting Revitalization of Evangelical Covenant Churches" (Doctor of Ministry, Biola University, 2012).

rules for all future conflict. The PULSE survey⁵ exposes the congregation's strengths and weaknesses. An outside vitality coach offers recommendations for the pastor and congregation. Pastors have the opportunity to avail themselves of CO-OP, a more intensive coaching process.⁶

The vitality pathway stimulated an honest conversation about the church's present reality and ultimate direction. The vast majority of people wanted Bethlehem to be healthier and more missional, but the congregation was divided about the best way forward. Particular tension surrounded the creation of a contemporary worship service. The pressure finally boiled over when the suggestion was made to move the grand piano, and a squabble ensued. The public airing of disagreements positively impacted the church. The piano stayed put, but the congregation moved forward.

Two of the three focus groups reflected on this conflict, and did so quite positively and enthusiastically. Cindy Harvin⁷ assessed the outcome, saying, "I would like to say that we are more honest with each other. Some of us might not like to hear some of the things that others have to say. At least we are open, and I don't think that we can say that we always were before." Rachel Green confirmed this comparison: "Ten years ago we wouldn't have [thought] okay, that's a good thing." Bjorn Olafson added that conflict management is not just dealing with the conflicts that arise naturally; sometimes leaders have to deliberately stir the pot to get things bubbling. He said, "A missional church forces the issue of some kind of goal or some kind of a way that we want to further the kingdom by challenging us and making us feel a little bit uncomfortable."

The larger congregation agreed with the perception of the focus groups regarding the pathway's impact on the congregation's communication and conflict management. Eighty-six percent agreed highly or very highly that healthy, missional churches are able to constructively manage conflict. Seventy-one percent of the surveyed active membership agreed that Bethlehem was better or significantly better at communication. Fifty-

5. PULSE is a church assessment tool that analyzes the health and missional behaviors of the church. PULSE stands for "Provides awareness of current reality. Updates progress every two year. Links the church more closely with the mission and message of Jesus. Suggests next step. Encourages spiritual discernment."

6. Not every pastor is capable of leading their current church toward health and missional vitality. CO-OP is a safe place for clergy to sort out what comes next for the pastor and congregation.

7. Names of individuals who participated in focus groups have been altered in order to maintain anonymity.

five percent agreed that Bethlehem was better or significantly better at conflict management.

Speed Leas identifies five levels of conflict: productive conversation, self-protection, prioritizing winning, hurting opponents, and destroying enemies.⁸ Bethlehem's "piano fight" was a level-two conflict in which parties were protective of their own self-interest. A level-five conflict would certainly be damaging to a congregation, but such church fights are rare. It is better to risk conflict than to abandon honest dialogue by pretending that there are no disagreements in the congregation. Church consultant Peter Steinke encourages leadership to actively instigate conflict by challenging accepted norms. By gently prodding the congregation and backing off at the appropriate moment, the leadership of Bethlehem helped navigate a treacherous path. We ceased defining our congregation primarily by our music and so were able to sing a new song to the Lord.

Steinke, Leas, and Paul Kittlaus agree that church conflict is healthy and even essential for churches.⁹ They encourage conflict-averse churches like Bethlehem to stop squandering energy and creativity on conflict avoidance and have a good fight. Conflict is actually a good way to set new boundaries and reestablish identity. It is liberating to release pent-up frustration and move forward. Sure enough, our conflict was ultimately more constructive than destructive. Bethlehem was finally able to let off some steam and subsequently renegotiate boundaries.

Scripture suggests that the Holy Spirit uses conflict to disrupt the status quo. The Book of Acts tells the story of the impasse between Jewish believers and Gentile converts. Some legalists insisted that Gentile believers receive circumcision. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with stories of lives transformed by the gospel. The Council of Jerusalem resolved the matter by deciding to spare Gentiles from what they deemed an unnecessary burden. They wrote, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication" (Acts 15:28–29). The Spirit redeemed the conflict with a new path forward for new believers.

It should be noted that Paul and Barnabas split up immediately after

8. Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church through Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1985), 19.

9. Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 158; Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herdodon, VA, 2006), 99.

the Holy Spirit unified the disparate elements of the early church. Paul could not abide with Barnabas's decision to bring John-Mark on their missionary journey. Not all conflicts end happily, but the Spirit can redeem any struggle. When Paul and Barnabas separated, Paul's ministry impact grew miraculously. God found a way to bring something positive out of a painful squabble between church leaders.

Change

Congregational revitalization is a pious desire. The Covenant denomination emerged from revival movements rooted in German Pietism, which sought the transformation and renewal of the individual, church, and society. This continual, comprehensive conversion is the work of the living God, who evangelizes the church, exposes our habitual reduction of the gospel, inspires us to address our cultural context, and sends us forth to participate in the *missio Dei*. Such change requires missional leadership, recognition of the multiple layers requiring change, and boldness to change not simply the external forms of worship and communal life, but the very culture of the congregation.

Leadership. Throughout Scripture God raises leaders to help his people adapt to new realities. Change demands leadership; change within Christian churches demands Christ-like leadership. My research confirms the literature that suggests good leadership both serves and transforms. Building leadership skills is not an accomplishment to achieve but a way to serve and transform the world for the purposes of God.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner argue that contemporary leaders must be transformative, changing their constituents' lives for the better.¹⁰ According to Kouzes and Posner, transformative leaders (1) model the behavior they expect of others, (2) inspire a shared vision, (3) challenge the process by disrupting the status quo (i.e., initiating the right conflict at the right time), (4) enable others to act, and (5) encourage the heart.¹¹ These five leadership practices informed how our strategic planning team led the revitalization process. The team met every other week for a year to discern the Spirit and guide the congregation through the renegotiation of our moral vision, seeking to identify the proper challenges to help reawaken the congregation to the purposes of God.

10. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 343.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 14 Kouzes and Posner's desire for transformation and heart language make them sound like a couple of Pietists! They do have a companion volume that applies

The team worked collaboratively toward a spiritually and communally discerned vision, empowered the congregation to implement this vision, and fostered enthusiasm by celebrating the large and small victories that followed the new vision.

Robert Greenleaf, the leading secular proponent of servant leadership,¹² believes that servant leadership improves individuals and the larger community, especially the least privileged in society. The revitalization process at Bethlehem avoided pronouncing hierarchical dictates by intentionally serving the congregation. The strategic planning process was not an opportunity to dominate, but rather a long and arduous act of service on behalf of the congregation. The strategic planning team maintained ongoing communication with the church body, learning from them, putting their ideas into action, challenging their thinking, and negotiating the practical applications. At the end of the process, the congregation was not resistant because it was keenly aware that the vitality and strategic planning teams had been seeking to serve them for two long years! At the culmination of the process, the congregation was well-prepared to step into the future.

Feedback from both focus groups and survey respondents identified leadership as an important theme in the revitalization process. Jack Holmgren emphasized the importance of visionary leadership (“The pastor has got to go ahead . . . whatever happens”), while Rachel Green added that it can’t just be the pastor or one or two people leading the charge (“It really needs to come from the strong members who will be respected”). Paul Davidson synthesized both perspectives: “I’ve heard that the pastor plays a large part in church revitalization. And it was mentioned that all the ideas shouldn’t come from the pastor or shouldn’t be presented by the pastor. That’s true, but the pastor does make a difference.” The surveyed membership corroborated the insights of the focus groups. High proportions agreed highly or very highly that healthy, missional churches require the leading of the Holy Spirit (96 percent) as well as a healthy, missional senior pastor (96 percent) and lay leadership (90 percent).

their findings specifically to a Christian audience: James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

12. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, rev. ed. (Westfield, IN: Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 2008); Greenleaf and Spears, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).

These numbers likely would have been quite different if the congregation had felt bullied into action. The congregation has been changed by transformative leadership. Members are reading the Bible more. There is greater involvement in small groups, increased dependence on the Holy Spirit, and a heightened willingness to take risks of faith. The congregation apparently feels blessed by the servant-leadership modeled by the senior pastor and the strategic planning team.

