

CONVICTIONS & CULTURE



LIFE TOGETHER IN THE
CENTRAL CONFERENCE
OF THE ECC

Introduction

In the Central Conference, we start, strengthen, and unite churches. This is the mission we pursue together. Along with every other Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) conference, we hold [six theological affirmations](#), our **convictions**. And within the Central Conference, we nurture a distinct identity, our **culture**. It is from these convictions and culture that we engage in the good work of planting, strengthening, and connecting churches. Our convictions and culture shape our mission.

Central Conference Convictions:

1. We affirm the centrality of the word of God.
2. We affirm the necessity of the new birth.
3. We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the church.
4. We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers.
5. We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.
6. We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.

Central Conference Culture:

7. We are a relational conference.
8. We are a hospitable conference.
9. We are an immigrant conference.
10. We are a justice-seeking conference.
11. We are a courageous conference.
12. We are a hopeful conference.

Throughout the Central Conference are churches that are worshipping and ministering in a wide variety of contexts. Visit even a few of these churches and you will experience a diversity of worship styles, cultures, and ministry priorities. Underlying this great diversity are the theological convictions and cultural elements that make the Central Conference a wonderfully unique and thriving place to pursue God's mission. This resource is a way for your congregation, Sunday School Class, or small group to explore in more depth what it means to belong to a larger movement of churches that, despite our diversity, share so much in common. For each conviction and cultural element, we have invited a Central Conference leader to contribute an article and a Bible Study lesson. We have designed these to be used in a variety of manners, in whichever ways best suit the needs of your congregation.

Additionally, we've produced [this short video](#) that could be used to introduce the Convictions and Culture resource to your congregation.



You will notice that, while the articles are mostly the same length, the Bible studies vary slightly in style and length. Rather than edit these for uniformity, we chose to let the preference and disposition of the contributors shine through these studies. We hope this will be a helpful resource for your congregation. We welcome your feedback and would love to hear how you these articles and studies are received within your unique context.

On behalf of the Central Conference Staff, David Swanson
Director of Church Planting and Pastor of New Community Covenant Church, Bronzeville

Our Convictions

Part 1: We affirm the centrality of the Word of God.

Jerome Nelson is the Superintendent of the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church



In the Central Conference, you can still hear someone ask the question, "Where is it written?" And that is because, we still hold the view that: "the Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct."

We affirm that the Bible is the Word of God and the Word of Truth. It is the message of God to humankind. It reveals that the evil that is in the world today is the result of unbelief; that it is the result of the self-will of lost individuals who are blinded by Satan and who are living in sin; that it is the result of humankind's disobedience to the commands of a Holy and all-wise God.

We affirm that the Bible is the only book that can give a satisfactory explanation and a clear understanding of the cause and the meaning of the turmoil and the fear of these troubling times; and it is the only book that can give the remedy for this turmoil and fear. It is the only book that reveals Jesus Christ, the Savior of humankind.

Contrary to the belief of some, the Bible is not a magic charm, fetish or a thing that will work wonders by its very presence without any engagement with it. The Bible does not claim to be any such thing. But it does claim that if one will study and practice it that it will work wonders in the life now and in the life after. It will not benefit anyone by its mere presence any more that a spring of cool water to a thirsty person in the desert will benefit them if they refuse to drink from it. And neither is the Bible a book that conforms to the tastes, customs, or habits of any one group of people, or for any one age or period of time. It is a book to which all people in all ages can conform, and yet retain their own peculiar customs and habits that are not sinful and contrary to the will of God.

The Bible is God's inspired revelation of the origin and destiny of all things. It is the power of God unto eternal salvation and it is the source of present help for body, soul, and spirit (Romans 1:16, John 15:7). It is God's will and testament to humankind in all ages, revealing the plan of God for man here and now and in the next life to come. It is the record of God's dealings with humankind; past, present, and future. It contains God's message of eternal salvation to all who believe in Christ and of eternal damnation to those who rebel against the Word of God.

The Bible contains the mind of God, the state of mankind, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts binding, its histories true, and its decisions immutable. It should be read to become wise, believed to be saved, and

practices to be holy. It contains light to direct you, spiritual food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end.

Dwight L. Moody, when he was asked from whence he had obtained such lasting power and strength in his life, said, "I have power inasmuch as my soul is saturated with the word of God."

Bible Study

2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16

Because God will examine what kind of workers we have been for him, we should build our lives on his Word and build his Word into our lives. It alone tells us how to live for him and serve him. The Bible is not a collection of stories, fables, myths, or merely human ideas about God. It is not a human book. Through the Holy Spirit, God revealed his person and plan to certain believers, who wrote down his message for his people.

