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# Comment

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What characterizes a thriving congregation? What fosters vitality, and by what fruit might we assess it? The goal of the congregational vitality emphasis within Start and Strengthen Churches is that every Covenant congregation become a "healthy missional church," which the ministry area defines as "pursuing Christ" (healthy) and "pursuing Christ's priorities in the world" (missional). Assessment tools (PULSE), coaching, and workshops (Veritas, EPIC, ONE) guide established congregations on a path of corporate self-reflection toward greater vitality. It is these initiatives this issue explores and assesses.

In the opening article, John Wenrich, director of congregational vitality, grounds vitality in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, as both the Spirit of truth, enabling congregations to speak the truth about themselves, and the Spirit of life, breathing new life into old bones. Research results follow from two doctor of ministry projects that assessed the perceived success of vitality initiatives within congregations.

Ryan Eikenbary-Barber studied the impact of the vitality pathway as a whole on a single congregation. Through feedback collected in focus groups and surveys, he concluded that the pathway's greatest impact was facilitating healthy conflict negotiation and commitment to deep cultural change.

Surveying a broad sample of Covenant congregations, Corey Johnsrud sought to establish how the Veritas seminar fosters increased capacity for mission. His research revealed that the principal felt-benefit was gaining language and opportunity to corporately take stock of present realty. It further revealed a common conflation of mission and evangelism. Both studies revealed the importance of truth-telling, reliance on the Holy

Spirit, and adaptive leadership in the pursuit of vitality.

Wenrich, Eikenbary-Barber, and Johnsrud converge in their insistence that no transformation precedes an honest account of that which is in need of transformation. All emphasize further that this commitment to seeking, accepting, and telling the truth is a necessary starting point that will lead nowhere if not acted upon in reliance on the Holy Spirit. Taken together, the authors call the Covenant to conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit (Wenrich), productive conflict (Eikenbary-Barber), and a restored tension between mission and friendship (Johnsrud).

Interact with these authors and arguments on Forum: Dialoging with the Covenant Quarterly, where you'll find further resources and discussion.

# The Holy Spirit and Congregational Vitality

*John Wenrich, director of congregational vitality,*
*Evangelical Covenant Church, Chicago, Illinois*

Denmark's Roskilde Cathedral is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the first Gothic cathedral built in Scandinavia, with construction going back to around 1170 CE. In 2015 I taught at a summer festival of the Mission Covenant Church in Denmark, held a few miles from the town of Roskilde. As I toured this magnificent building, my eyes were drawn to the private worship box of King Christian IV (d. 1648) and Queen Anna Cathrine (d. 1612), where the queen's motto is inscribed: *Rege me D[omi]ne Spiritu Sancto tuo*, "Lord, lead me with your Holy Spirit."

This spiritual yearning of a seventeenth-century Danish queen inspires my own journey with the Holy Spirit—a journey that, in recent years, has taken on new significance in my life and ministry. Although I became a follower of Jesus forty-five years ago, the mystery, discovery, and adventure I now experience through the Holy Spirit marks a time of spiritual rebirth in my union with Christ. After twenty-one years in pastoral ministry and ten as director of congregational vitality for the Evangelical Covenant Church, I am convinced that the key to congregational vitality is listening to the Holy Spirit and responding in action. I have found this in my life experience, and I find it in Scripture, which tethers the vitality of the church to the Holy Spirit. We cannot speak of congregational vitality without beginning with the Holy Spirit. It is this conviction that shapes the pages that follow, in which I seek to establish the role of the Holy Spirit in awakening the church. My hope is to raise our awareness of and dependence on the Spirit so that the gospel burns more brightly in our congregations and in our own hearts.

## The Spirit of Truth and Power

The letter to the seven churches in the book of Revelation is like a vitality assessment handbook for churches. If we date the time of John's revelation to 95 CE, the churches addressed are at least thirty years old. They are no longer church plants as they were during the time of the epistles; they are now established churches. As decades of entropy diminish the health and growth of these congregations, each message comes as a customized assessment of vitality.

The same exhortation concludes all seven assessments: "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Eugene Peterson says of this repetition, "Whatever differences there are between the churches, two things are constant: the Spirit speaks, the people listen. Churches are listening posts."[1] A recent Reuter's article about hearing loss among seniors referenced a study that found a positive correlation between hearing impairment and risk of death. It concluded, "Hearing impairment is at least a sign of, and possibly a contributor to, an older person's survival odds. Hearing impairment can directly affect a person's health and wellbeing."[2] Could the same be said of churches with a "hearing impairment"? As churches age, do they listen to the Holy Spirit less and less while protecting the status quo more and more?