Cultural and Adaptive Change. No organization experiences genuine transformation without changing the culture. Edgar Schein, a leading scholar on culture change,¹³ teaches that culture has a subtle but foundational influence on our lives. Culture is always changing as it interacts with new stimuli. Schein identifies three levels of cultural meaning: artifacts, espoused beliefs, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts are the clearest and most superficial markers of culture such as architecture, language, style, clothing, and ceremonies. Espoused values are cultural cues that are embedded deeper in organizational culture. Ideals, goals, values, aspirations, and rationalizations are examples of espoused values. The deepest and most entrenched expression of cultural meaning is found in the underlying assumptions. It is hard work to confront and change the basic assumptions of a community.

The vitality pathway has been a helpful tool in addressing cultural change at Bethlehem Covenant Church. It is built on the premise that if you have not changed culture you have not changed anything. Changing the artifacts may take months, changing the espoused values may take years, but changing the assumptions may take generations. Leaders should be warned that genuine culture change takes more time and deliberation than they could ever foresee.

The vitality pathway does not offer prepackaged tweaks to congregational artifacts. It aims instead at the deeper realities of espoused values and underlying assumptions. The Veritas seminar teaches congregations to tell the truth about revitalization by evaluating their own vision, intentions, and means. The strategic planning team helps the congregation reevaluate espoused values. It took quantifiable data, confessional speech, and vocal leadership to begin to confront underlying assumptions. Examples include assumptions that the majority of the congregation opposed a contemporary worship service, that the young people in our

13. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed.; the Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series 2 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), xv.

neighborhood preferred traditional worship, and that starting a second service would split the congregation into competing factions. We have deliberately made decisions that challenge these false assumptions, but the legacy of those entrenched positions lingers on. It will take several more years to replace those assumptions with new ones that affirm the importance of our contemporary worship service. Cultural change is happening, but it does not happen swiftly.

Nor does change happen predictably, requiring the congregation to change adaptively. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky remind us that every problem does not have a technical quick fix.¹⁴ Organizations must learn to wander through unexplored territory before arriving at their surprise destination. In his work on congregational change, Gilbert R. Rendle writes that leading change in a church is an adaptive practice and therefore churches must learn through trial and error.¹⁵ Focus group participant Angie Sherman addressed the adaptive nature of Bethlehem's process: "I think that it is so important to start without end results in mind." Larry Jones summed up the tension of wandering into the unknown: "A number of times I felt like Moses wandering in the desert. I didn't know where we were going, but you have to keep moving."

To the literature on adaptive change, Rendle adds the point that the unknown inherent in such change requires dependence on God and is therefore a spiritual discipline. No amount of human engineering can accomplish the work of God. The revitalization of Bethlehem Covenant Church depended on the movement of the Holy Spirit. The leadership and congregation needed to step out in faith as we discerned the Spirit's leading. We were neither in control of the journey nor alone in the process. We were interacting with the living God. The larger congregation picked up on the importance of God's leading through the process. Jack Holmgren saw congregational change as a spiritual matter: "We had to just let it happen. Let the Spirit guide us." Bjorn Olafson concurred, "You're not really in control of anything." We had to change our language, espoused values, and even our underlying assumptions regarding the work of the Holy Spirit at Bethlehem Covenant Church. Setting a new

14. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 19.

15. Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998), 9.

path, dealing with conflict, trial and error, and most of all dependence on God changes individuals as well as Christian communities.

Bethlehem once resisted instability and change. Now the congregation overwhelmingly approves the changes required to become healthier and more missional. The focus group interviews affirmed that Bethlehem Covenant Church is changing for the better, a conclusion corroborated by the survey respondents, 91 percent of which agreed or significantly agreed that Bethlehem has changed for the better in the past three years. The congregation saw this change as a spiritual matter, with 91 percent of the surveyed active membership agreeing that the Holy Spirit has breathed new life into Bethlehem.

A consensus emerged within the focus groups that starting a contemporary worship service was the biggest risk the church took. Larry Jones said, “I think, through this whole process, probably the greatest risk that I have observed is trying to bring about the contemporary service.” Nancy Newton added, “Adding the second service has certainly been a culture change.” The contemporary worship service has challenged the artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions of church culture. Lindsay Wilson was excited that Bethlehem was willing to engage congregational change. “A lot of the time people are resistant to change, so that here there is a body of people that were open to change: pretty fantastic.”