Questions:

1. What happens to believers who ignore the Bible?
2. What is required in order to be able to understand and explain the Bible to others?
3. Who were the Scriptures inspired by?
4. What are the Scriptures good for?

Part 2: We affirm the necessity of the new birth.

Amanda Olson is pastor of Grace ECC in Chicago, an intentional gathering of unfinished people seeking and sharing Jesus' transforming love.



“Have you been born again?” If you are anything like me, you may not like that question. Evangelicalism and being “born again” brings negative images to mind for many, even me. I’m not a fanatical “holy roller”. And yet...

I “roll” with holy (albeit imperfect) people.

I am fanatical about Jesus.

I am an evangelical.

I am born again.

Jesus says new birth is necessary for anyone who follows him. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again... no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:3,5).

Jesus speaks these words to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus was a bible-believing, bible-living man. Jesus refers to him as one of “Israel’s teachers.” And yet, it seems that he doesn’t have eyes to see the workings of God as they are playing out right in front of him, in the person of Jesus.

The hard thing about being born again (and seeing God’s kingdom) is recognizing the conditions of our “first-birth” life. It can be difficult to acknowledge that our lives keep us from living according to God’s will and way. Human beings are born self-centered. It is a survival mechanism. Our culture encourages us to build our own kingdoms. It’s security. Natural tendencies and evil powers work so closely to the core of our very selves that we have trouble seeing them.

But once we see how our first-birth lives keep us from having a right relationship with God who is the center of the universe and the one and only true King, we recognize that we need some help in getting our lives aligned with His. We need more than help. We need Him! And God gives us himself, most fully and clearly in the person of Jesus.

Jesus is God-Redeemer. Through God-Redeemer’s sacrificial death, God-Creator forgives us of our first-life faults. And through God-Redeemer’s resurrection, God-Creator introduces us to our new life with Him - a life that is characterized by love, joy, hope, justice and peace! In this, we are born again.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17, TNIV). Some point to a date where they were made new in Christ. Others experience a season of transformation into their new life in Christ. Thankfully, as we read on in the Gospel of John,

we discover that Nicodemus must have been reborn at some point. It is Nicodemus who provides a generous portion of embalming spices and assists Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus' burial (John 19:39-42).

No matter how new life in Christ begins one thing is the same for all. It never ends. I find myself being reborn in Christ every morning I wake, recommitting myself to God's will and God's ways. So the next time someone asks, "Are you born again?" I won't cringe. I'll nod and say, "Every moment of everyday."

Bible Study

Ephesians 4:1-32

The Apostle Paul writes a letter to the church in Ephesus, not to confront a heresy or problem, but to strengthen and encourage the churches in the area. Paul had spent over three years with the people in Ephesus. He had a close relationship with them. In Ephesians 4, Paul writes Instructions to them for mature Christian living, which includes unity in the church.

Questions:

1. Share your story of initial new birth. Was it on a particular day or over a period of years?
2. What "first-birth" life characteristics did you need to acknowledge before being reborn?
3. What 1-2 characteristics of mature Christian living is God calling you to develop? What are concrete ways you can live into new birth?
4. How are you being reborn, even today?

Part 3: We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the church.

Peter Kim is the planter and lead pastor for Redeemer LIFE Covenant Church in Vernon Hills, IL.



From our inception, Covenanters were known as “Mission Friends” who were propelled by the vision to be on mission with God through the gospel to all who needed Him. Both, the proclamation of the gospel as well as ministries of justice, compassion, and mercy, would mark this mission. We often begin the discussion of missions with the Great Commission Matt 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8 to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, but we must not forget that missions began long before this when a Holy God sought after a sinful and rebellious man when walking through the garden calling out, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). We didn't invent missions...God did! Our God is a missionary God long before we came into the picture.

The gospel story is the redemptive story of a missionary God reconciling a sinful humanity back to Himself. Any discussion of missions must always be seen in this greater larger story, and never just as an isolated ministry or program of the church. It is the meta-narrative from which all other mini-stories flow out from and back into. Missions is the heartbeat of the gospel story that we find throughout the entire Bible, which ultimately leads to the worship of a God of grace and power who rescues lost people to Himself. God gives us true hope even in the midst of the tragic Fall. God Himself will provide a Rescuer who will bring justice and mercy to our world. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). This first pronouncement of the gospel reminds us of the spiritual battle that we are engaged in between God's Kingdom and the kingdom of this world, and the eventual victory we will have centered in the person of Christ. Missions, evangelism, and church planting must flow out of this reality by keeping the final outcome and future victory before our eyes.