The Holy Spirit suffers no hearing loss as he declares to the churches what he hears from Jesus. This is the fulfillment of Jesus's teaching on the Holy Spirit in John 16:13–14: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."[3] What an amazing experience it must have been for the Apostle John to witness the unfolding of Jesus's words as he receives and records the vision.

The stable[4] church of Laodicea sees itself as wealthy and in need of nothing, but Jesus provides a radically different commentary: "But you

1. Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 45, 48.

2. Madeline Kennedy, "For Seniors, Hearing Trouble Linked to Greater Risk of Death," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015.

3. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the NIV.

4. We classify four types of established churches in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC): healthy missional, stable, critical moment, and at-risk. These four types of church-

do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). How's that for a lack of self-awareness? This proud, self-sufficient, sleepy church needs to wake up and repent. Jesus loves these churches, but sadly there is not even a place for him at the table in Laodicea, a violation of first-century standards of hospitality. Jesus is locked out of his very own church, knocking on the door, desperately trying to get back in. Jesus shouts to the people inside: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:20). This verse is not about evangelism as it is commonly preached, but about congregational vitality! The church does not even realize Jesus is absent from the table. They don't know what they don't know.

The other stable church is Ephesus. It has forsaken its first love (Revelation 2:4) and is commanded to remember the height from which it has fallen (Revelation 2:5). Again, there is a lack of self-awareness and desperation regarding their current reality and trajectory. They aren't even in love with Jesus anymore. They are going through the motions of ministry without the kiss of the Holy Spirit. Despite presenting a good image on the outside, the Laodicean and Ephesian churches need an awakening.

"Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matthew 13:9). This clarion call for discernment reveals the essence of congregational vitality. Churches that discern the movement of the Spirit and respond accordingly are the churches that thrive. These are the churches that overcome and live into the promises of vitality that accompany each assessment.[5] Often this, response calls for repentance. In John 14:16–17 (RSV), Jesus identifies the Holy Spirit as Counselor and the Spirit of truth: "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth." A counselor gently draws out the inner truth of another person in order to bring awareness and healing.[6] This is what the

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es flow out of Revelation 2 and 3. The four church types are also represented by the four types of soil in Jesus's parable: fertile, weedy, rocky, and hard packed (Luke 8:4–15).

5. It may be, however, that the Holy Spirit tells the church to choose "living legacy." Living legacy churches conclude their ministry with dignity and grace, celebrating what God has done over the years. Through this sacrifice, the church contributes to the planting and revitalization of other churches. New life emerges from their sacrificial gift. Jesus teaches this kingdom principle in John 12:24.

6. See Proverbs 20:5, "the purposes of a person's heart are like deep waters, but a person of understanding draws them out."

Holy Spirit does, bringing to congregations both comfort and conviction.

It is generally well-known among believers that the Holy Spirit empowers the church for mission (Acts 1:8). An equally significant role of the Holy Spirit is often overlooked or even feared: helping churches tell the truth about themselves by assessing their current reality and trajectory (John 15:26).[7] This is what we find the Holy Spirit doing in Revelation 2–3. The Spirit delivers Jesus's assessment to each church, for each church is accountable to Jesus. Jesus wants each church to see itself as he sees it—to become aware of, and *accept*, his "assessment" of it. Awareness (knowing it) and acceptance (owning it) are often the first steps in moving forward with God.

Many churches are drawn to the Holy Spirit for power but not for truth. They want revival without the repentance, comfort without conviction, fire without heat, assets without assessment. They want the fruit without working on the root. Jesus said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). You will know the truth—that's reality. The truth will set you free—that's vitality. There is no vitality without reality. To want all of the vitality without any of the reality is to negate or ignore the truth-telling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

*In vino veritas*, "in wine there is truth," is a Latin idiom from the ancient Greco-Roman world. It refers to the condition of being drunk with wine: the inhibitions come down, and the truth comes out. Living within this very culture, Paul instructs the Christians in Ephesus not to "get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead," he says, "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). There is something intoxicating about the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, the inhibitions of pride, fear, and shame come down. We are able to tell the truth about ourselves in a civil, compassionate, and Christ-honoring way.

A Chinese proverb says, "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right name."[8] Churches often have an easier time telling the truth about Jesus than they do about themselves. Telling the truth about our current reality and trajectory is no less a work of the Spirit than a powerful miracle, sign, or wonder—a lot less glamorous to be sure, but no less significant. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of power *and* the Spirit of truth.