The vitality pathway helped us navigate our way through new realities. We began to seek the continual conversion that Darrell Guder advocates.¹⁶ Bethlehem employed both servant and transformative leadership styles to help guide the congregation forward. We were inspired by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky’s teaching on adaptive leadership.¹⁷ We sought deep cultural change instead of cosmetic tweaks. We understood congregational change to be a spiritual practice, not just an exercise in human autonomy. Conflict led to change, which ultimately led to growth.

Growth

At the beginning of my research I was skeptical that a congregation could grow in health and missional capacity at the same time. I expected there to be more tension between the priorities of internal health and external mission at Bethlehem. As worried as we were about long-term survival, I doubted our capacity to look outward to a larger vision of God’s purposes.

16. Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church: The Gospel and Our Culture Series* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 150.

17. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*.

We found instead that the two are inextricably related. Congregations find vision and intention in the mission of God, but the means to execute the *missio Dei* emanates from the health of the congregation. Or, to put it differently, vitality gives congregations the *health* that enables them to participate in the *missio Dei*. Peter Steinke compares healthy churches to healthy human bodies.¹⁸ Healthy churches are able to respond with integrity to a wide variety of stimuli. Some healthy churches continue to grow while others have reached the end of their natural growth cycle. Healthy churches know what is good for their intestinal fortitude and what would make them ill.

Likewise, the markers of health are free gifts of God, given in order to be extended in mission. Much of missional church literature is suspicious of growth strategies rooted in technique. Missional theology has been used to confront the theology of glory uncritically embraced by the Church Growth Movement. Indeed, congregations of all sizes often behave as if they have the worldly wisdom, power, and strength to navigate their own way to resurrection. Yet some churches go to the opposite extreme, delighting in their misfortunes as though their shrinking and dying were in some way saving the world. Such a death-affirming messianic complex is no less troubling than the more commonly criticized excesses of the Church Growth Movement. Jesus died for the world, but he also rose from the dead. The way forward is a comprehensive missional theology that begins at creation, suffers the cross, and ultimately finds God-given new life.

Christopher Wright suggests, “Mission is what the Bible is all about.”¹⁹ Reading the Bible with a missional hermeneutic helps us thread the needle from creation to crucifixion to resurrection without getting stuck hanging on the cross or trying to skip the cross in the vain search for personal glory. God always intended the very best for humanity: abundance, fruitfulness, long life, prosperity, prominence, and all manner of synonyms for growth. Such wonders are free gifts from God, but they come with the expectation that the recipient will pass along the blessings they have received. The blessings of God are not to be hoarded and kept away from the world. God always intended his blessings to further his mission in the world. Individuals, congregations, and societies grow by receiving and sharing the blessings of God.

18. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, xi–xv.

19. Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP Academic, 2006), 29.

The mission begins with God, not in the imaginations of church leaders. Craig Van Gelder encourages congregations to discern where God is already at work in the community and to join God's ongoing purposes.²⁰ Missional congregations can discern God's mission by reading Scripture and interacting with their theological tradition, understanding cultural context, discerning communally, and creating an action plan. Missional churches attend to culture, assert options, agree to a course of action, act on the choice, and then assess the outcome. Roxburgh and Romanuk similarly suggest that missional congregations must seek to follow the Holy Spirit through awareness, understanding, evaluation, experimentation, and commitment.²¹

The members of Bethlehem Covenant Church came to reject a false dichotomy between health and mission. Many of the focus group participants described an interdependent relationship between congregational health and mission. Cindy Harvin spoke for many when she insisted, "We can't be a missional church without being healthy, and we can't be healthy without being missional. They are tied together." Those who participated in the focus groups generally understood health as institutional strength, evidenced by such indications as a well-maintained building, long life in the neighborhood, increased visitor flow, growing membership, staff growth, ability to pay the bills, and congregational comfort. These blessings harken back to the creation narrative where God intends his people to experience his abundant blessings. After thirty years of gradual decline, Bethlehem felt reinvigorated and healthy because of the gifts of God.