The power, which fuels this mission, is the reality that we also were dramatically rescued in power and grace. When we forget this fundamental truth, we ourselves lose the compassion, humility, and dependency on the Lord to fulfill His mission. We forget that our calling is the ultimate privilege since no one deserves to be rescued and redeemed in the first place. It is always by sheer undeserved grace. Only in this understanding will we be able to look at the outsider, the lost, and the broken and not only identify with them, but minister in a spirit of true love since we ourselves are really no different than them. Missions flow out of heart that understands the gospel of grace.

Missions is not just a department of the church. It isn't just for the super spiritual giants or the religious professionals. Missions isn't a mode we enter into during a summer short term missions trip but rather it defines our essence, our identity, our lifestyle, and our focus. The church is the missionary community of God because our God is a missionary God who indeed seeks to save that which was lost as seen in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Himself. His

mission is now carried out in His Body, the church, as we engage in the whole mission of the church to a lost and broken world.

Bible Study

We often immediately turn to Acts 1:8 or MT 28:18-20 in our study of missions but we must actually begin in Genesis to truly understand our conviction of our commitment to the whole mission of the church. Please read through Gen 3:1-9 and Luke 19:1-10 as we gain a clear picture of God's missionary heart seen at the Fall as well as that same heart in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Questions:

1. How does God demonstrate His heart for missions in Genesis 3:1-9? Why is this significant?
2. How does Jesus demonstrate this same heart in Luke 19:1-10?
3. Why is it important that we never lose sight of our own dramatic rescue when we first became a Christian?
4. "Missions flow out of a heart that understands grace." How has God been teaching you this truth in your life today?

Part 4: We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers.

Min Song is currently serving as a bi-vocational tent-making associate pastor at New Life Covenant Church in Palatine, IL.

“One Church... One Family.” Our youth group in recent years has adopted this phrase as our rallying cry. We’ve declared it at sports tournaments as a youth group team, at the close of corporate prayer time, when wrapping up retreats and preparing to return home, and even made it a shirt theme. “One Church... One Family” captures the heartbeat of the Evangelical Covenant Church’s affirmation that the church is a fellowship of believers. In “Living Faith” published by the denomination, Phil Anderson reflecting on the historical roots of this affirmation wrote, “those who have found the Covenant Church to be their spiritual home have consistently responded to the call not only to believe but to belong.”

Our history going back as Mission Friends and meeting in conventicles to the present day diverse growth of the denomination shows the importance and vitality of the local church. From our historical roots to present day, the pressing call remains that we not only go to church, but to be the church as we do life together through all the complexities that accompany it.

The local congregation is of crucial importance in God’s redemptive work in the world. While God is at work elsewhere, it is particularly in the close personal relationships of the fellowship that people are opened to the healing, convicting, and life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here, biblical nurture and discipline occur in the context of love and concern. (Living Faith, 105)

Having roots connected to the Korean immigrant church, I’ve seen how vital youth and young adult ministry can be for second-generation Korean-Americans. With a different heart language, culture, and life-context than our immigrant parents, it can be struggle to find a place of understanding and care.

I personally grew up in a non-Christian home, as an only child-latch key kid since second-grade since my parents at that time worked seven days a week and often ten to twelve hour days. I knew my parents did what they had to do to survive and support our small family. My aunt was the first Christ-follower in my extended family, and through her invitation and my parents approval, I started attending church since childhood.

The local church and God working through the personal relationships with Sunday School teachers and youth pastors has been key to my testimony and call to ministry. Through the local church, I heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, grew to love the Word, and found a spiritual family that went deeper in unique ways than my biological family could.

In doing youth ministry, I’ve seen the importance of the local congregation being used in God’s redemptive work. Through peer ministry and through older people reaching out to the youth, Christ’s love was embodied. For second-generation youth and young adults, the local church provided a place to believe and belong, a family redefined, and a place for discipleship and growth.

Church is where we discover our most basic, fundamental community. We can say “we” of our family, city or region, ethnic group, or country. Each of these communities may

shape who we are. Yet, only one of them shows and shapes our true identity as God's blessed creatures (Genesis 1:28) and beloved children (Ephesians 5:1; cf. Romans 1:7). (Living Faith, 109)

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:9-12)

The world is hungry for authentic connection and relationship beyond the virtual world, desiring real community, and seeking a true anchor in the midst of life. The church as the fellowship of believers is the means through which God can reach the world. The church is the gathering place of God's children, God's love lived out and in motion, and God's love in mission. One church, one family may we be.