7. Dallas Willard prefers "strengthener" to "comforter" as a translation of *paraclēton*. *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 277.

8. Gil Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 9.

Power and truth must go hand in hand in congregations as they do in the person of the Holy Spirit. Power without truth is dangerous;[9] truth without power is lifeless. Power without truth is abusive and arrogant; truth without power is dry orthodoxy.

## The Person and Work of the Spirit

Nor can we, as churches or individuals, have the *power* of the Holy Spirit without submitting to the person of the Holy Spirit. This would be the magic sought by Simon Magus in Acts 8:9–25. As Andy Crouch writes in *Playing God*, "The dream of magic is to have power, the ability to make something of the world, without suffering, without relationships and without risk, which are all ways of saying the same thing."[10] It is a way to grow without change and change without pain. Just like Simon Magus, some churches think they can purchase this magic power through a transaction or a program: "Vitality in a box for $499."

The Holy Spirit is not a New Age, impersonal, cosmic energy field but a person (Acts 5:3).[11] The Holy Spirit is God (Matthew 28:19) and is therefore worthy of our worship, love, delight, and devotion. Milliard Erickson explains:

> The Holy Spirit, being divine, is to be accorded the same honor and respect we give to the Father and the Son. It is appropriate to worship him as we do them. He is someone with whom we can have a personal relationship, someone to whom we can and should pray. The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the particular person of the Trinity through whom the entire Triune Godhead works in us.[12]

For many years I thought it misguided to focus on, pray to, or even entertain the idea of having a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. I was taught that the Holy Spirit's primary role is to glorify the Son (John 16:14), and everything else the Spirit does is subservient. I remember

9. I was painfully reminded of this while teaching vitality in Berlin. Touring World War II sites, and especially at the Holocaust Memorial, I was struck by the fact that power devoid of truth made the Third Reich so dangerous, abusive, and evil.

10. Andy Crouch, *Playing God, Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 43.

11. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 861.

12. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 846, 862.

hearing the Holy Spirit compared to a spotlight, always shining the light on Jesus while remaining in the shadows. Wayne Grudem offers a corrective to such a notion:

> It seems more accurate to say that although the Holy Spirit does glorify Jesus, he also frequently calls attention to his work and *gives recognizable evidences that make his presence known. The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest the active presence of God in the world, and especially in the church.* After Jesus ascended into heaven, and continuing through the entire church age, the Holy Spirit is now the *primary* manifestation of the presence of the Trinity among us.[13]

It is following the Holy Spirit wherever the Spirit leads that makes Christianity so adventurous and refreshingly unpredictable. The Spirit's movement reminds me of the knight in the game of chess. "The knight's curious sidelong move is the deepest genius of chess; it is the one piece that does not move in linear fashion; the one piece with geometry of its own, the piece that goes its own way, the mystical piece."[14] What a beautiful description of the unusual and curious movements of the Holy Spirit.

The wild and creative Breath or Spirit (*ruach*) hovered freely and effortlessly over the waters at creation (Genesis 1:2). The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost established the church. Scripture ascribes to the Spirit the work of regeneration (John 3:5), the spread of the gospel (Acts 6:5–7), the writing of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), the planting and vitality of congregations (Acts 9:31; 13:1–3), intercession (Romans 8:26), edification of the body through spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7), sanctification (Galatians 5:16-26), and adoption into God's family (Romans 8:13–17). The testimony of Scripture reveals the essential work of the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God and in our union with Jesus.

13. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 634–35, 642. See also Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 25: "The Spirit who inhabits us is not mute, restricting himself to an occasional nudge, a hot flash, a brilliant image, or a case of goose bumps. How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God—or with anyone else—without individualized communication? Nothing is more central to the practical life of the Christian than confidence in God's individual dealings with each person. We can get by in life with a God who does not speak. Many at least think they do. But it is not much of a life, and it is certainly not the life God intends for us."