The focus groups viewed mission as having a decidedly external direction, as the missional church seeks to pass God's blessings along to the larger world. Janet Patera had a helpful understanding of the missional church: "I think that a missional church has a purpose. What I really appreciate is our purpose is not just to pursue other people, but [is] Christ-centered." The other focus group participants chimed in, naming specific missional practices being pursued at Bethlehem, such as small group Bible studies, the commitment to biblical literacy, serving at a soup kitchen, the child care center, Meals on Wheels, foreign missions, community evangelism, contemporary worship service, outdoor worship in the park, and the church's service to Bhutanese refugees. Bethlehem

20. Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2007), 17.

21. Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 84–103.

Covenant Church is participating in the *missio Dei* as it seeks to join God’s redeeming work in our community and beyond.

The quantitative data support the qualitative data. Ninety-eight percent of active membership agreed moderately, highly, or very highly *both* that the church was healthier than it had been three years earlier *and* that the church was more missional than it had been three years earlier. The surveyed membership had no problem affirming both signs of health and signs of missional identity. Signs of health included stronger finances, more children, and a growing membership; components of our missional identity included our outreach to refugees and child care families, seeking God’s will, the contemporary worship service, and sacrificial giving. (See figure below.)

Signs of health	% agreed
Current financial strength	98%
More children at church	100%
Growing attendance	99%
Important part of missional identity	% agreed
Bhutanese refugee outreach	89%
Child Care family outreach	98%
Seeking God’s will	100%
Contemporary worship service	96%
Sacrificial giving	99%

Investing money in ministry to refugees might have met more resistance if we had not been blessed with surplus cash at the end of the year. The contemporary worship service might have engendered more resentment were it not for all the new children at the church. Sacrificial giving might not have garnered such a positive response without all the new members helping to cover expenses. The increased health of the church expanded our capacity to do mission. God has lavished blessings on Bethlehem Covenant Church, and the congregation has faithfully passed those blessings on to others.

Bethlehem Covenant Church has a much broader understanding of growth after traversing the Congregational Vitality Pathway. God has granted us the largest membership in our congregation’s history, a 42 percent increase in attendance, and four years of financial surpluses. We

have greater institutional health and strength than we did at the beginning of the process. On this journey we have also learned that the gifts of God are to be shared with others. We had an overwhelmingly positive vote to partner with a Spanish-speaking core group in order to plant a Spanish-language Covenant church in our building. Now we are sending our people to the fringes of our neighborhood to seek out refugee children and their friends. Now we are reinvesting our budget surpluses into external ministries. Yes, the church has experienced numerical growth, but we have also experienced spiritual growth. At the end of the journey, the congregation is both healthier and more missional.

Conclusion

This research focused on the congregation of Bethlehem Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. No other church should expect a journey quite like ours. Churches are as diverse as sets of fingerprints; no two churches traverse identical pathways on the journey to revitalization. Like all case studies, this research has limited generalizability. I examined a particular church at a unique moment of time, and this context cannot be ignored. Other researchers employing a sequential exploratory analysis of the Congregational Vitality Pathway in other contexts would assuredly have their own unique discoveries. Yet I examined Bethlehem's journey so that others might hear our story of revitalization and perhaps respond appropriately to the mission of God. I am hopeful that this research will benefit the Covenant denomination and perhaps the larger church.

John Wenrich suggests that "there is no growth without change and no change without pain." A great amount of the pain at Bethlehem Covenant Church came from learning how to manage conflict. My conclusion at the end of this case study is that there is no growth without change and no change without conflict. Bethlehem fought a fair fight, experienced pain in the process of change, and emerged with God-given new growth. The theme of conflict deserves more explicit attention in the vitality materials beyond the composition of conversation guidelines. Many churches must learn how to fight fair before they renegotiate their vision statements and budgets. The vitality pathway has the potential to teach the Evangelical Covenant Church and other interested denominations how to talk through their differences in productive and helpful ways.

While our story cannot be duplicated, it is an inspiring reminder that God is breathing new life into old congregations, and all churches seeking revitalization would benefit from considering this research. I

recommend that dying, struggling, and stable Covenant churches explore the Congregational Vitality Pathway. Non-Covenant churches, too, may find the Covenant's vitality pathway a helpful process for exploring their own health and missional identity. Even the healthiest and most missional congregations might be blessed by the process. There is no magic in the vitality pathway, but it was a helpful way to work through conflict, change, and growth at Bethlehem Covenant Church.