Bible Study

Philippians 1:1-11

Philippians is an intimate letter written by Paul to a church that he dearly loved. Paul's prayers, affection, tears, and nearness in his heart reveal that care he had for the church he established in Europe (Acts 16). While the themes of fellowship, Gospel, and joy shine throughout the letter, the context in which Paul was writing from was a prison view in Rome. There were no guarantees if Paul would receive freedom or death. When the Philippian church heard of Paul's predicament, they sent Epaphroditus to Paul with gifts, support, and encouragement. In light of this correspondence, Paul penned this letter to the Philippian church.

Questions:

1. What do you think about when you hear the word fellowship? What images, activities, and memories come to mind?
2. In verse 3, Paul prays with joy because of the partnership the church had with him in the gospel. The word partnership is connected to the word, fellowship, so that it could read, because of your fellowship in the gospel. Fellowship here is understood and rooted to the gospel. How does that affect our understanding of fellowship and gospel?
3. In verse 7, "all of you share in God's grace with me" also connects to the word fellowship; all of you are 'fellowshippers' in God's grace with me. What emotions and heart does Paul convey when he thinks about the Philippians?
4. How does Paul pray for the Philippian church? How can we pray for the fellowship of believers in our midst?
5. What missional aspects come to mind with fellowship in this passage? What encouragement comes from fellowship in this passage? What challenges come from fellowship in this passage?

Part 5: We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Shaun Marshall is the Senior Pastor of Community Covenant Church in Calumet Park, IL.



I remember growing up that there were many things that confused me about Church: “Why do I have to go to school on Sunday?” “Why do I have to dress up like I’m going to a funeral every time we go?” “Why do we stop in the middle of service to have a snack with grape juice and crackers?”

And it is very often the case that when we don’t fully understand things, that we disengage ourselves from them. I remember being in Church one day as a small child, and seeing a woman become excited and moved so much until she started dancing and crying with joy. I turned around to a friend who was seated next to me and asked, “What’s wrong with that lady?” “Oh,” she replied, with a weird calm, “She caught the Holy Ghost.” I didn’t say another word, but I kept thinking to myself, Ghosts are bad! How did she catch it? Is it contagious??? I don’t want the Holy Ghost!!!

As I grew older, I came to understand the Holy Spirit as a person of the Trinity to be known, and not a “thing” to be caught. I learned that the Holy Spirit is not present with us to create passive religious experiences, but rather to foster an active spiritual life demonstrating itself not only in exuberant praise, but also life-changing works of service. I realized that I not only wanted the Holy Spirit, but I desperately needed Him to be the person God created me to be in Christ.

The Evangelical Covenant Church affirms not only the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, but the importance of a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit...and there are several important reasons why.

First, the Holy Spirit enables our connection to God. Once the Holy Spirit enters the life of the believer upon conversion, His work causes a new life, helping us to know that we are children of God (Romans 8:16), and confirming our adoption into the family of God (Galatians 4:4-7). It is our connection to God that allows us to experience the love, freedom, grace, joy, and hope that prepares us for a new life in Christ.

Second, the Holy Spirit equips us to conform to His image. As we grow into our new family, we transformed from the inside out, and we gradually take on the character of Jesus. The Holy Spirit gloriously performs that work in us (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit is our teacher, teaching and reminding us about the word and the way of Jesus (John 14:26). In John 16, Jesus also refers to the Spirit as a "Counselor" who will guide us in our everyday lives. This is important, because this means that because of the Holy Spirit, we are no longer limited to our sinful nature when making decisions. As we depend on the Spirit, and surrender to the work of the Spirit in us, we become more like Him.

Third, the Holy Spirit empowers us to continue His mission. When we rely on the leading of the Holy Spirit, He helps us to see how God is moving (Isaiah 43:19), joins us in where God is working (Acts 1:8), and releases gifts to the body for us to do what God is doing (1 Corinthians 12:1-7). The Holy Spirit does this beautifully by not only giving individual believers unique abilities and gifts, but by connecting us as one body so that we operate in those gifts interdependently. When we consciously depend upon the Holy Spirit, He helps us to connect with one another across differences and divisions so that we can function as one body, with a diversity of operations, skills, and abilities to serve one God in shared mission.

It is our conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit that transforms us, prepares us and releases us to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the earth.

Bible Study

Acts 1:1-8

Think for a moment about how the disciples of Jesus must have felt when He was crucified. They spent three years with this incredible figure, watching in amazement as He healed the sick, raised the dead, restored sight to the blind, preached with authenticity, simplicity and authority, and restored hope to a nation waiting for a King and a Savior. Their hopes for Jesus were mainly that He would overthrow the Roman Government and restore the Kingdom of Israel, becoming a King more like David and Solomon.