14. Brian Doyle, "Chessay," *The University of Portland Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2015).

From beginning to end, Jesus's life and ministry are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The gospels speak of the Spirit's role in Christ's conception (Matthew 1:18–21) and presence at his baptism (Luke 3:21–22). Jesus is "full of the Holy Spirit" and is led "by the Spirit in the desert" (Luke 4:1), leaving the wilderness in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). During his inaugural address in the synagogue, Jesus applies to himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1). Jesus is full of joy in the Holy Spirit when the seventy-two return with a good report (Luke 10:21). Jesus is able to do miracles and drive out demons because of the Spirit's power (Mark 3:22–30) and is himself raised to life by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). N.T. Wright says of this union of Living Word and Holy Spirit that "the Spirit indwelt Jesus so richly that the Spirit was known as the Spirit *of* Jesus."[15]

When it comes to being filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus sets the example for us to follow. Jesus viewed his own body as a temple (John 2:19–22). Our bodies too are designed for the Holy Spirit to take up living residence. Paul asks the Corinthian church, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16, NRSV; cf. 6:19). As apprentices of Jesus, we must learn how to offer ourselves more fully as a residence of the Holy Spirit, so that we can join Jesus more fully in the mission, overflowing with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

## Conscious Dependence on the Holy Spirit: A Covenant Distinctive

Jesus commands the church in Sardis to wake up (Revelation 3:2). I believe it is the Holy Spirit who causes this awakening to occur. When we "awaken," we see our current reality and trajectory, repent, and take the appropriate next steps. Led and energized by the Holy Spirit, we move from anemia to vitality. As we become more attentive to the Spirit, I believe that more of our churches will wake up. It is no coincidence that the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States were called "The Great Awakenings." I yearn for this continued awakening through the Holy Spirit in my own life and in the life of

15. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 163.

Covenant congregations. Our sixth affirmation reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit who

> instills in our hearts a desire to turn to Christ and who assures us that Christ dwells within us. It is the Holy Spirit who enables our obedience to Christ and conforms us to his image, and it is the Spirit who enables us to continue Christ's mission in the world. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to us as individuals and binds us together as Christ's body.[16]

I am convinced that one of the reasons more Covenant churches are not healthy and missional is we are not greatly and consciously depending on the Holy Spirit.[17] Covenant theologian Donald Frisk's assessment sixty-five years ago still rings true today:

> Often one hears the complaint that the Christian Church lacks power. But in the Holy Spirit unlimited power is available—power which is released through prayer and action. The mediocre lives which multitudes of Christians love do not require great strengthening and hence there is little evidence of its presence, but let a Christian seriously attempt the demands of the Lord in the church and community and strength would be given in proportion to the task. What world-shaking things the church could accomplish if we prayerfully accepted the full responsibilities that now confront us.[18]

It is my fervent prayer that as Covenanters, we celebrate this affirmation and live into it with greater intentionality and teaching. "Living with God," writes Helen Cepero, "means discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit as that Spirit seeks to both comfort us and challenge us to live with God in an ever fuller, ever more responsive and responsible way."[19]

These are complex times for the church in North America, and the

16. *What Does the Covenant Church Believe? A Brief Look at Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications).

17. By "healthy" I mean pursuing Christ, and by "missional" I mean pursuing Christ's priorities in the world. With input from superintendents and directors of church vitality, I estimate that less than 20 percent of Covenant churches are healthy and missional, with the majority being stable, critical moment, or at-risk.

18. Donald C. Frisk, quoted in James R. Hawkinson, *Glad Hearts: The Joys of Believing and the Challenges of Belonging* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 345.

19. Helen Harmelink Cepero, "Living with God: A Trinitarian Understanding of Spiritual Formation," *In Spirit and in Truth: Essays on Theology, Spirituality, and Embodiment*

Covenant Church is no exception. Alice Mann, senior consultant for the former Alban Institute, writes,

> Society deposited people on the doorsteps of our churches in the 1950s. But that marked the end of an era of privilege for Christianity in North America. It is the cultural disestablishment of Christianity by secular, political, and alternative religious forces. Some see this as bad news to be fixed, but I would encourage you to see it as an opportunity to clarify your congregation's identity, purpose and outreach.[20]

Many pastors were never trained for the world in which we now live. Christendom is dead; secularization is the new normal. Just as in the time of Jesus, the church does not occupy the center of culture and must learn how to be ministers of the gospel from the periphery. Many are confused and bewildered. It seems ministry is less effective each year. Yet perhaps the Holy Spirit will use this displacement to awaken and missionalize the church today, as he did in Acts 8. It is time for the church to press the reset button and step forward, not shrink back. We need the Holy Spirit to blow through the valley of dry bones and restore life, hope, unity, passion, and purpose. O Breath of life, fit your church to meet this hour![21]

## Application

Congregational vitality is the by-product of two activities: doing faithful ministry over a long period of time and the movement of the Holy Spirit. This divine-human partnership is the impulse that makes ministry both natural and supernatural. Fruit grows as the Holy Spirit empowers human effort. There are some congregations that emphasize the divine aspect of this partnership to the exclusion of the human side: "What we do here almost doesn't matter. It's all about God, not us." Churches that rarely or never take action forget that the church is called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. There are other churches that emphasize the human side of this partnership to the exclusion of the divine: "Holy Spirit? Who's that?"

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*in Honor of C. John Weborg*, ed. by Philip J. Anderson and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, 222–38 (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2006), 234.

20. Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 2000), 18–19.

21. "O Breath of Life," *The Covenant Hymnal, A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1996), no. 599.

Churches that rarely or never interact with the Spirit are limited by their own resources and power. There is human activity no doubt, but little of the Spirit's anointing. Dallas Willard provides a helpful description of this divine-human partnership:

> The importance of the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be overemphasized. But today, our practice in Christian circles, in general, is to place almost total emphasis on the work of the Spirit of God for or on the individual. Reliance upon what the Spirit does *to* us or *in* us, as indispensable as it truly is, will not by itself transform character in its depths. The action of the Spirit must be accompanied by our response, which . . . cannot be carried out by anyone other than ourselves.[22]

How can we respond to the Holy Spirit and enter fully into this divine-human partnership? How can we, as apprentices of Jesus, train to live in more conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit? There are many ways to train. I will suggest only three.

**1. Use the agenda of thirds in your leadership team meetings.** Most churches spend their precious meeting time talking about two de-motivating factors: money and attendance. No wonder few people want to serve in leadership! The agenda of thirds offers a different way of doing meetings that foregrounds the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Divide your meeting time by three, devoting each section to the following sequence of questions: (1) How is the Holy Spirit at work in me? (2) How is the Holy Spirit at work in *us*, both in our church and out in the community? (3) Based on how the Holy Spirit is at work in and around us, what decisions do we need to put on the table? In the beginning, this agenda may feel awkward and even esoteric, but I encourage you to trust the process. This practice reminds us that in the church we are not captains of industry whose bottom line is to satisfy shareholder expectations. Rather, our role is one of spiritual leadership, and this involves a different kind of approach than Madison Avenue. I do believe that the church can learn many good things from the business world, especially when those principles are simply describing human behavior. But these behaviors need to be practiced with a listening ear to the Holy Spirit and under the lordship of Christ, who is the head of the church (Ephesians

22. Willard, *Hearing God*, 348.

5:23). The agenda of thirds attunes us to the Spirit's presence and helps us live into the divine-human partnership that is our birthright in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20; cf. Acts 15:28, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…").[23]

**2. Develop a system whereby people discover, deploy, and develop their spiritual gifts.** Most churches operate with a volunteer-based culture, looking for warm bodies to fill ministry slots. But the Apostle Paul presents a more meaningful way to recruit based on spiritual gifts: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). In this gift-based culture, the role of the pastor is not to do the work of the ministry, but to equip others to do the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:10–16). One of the keys to congregational vitality is to develop a system, class, or small group that helps people discover their gifts for ministry. This gift-based approach to congregational ministry is much more life-giving than resorting to guilt or gimmicks to entice volunteers.

As we serve in the area of our giftedness, we experience a deep sense of satisfaction. Apathy disappears. Eric Lydell, memorialized in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* puts it this way in the script, "God made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure." Exercising our spiritual gifts, in God's partnership with the Holy Spirit, is one of the greatest joys of living in kingdom. The healthy missional marker of sacrificial and generous living and giving not only refers to generosity with treasures, but also to spiritual gifts for the strengthening of the church.

**3. Walk the congregational vitality pathway.** The congregational vitality pathway postures a congregation to discern the Holy Spirit and respond accordingly. It provides language and a process that empowers churches to discover and follow the Spirit's leading. The four types of churches and ten healthy missional markers[24] provide a holistic, biblical

23. I encourage leadership teams to read books on discernment and divine guidance. Dallas Willard's *Hearing God*, and Ruth Haley Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* are both excellent. Churches may also want to teach a workshop on divine guidance and discernment.

24. The ten healthy missional markers are centrality of the word of God; life transforming walk with Jesus; intentional evangelism; heartfelt worship; compelling Christian 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. All of these markers are undergirded in prayer and the working of the Holy Spirit.

means of measuring vitality and connecting more fully with the Holy Spirit. Henry Cloud recently blogged, "People who meet their goals follow a path; they don't just get lucky or work harder."[25] The same applies to congregations. The vitality pathway provides a number of common experiences and opportunities for the Holy Spirit to speak and for us to listen. Exercises such as finding your biblical story; establishing a process of pervasive prayer; taking the PULSE assessment;[26] and learning how to have civil, compassion, and Christ-honoring conversations are all opportunities for the Spirit to work.