Now, imagine their excitement and hope when they learned that He was resurrected from the dead just as He said He would...YES! Jesus is back and more victorious than ever...they can't even kill Him...it's time to take over!

But then, imagine how the disciples must have felt when Jesus announced He was going away. WHAT??? They had a tough time following Jesus when He was standing right next to them, how much more of a challenge would it be for them to serve Him when He wasn't around!!!

When we really process what was happening, and think about how they must have felt, we can certainly understand the disciples' fear and frustration. If you go away, Jesus, what will we do?

Of course, we know that Jesus was not necessarily interested in ascending to an earthly, political throne, but He instead wanted to rule in their hearts. Jesus knew that in order to build His Church in the earth that He had to go, but He had other plans in mind for the disciples. He planned to send the Holy Spirit that they might be transformed and through this transformation, the disciples would receive power to be witnesses for Jesus locally and globally. All they had to do was wait until they had become aware of the Holy Spirit's presence among them. As these people, all with different experiences and personalities waited together, they developed faithfulness in prayer, compassion toward one another, and a commitment to life together. Little

did they know that in a matter of days, the Holy Spirit would radically transform them to be able to communicate beyond language barriers, share the life-changing truth of the Gospel, and lead thousands upon thousands to Christ.

Questions:

1. What thoughts, emotions or impressions are you left with after reading this text? When you think about how the disciples may have been processing everything that was happening, was there anything that stood out to you in particular that had special significance?
2. The disciples were waiting for Jesus to continue doing great things, but Jesus' plan was for the disciples to be transformed so that the Holy Spirit could do great things through *them*. What great things do you sense that the Holy Spirit could do in your life if you consciously depended upon Him?
3. The disciples went back to the Upper Room where they waited for the Promise of the Father in the person of the Holy Spirit. We see in Acts 2 that their awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence among them radically transformed and empowered them to serve the Mission of God in the earth. Think about some practical ways that you might deepen your awareness of the Holy Spirit in your life on a daily basis.
4. The Holy Spirit equipped the disciples to connect with people beyond language and cultural barriers. Is there anyone in your world that you have rejected because their background, culture or style of worship is different? What do you think the Holy Spirit might work in your life to help you embrace them?
5. How do you think you will experience God's promise of Holy Spirit-powered change in your life?

Part 6: We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.

Meztli Gonzalez attends Vida Plena Covenant Church and currently is in her 1st year at North Park Theological Seminary.



Growing up in the Hispanic congregation, it is tradition to go to Covenant Harbor Bible Camp up in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin for our annual Baptismal Sunday. If I go through photo albums, I see many joyful expressions on people's faces. I can recall the exact songs of worship one would sing from the gazebo and on the pier. I imagine that this is how Israel left Egypt when God took them out of slavery. They had joyful expressions, they were clapping, and they were singing songs of praise and worship. However, as we continue to read in the book of Exodus, we soon find out that during hard times the people of Israel would cry out to God asking him to take them back into Egypt, even though their status would go back to being one of slavery.

When we read scripture, we see that Egypt is a place where the people of Israel are treated as second class citizens. Egypt represents a place of captivity. In this case, that captivity took over the lives of the Israelites and there was a clear distinction between social classes. I think many of us would agree that being captive is no way of living: someone telling you what to do, what to eat, causes emotional distress. When one comes to know Christ, that emotional distress and emptiness is broken. Why? Because there is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain in our lives that is keeping us captive.

The problem is that many times we are just like Israel we cry out to God and wish to go back to our old way of living. Why? A possible answer is that our old way of living is going back to our comfort zone. Of course humanity has the tendency to find great comfort in engaging in a pattern of what feels natural and familiar. Comfort zones exist in every area in our lives. The key is to be aware of them and examine which comfort zones may not be beneficial to the Kingdom of God. Which comfort zones are preventing you from change? Which comfort zone keeps you from experiencing freedom in Christ?

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”(Galatians 5:13)

It is no secret that outside the walls of the church (and even inside the church) there is a clear distinction between socio economic levels, race, ethnicity, and appearance. This is of course uncomfortable to acknowledge, because we begin to talk about what breaks God's heart. God sent his one and beloved son to break all these chains among us, so that we can experience true love and freedom through him. We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1) This freedom is a gift of God in Christ, so that we can serve the community and the world. For Paul, this freedom means that we are set free from the power of those things that tend to divide. United in Christ we offer freedom to one another to differ on issues of belief or practice where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God. We in the

Covenant Church seek to focus on what unites us as followers of Christ, rather than on what divides us.