Discerning the Holy Spirit is a dynamic process that takes time. It is not a magical incantation or technical quick fix that will solve our problems overnight. Trusting the process is half the battle. On the vitality pathway, we learn how to manage our anxiety, how to hold up the mirror of Scripture, how to laugh again, and how to re-engage with God in the mission. The pathway is an organic approach to congregational vitality that helps us acquire new skills and open our ears to the Spirit.

Any approach to congregational vitality that is not rooted in the person and work of the Holy Spirit lacks supernatural power. In September of 2015, I spoke at the building dedication ceremony for Countryside Covenant Church in Milbank, South Dakota. This small town and country church had been on the pathway for a few years. They had experienced some "high highs" and "low lows." Mark Chapman, pastor of Countryside, told me after the worship service:

> I would not be pastoring here today without the vitality pathway. I would not have understood what was going on around me. I would have panicked and bailed… honestly. The pathway gave me language and understanding. It gave me the ability to be a non-anxious presence. It gave people at church confidence to follow me…. The pathway, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is why I am where I am today.

I am told that a large number of Covenant pastors are nearing retirement. More and more of these pastors are boldly and selflessly leading their congregations through the pathway. Harvey Fiskeaux, pastor of the

25. Henry Cloud, "Daily Dr. Cloud Inspiration," July 16, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/CRofPinedale/posts/848146848605790.

26. As part of the congregational vitality pathway, the PULSE assessment helps to determine whether a church is healthy missional, stable, critical, or at risk.

Covenant Church in Nome, is one of them. Led by the Spirit, he desires to leave a legacy of vitality.

> I have had two growing convictions through the years that have fueled my vision and passion as a pastor in rural Alaska. One is the necessity of viewing the church as the living body of Christ himself. Jesus said, "I will build *my* church" (Matthew 16:18). The other conviction is the indispensability of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the life of the pastor and church (Acts 1:8). The pathway embodies both. I am convinced that through the vitality pathway our best days are ahead.

It is such a joy and honor to work with veteran pastors like Harvey. These are the pastors who are willing to put the health of their congregations above their own anxieties regarding retirement. If you are a Moses who is nearing retirement, I invite you to prepare your congregation for the Joshua who is coming next. You can do this, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by leading your congregation through the congregational vitality pathway. This could be your finest hour as a pastor![27]

## Conclusion

At its core, congregational vitality is a spiritual awakening, a movement of the Holy Spirit that often happens in surprising ways—ways in which the church did not anticipate. Cultivating a sense of mystery and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit makes us more open to moving forward with God. Congregational vitality is not a feeling or a fad that is here today and gone tomorrow. It is deeply rooted in Scripture. Congregational vitality is born out of a fresh awakening of the Holy Spirit among people with an earnest desire to live more fully with God and for God. Debbie Bogart, a vitality facilitator from Alaska sums it up well, "If you are going to do the pathway without the Holy Spirit, it won't be done."

"'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6).

27. John Maxwell insists that "there is no success without a successor" (http://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/are-you-busy-building-sandcastles, February 10, 2014).

# New Life at Bethlehem

*Ryan Eikenbary-Barber, lead pastor, Bethany Covenant Church, Mount Vernon, Washington; former senior pastor, Bethlehem Covenant Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

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 survey[5] 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 Harvin[7] 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).

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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.

# 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.

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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: Paradign 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 Weslyan 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.

# Book Reviews

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**Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom and David D. Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom* (Cascade Books, 2014), 166 pages, $19.**

While some congregations excel in children's and youth ministries and others struggle to keep their youth connected, both groups often fail to integrate children as fully participating members in worship. *Incorporating Children in Worship* is a theological exploration of the conviction that children play a vital role within, and make an important contribution to, the body of Christ.

The initial chapters are dedicated to deepening the reader's capacity to think theologically about children and worship. Oftentimes the practical execution of ministry to children eclipses the theology of the child, with the result that this is underdeveloped or non-existent in the local church. The same can be said of worship, where conversations of form and substance supersede the theology that determines praxis. Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin call the reader to consider children (including those we may consider youth) not as pre-believers or pre-members but as full members of the body of Christ. Their initial chapter also realigns the reader's perception of adult believers as "children" of God who are no more or less valued than other children.