Bible Study

Change of Status

For eleven years, a man named Merhan Karimi Nasseri was stateless. During that time, he lived in an airport in Paris. He had no passport, he did not have citizenship, and he had no documents that would allow him to exit the airport or fly to another nation. He had been expelled from Iran, his country of origin. Then, he was kicked out of Paris, France for lack of proper documentation. He had manifested that they had stolen his refugee documents issued by Belgium. He flew to England, but was refused entry and sent back to Paris. When he returned to Paris in in 1988, the airport authorities allowed him to live in terminal 1. He remained there for eleven years, writing in a journal, living off the gifts that the employees of terminal 1 would give him, showering in the bathrooms in the airport.

In September of 1999, his situation changed. French authorities gave Nasseri an international travel card and a permit of French residency. All of a sudden, he was free to go wherever he'd like. When the airport authorities gave him permission to go, to everyone's shock he simply smiled and put the documents in his binder and continued to write in his journal. They discovered that he was afraid to leave the station that had become his home for eleven years. As days went by and Nasseri refused to leave, the authorities decided that they were not going to kick him out of the airport, but that they would patiently and kindly try to convince him to look for a new place.

Can you imagine a more unnatural home than an airport? There is so much movement, it may be interesting place, but it is not a place to call home. When we come to Christ, we need to take a step that may be terrifying, such as the moving out of the airport like Nessari should have done. We have been invited to leave the unnatural home (the ways of this fallen world) into our new home: the freedom of the kingdom of God. Do not stop!

The Dominion of Sin and Death

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Pain and suffering are part of human experience as consequences of their bad decisions. But as humans, we want to conquer the perceived obstacles in front of us. A few examples:

- In the 16th Century, great European empires such as Spain, England, and Portugal went after the conquering and expansion of their empires. This conquest is what we now refer to the New World (the Americas).
- In the United States, we had the conquest of the West.
- In the decade of the 60's and 70's, space programs were implemented at great costs with the end of conquering outer space.
- Death has also formed part of the list of things that humanity has tried conquering. In many cultures, there are records of reincarnation, a prime example is this ritual is

Egyptian culture. Pyramids were great tombs where they would deposit the body of Pharaoh all “dolled up” for the afterlife. Another civilization that did believe in the afterlife are the Aztecs, the Hindu culture, etc.

However successful we have been at our various conquests, the experience of sin and death has been a losing battle.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:15)

Freedom from the dominion of sin and death is only possible by the grace of God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Questions:

1. What have you conquered in your life?
2. Has there been a circumstance where someone has offered freedom through another mean that is not by the grace of God?
3. How has freedom in Christ a transformed your story?

Your Freedom, Christ’s Mission

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus Christ has called us to a ministry of deliverance, healing, and salvation. The call of Jesus Christ to a ministry marked by presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus Christ and gave him power for His mission. The call of Jesus Christ to a ministry marked by the proclamation of the Good News:

- proclaim freedom from the dominion of sin and dead
- proclaim freedom from the dominion of Satan
- proclaim freedom from the dominion of fear, guilt, and shame

We need to seek this physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom. Freedom. We live in a broken world and we are going to experience brokenness in one area or another at one point or another in our world, but Jesus Christ has overcome this world and called us to experience and proclaim his freedom.

Questions:

1. In what areas of your life do you need healing or freedom from?
2. What does it mean to you, to be anointed by the Holy Spirit?
3. Does the anointing of the Holy Spirit make a difference in the proclamation of deliverance, healing, and salvation?

Part 7: We are a relational conference.

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Be honest; have you ever glanced out your window and noticed door-to-door salesmen or particular religious groups coming towards your door, and you decided to pretend that you weren't home? (I cannot be the only one?) I'm not suggesting that God can't use any number of methods by which to draw people to Himself. What I am suggesting is that it is our human nature to find it intrusive when a stranger tries to speak into our lives or influence us. Why? Because that kind of influence is typically reserved for those with whom we are in relationship.

Since the mid-eighties, the Barna Group has specialized in research that is geared towards supporting and helping the larger Church. Every so often, a Barna research article will appear online and by way of social media, it will circulate for some time. Periodically, one is bound to come across an article that talks about why this group or that generation is leaving the Church, or "The Six Reasons that [fill in group name] stays in the church." Given society's curiosity about whatever generation is newest and therefore least known or understood, these articles are usually focused on younger folks. Regardless of the age or particular group that a given article focuses on, however, there is always one piece that seems to remain consistent: People stay in the Church when they have meaningful relationships. People leave the Church when they don't.