From a theology of children the book moves to a theology of worship, understood as "the enactment of the dramatic story of the triune God by the people of God" (p. 34). For the authors, worship is primarily, though not exclusively, expressed in the participation in the sacraments of baptism and communion. Their emphasis is on baptism as the outward sign and symbol of God's acting upon the person and adopting, or incorporating, the person into the family of God. Infant baptism clearly portrays God's agency rather than understanding baptism primarily as human action based on belief, assent, or devotion to God. Thus a proper understanding of the child in relation to the whole body allows for the practice of infant baptism and encourages the baptized child's full participation in the Eucharist.

The book then addresses implications of this integrative theology of children and worship in its chapters on incorporation, virtue, vocation, and vision. While this book is primarily about the incorporation of children in worship and the local church, its implications extend to the larger *ecclesia*. *Incorporating Children in Worship* is a work of missional theology expressed in terms of the worship of all of God's people: "The particular activity that forms Christians for the work of the kingdom, or God's mission, is worship. Worship constitutes the single most important activity in which the church engages and, further, it is the time when the body comes together regularly, forming its identity as coworkers with Christ in advancing God's kingdom" (p. 5). Incorporation includes bringing to the center marginalized voices within the community of saints. A discussion on the understanding of virtue from the perspectives of the West and the Global South highlights the need to consider whether theology is coming from the centers of power or the margins. Though children are undoubtedly considered important to the life of the family and of the church, they are marginalized in the sense of lacking power, authority, or voice in determining the direction of worship or even church administration. The authors do not advocate a child-led, child-directed, or child-focused ministry per se. They do advocate that the church consider what it means for children to be members of the body. Here, the vocation of children in the scheme of worship is to be children, in all the unique traits and giftings only they could possess: child-like faith, the ability to hope, and uninhibited imagination.

While the authors suggest this book is accessible to anyone who ministers to children, its chapters lack adequate groundwork for those who do not already have a theological foundation. Nor do the authors pro-

vide the practical applications one might hope to find for integrating its principle insight into weekly worship gatherings. These tasks are left to the local pastor to lead staff, volunteers, parents, and others into further conversation regarding the book's implications for their particular setting. Nevertheless, *Incorporating Children in Worship* is a necessary message that all churches should engage in their practice and theology of worship.

BENJAMIN H. KIM

**Mandy Smith, *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry* (IVP, 2015), 208 pages, $16.**

Church leaders in the West have long looked to corporate leaders for guidance. Books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and *Good to Great* are commonly found on pastors' bookshelves. Mega-churches host conferences inviting CEOs, politicians, coaches, and entrepreneurs to offer pastors lessons on leadership.

Smith, lead pastor at University Christian Church in Cincinnati, began her journey toward vulnerability at one such Christian leadership conference. As she absorbed the workshops, the speakers, and the books, something did not feel right. She was not connecting. At a dinner with some of the key speakers, she asked, "Do you ever feel like you're making it up as you go along?" For pastors who feel the pressure to perform in a consumer-driven culture, Smith's question is profound. She needed to know if these leaders had weaknesses as she had—did they also bleed? Did they also have fears and doubts? If they could offer a glimpse into their humanity, then there would be hope for Smith as well.

Wrestling with this question, Smith felt God prompting her with Psalm 51:17, "A broken and contrite spirit I will not despise," and 1 Corinthians 12:9–10, "In your weakness I am strong." For Smith, strength is not a prerequisite for Christian leadership. She concludes, "if feeling our own weakness makes us rely on God, and if the best ministry grows from reliance on him, then our weakness is a ministry resource" (p.15). God calls *humans* to be pastors—people who have limitations, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities.

*The Vulnerable Pastor* follows current attention to emotional intelligence, self-awareness, shame, and connection, applying insights of Brené Brown to the specific fears pastors have about allowing others to see who we really are. Smith's book could easily be called *The Vulnerable Christian*,

but, as a pastor, I appreciate the vocational specificity.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first section invites the reader to feel vulnerable before God in the ways we confess sin, ask for help, acknowledge emotions, pray desperately, and read Scripture. In the second section, Smith focuses on feeling vulnerable in pastoral leadership through collaboration, listening, transparency, self-care, and faithfulness. The third section addresses vulnerability in front of an audience, particularly in preaching and in engaging the world from a place of longing and lament.

Smith does not just describe vulnerability; she models it in her writing. When she turns her attention to the ways pastors use time and energy (chapter 9), she shares in detail her weekly rhythm of work (pp. 142–43), saying, "You may also notice how little I get done in my week" (p. 144). In her honest self-assessments and acceptance of her limitations, she releases the reader from unrealistic—and worldly—expectations. When Smith allows herself to be seen, she gives us permission to feel vulnerable as well.