From the very beginning, we were created to be in relationship—both with God and with one another. The only mention of God deeming something not good in the entire creation narrative happens as God looks upon Adam in his loneliness and deems it not good for man to be alone. The Medical field, Psychology and Science have all come to similar findings—that we cannot thrive as human beings apart from relationship. Despite the independent, every-person-for-themselves culture in which we currently live, we cannot succeed in this life without meaningful relationship.

In large part because of its location, the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church has existed as a relational entity since the very beginning of our denomination. The very roots of our denomination are as a gathered body who called themselves Mission Friends, and one of their defining characteristics was their warm fellowship with one another. As the denomination grew and spread out across the United States and Canada, they eventually organized themselves into Conferences. The purpose of Conferences? To further the mission in each particular area by meeting the needs of those around them. In other words, even as the denomination grew in number, they knew that a vital aspect of church growth was found in relationship, and so they continued to structure the denomination and its churches with relationship in mind.

The Central Conference finds its roots in relationship and we continue to foster that central characteristic to this day. Our relational nature is fostered through our annual meetings as well as in our individual church worship gatherings. It is why you will see men's and women's retreats offered to our Conference churches. It is why our pastors gather within their districts or all together for retreats. It is relationship that drives us to participate in collaborative efforts like the North Side Youth Collision or Church Planters gatherings. It is why we work so closely with our two Conference camps—Covenant Harbor and Covenant Point.

Somewhat in jest, our Annual Meetings or retreats are often referred to as family reunions and while we never want to be seen as an exclusive group, there is something uniquely profound about a Conference as large as ours having that kind of a feel to it. We value relationships and see them as a gift, as a privilege and as a necessary aspect of our faith journey and therefore our churches. We are, without question, a relational Conference.

Bible Study:

Acts 2:42-47; John 21:15-19

In Eugene Peterson's bible translation, The Message, he translates the words from John 1:14 this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." They are the words that speak of the incarnation of our God. These words paint the picture of a God who loved us so profoundly, that God came as one of us, to live as one of us, that we would exist in a tangible relationship with God.

Nearly every single moment with Jesus that we find in scripture could be tagged as a model for relationship. The people with whom Jesus chose to surround himself; the inclusivity with which Jesus lived and ministered; the ways in which he trained his disciples—each of these things points us to the importance that Jesus placed on relationships.

Acts 2:42-47 is titled The Fellowship of Believers and it speaks to the very beginnings of the Church. It didn't start with a building fund and a system of boards and committees. It began with relationship—with people gathering on a regular basis, sharing what they have with one another and making sure that everyone had everything that they needed. To know what another's needs are, they would have to exist in relationship. The very Church of Christ began in, with and through relationship.

The text in John 21 is often titled Jesus Reinstates Peter and it's the image of a post-resurrection Jesus talking with the very same Peter who betrayed him. As Jesus questioned whether or not Peter loved him, Peter grew more and more frustrated. We live in a culture today where we have to prove ourselves and earn the trust of other people. So were we to write this script, I'd imagine we'd have Peter begging for forgiveness and then if he's lucky, we'd put him in probation until he can earn his trust back. And yet how did Jesus tell Peter that he could

prove his love for Jesus? “Feed my Sheep.” Or in other words, “love and take care of my people, Peter.” Our love for God is lived out in relationship with God’s people.

Questions:

1. Looking back on your own journey of faith thus far, who were the people who influenced your spirituality? How did they draw you closer to Christ?
2. What are some of the similarities between your current church and the fellowship of believers pictured in Acts 2? What are some of the major differences?
3. How would you describe the relationships in your current church?
4. Of all of the tasks that Jesus could have given Peter as he charged Peter with building the Church, why do you think feeding his sheep was his primary responsibility, and what does it look like today to “feed God’s sheep?”
5. Jesus “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” If we were to use that kind of mentality in our particular neighborhoods, how would that change the relationships that we have with our community?
6. In our current culture, what prevents us from building the kind of relationships that we saw in the life and ministry of Jesus? Who do we tend to include or exclude?
7. What things do we tend to put above relationships in the church? Why?

Part 8: We are a hospitable conference.