One word of caution for younger pastors: vulnerability is no substitute for hard work and vocational training. Smith identifies herself as a perfectionist; for someone inclined toward sloth, "vulnerability" is not a license to be lazy. There are many times when leading out of what feels authentic to us in the moment may not be helpful to those under our care. Smith briefly addresses the risks of over-sharing and having unhealthy boundaries. Discerning what makes for healthy vulnerability in pastoral relationships would be worth further discussion.

*The Vulnerable Pastor* is a great book for Christians, and especially pastors, who feel discouraged and ashamed of their weaknesses in a culture focused on strength, performance, and having it all together. Smith prophetically calls the church to renounce the idol of strength in leadership and to rely on God's strength in our weakness. The practice of becoming vulnerable is a means by which a new generation of pastors can develop the necessary virtues of courage and humility.

TY GRIGG

**Paul Peucker, *A Time of Sifting: Mystical Marriage and the Crisis of Moravian Piety in the Eighteenth Century* (Penn State Press, 2015), 248 pages, $84.95.**

For the Renewed Moravian Brethren the "sifting time" of the 1740s was a period of controversy, discipline, and reconciliation. The problem

for those involved in Moravian studies has been the ambiguity of the events at the center of the controversy. Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravian Brethren, with his deputy August Spangenberg, expunged the details from the records in reversing the excesses of the sifting time. Scholars of Moravian history are left to assemble a puzzle with many missing pieces.

The prevailing scholarly consensus attributes the controversy to excessive devotion to the "blood and wounds" theology of Jesus Christ. Paul Peucker, director of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, challenges this consensus in *A Time of Sifting: Mystical Marriage and the Crisis of Moravian Piety in the Eighteenth Century*. Peucker argues the opposite: that early sources suggest the crisis was solved by a return to the blood and wounds devotion.

Peucker's investigation reveals that in the late 1740s, Zinzendorf's son Christian Renatus proposed antinomian doctrines that led to practices of extra-marital sex, transgendered identification, and homosexual activity in the "Singles Choirs" of the Moravian communities. The leadership condemned these innovations and sought to restore traditional marriage values to the Moravian communities while reconciling and restoring errant members.

Christian Zinzendorf's antinomian theology grew out of three distinctive Moravian doctrines: blood and wounds devotion, where the side-wound of Jesus from the spear thrust became associated with female reproductive organs; a "playfulness" designed to confute the dour outlooks of other pietisms; and the theology of marital intercourse, based on the view that the Wedding Feast of the Lamb must then be followed by nuptials. All Christians were brides of Christ and would experience union with him like that of the marriage bed, thus the souls of both men and women were female. The elder Zinzendorf and other leaders gave both formal and tacit approval to these doctrines.

The controversy began with a liturgy in which Christian Zinzendorf pronounced absolution for past *and future* sins of the single men of Herrnhaag. He then declared the single men to be castrated in their spirits so that they would all become sisters to each other. This converged with heightened sexual language in their devotion to the side-wound to inspire the choirs to extra-marital sexual behaviors, including same-gendered sexual relations.

Due to the suppression in Moravian documents, Peucker relies on testimonies of disaffected former Moravians who had published lurid

and hostile exposés. Peucker brings enough suspicion to his sources to allow for a compelling argument. It is the best theory of the sifting time to date and will likely prevail in Moravian studies. Peucker regrets that imagination and creativity, a characteristic of Moravian pietism, suffered from the discipline of the community during the sifting time. The antinomianism of the younger Zinzendorf sparked a reaction that tilted the Moravians toward the conservative Protestant mainstream. Apart from this, Peucker allows the episode of the sifting time and its aftermath to speak for itself.

Christian Zinzendorf pushed the distinctions between flesh and spirit toward a gnostic dualism and adopted an antinomian stance toward sexual acts. Such views are without parallel today, and Peucker does not attempt to apply the ethics of the sifting time to twenty-first-century disagreements on human sexuality. However, since the Covenant esteems Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf as a spiritual forebear, we can at the very least be assured that challenges to traditional interpretations of the Bible regarding sexuality are not new in our history. Perhaps churches and denominations can learn from Zinzendorf and the Moravian leaders' efforts to heal the movement through discipline, reconciliation, and restoration.

JONATHAN M. WILSON

A PUBLICATION OF
The Evangelical Covenant Church