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When I think about the hospitality of God, I am reminded of the authentic welcoming hospitality offered to a stranger, late one Wednesday evening at a historical African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina. Cynthia Hurd, 54, Ethel Lance, 70, Tywanza Sanders, 26, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, 49, Rev. Sharonda Singleton, 45, Rev. Daniel Simmons Sr., 74, Myra Thompson, 59, and Susie Jackson, 87. These are the Charleston 9, nine African-American Christian hospitable human beings who were slain in a racially motivated mass shooting by a racist white gunman. The criminal responsible for this heinous crime later communicated his hesitation to proceed with the demonic plan because of the hospitable and pleasant way his anticipated victims embraced him for the hour he joined them in Bible study. I find eerie parallel in Jesus explaining the guidelines for how His disciples are to engage people as they set out on a trial missionary journey. “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:8). The hospitable embrace of the townspeople was to be a signpost of their authenticity, a people of God with whom they could feel safe and find rest among. The hospitality shown to the disciples by the townspeople would subsequently be met with blessings of truth and healing bestowed upon their community. But the radical hospitality of the Charleston 9, offered to the Judas among them at the table, instead brought brokenness and their demise. Likewise, I am reminded the radical hospitality of God, embodied in the life of Jesus also brought His demise.

While hospitality is mostly a benign proposition, it *can* be scary or dangerous, but it’s necessary. To increase the attendance numbers on the church roll? Quite the contrary, hospitality is necessary; “to bear witness to the hospitable God to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It’s necessary because we can’t establish a Church that unifies every tribe, every nation, and every culture if we will not welcome others into our spaces of vulnerability.

We might be tempted to consider the Charleston 9’s vulnerable actions unorthodox hospitality. We may render them a good example of why we ought not radically welcome strangers we don’t know and trust into our churches, homes or lives. But in the early church, this would not have been seen as unconventional. Gracious hospitality to “the other,” one of a divergent social class, different ethnicity or economic standing, was the mark of the early Christian whose heart and life had been changed by a Christ encounter. Boldness about their faith and exemplifying the radical love and hospitality of Jesus was a well-known life threatening risk. The black church has likewise often risked being a target of racial hatred. But its arms of love and welcome remain open, through slavery and Jim Crow and segregation and cross burnings and lynchings and police brutality and racism...reminiscent of the vulnerable open arms of Jesus outstretched on the cross. Theologian Amos Yong penned it this way, “Christian

mission is the embodiment of divine hospitality that loves strangers, to the point of giving up our lives on behalf of others as to be reconciled to them, that they might in turn be reconciled to God.”

The Charleston 9 presents a model for our reconciliation in the coming kingdom of God. They point our hope towards a Revelation kingdom with jeweled walls, a tree of life with succulent fruit and kingdom gates that are never shut and locked. Security video clips from the day of the attack reveal the villain entering the church through an unlocked side door. Revelation reads, “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (21:25, 27). This is a picture of a kingdom where there is no threat of danger to the divine hospitality of God being offered openly and freely to all. The Charleston 9 provides a model of this future hope we can live into as Christians.

Bible Study

Hospitable Hearts

I did a lot of travelling this summer. As a student on a strict budget, it was imperative that I depend on the hospitality of family and friends in order to enjoy as many trips as I did. Without their gracious hospitality that provided local travel, food, bedding and warm showers, I could not have afforded so many trips. None of these hosts welcomed me with a sense of obligation. Instead, each of these hosts invited me as guest and received me in their home to share time and space with them for a few days. Hospitality is about making space for others in your life. To welcome others this way costs you something. It can cost you time, attention, food, patience, discomfort, inconvenience and interruption to your normal routine.

Jesus’ ministry in the earth placed Him quite often in the position of guest to numerous hosts, including Mary’s womb and a borrowed tomb. He was accustomed to depending on the hospitality of others as was typical in Jewish culture. Jesus even instructed the disciples to depend on welcoming hospitality in the places where He was sending them to minister to the people (Luke 9:1-6; 10:3-9). The hospitality of the welcoming host was to be a sign that this was a place they were called to bless the people with truth and healing miracles. Theologian Amos Yong said, “Those who welcome Jesus into their homes become, in turn, guests of the redemptive hospitality of God.” The hospitable heart is necessary to extend authentic hospitality to others.

One way that we define the Central Conference of the ECC is as a hospitable people. What does it mean to live fully into that part of our identity? Are we willing to sacrifice in order to extend a radical welcome that exposes the lavish hospitality of God? Let’s look at 2 passages of Scripture that can give us deeper insight into the heart of people that offer this kind of lavish hospitality.

Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42
The Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

A major theme of the Gospel of Luke is that acceptance of “the other” is an indication you understand the reality of the kingdom of God and its goal to bring salvation to the masses, not just a select few. Through Jesus’ ministry we are introduced to an inclusive and welcoming faith tradition. Luke shows us the willingness of the oppressed, foreigner and outcast to accept this alternative religious worldview more quickly than the dogmatic Jewish religious leaders. This book highlights one of the categories of outcasts by portraying the significant role women played in the life and ministry of Jesus against the backdrop of a misogynistic society. “The other” and the outcast are emphasized because of Jesus’ compassionate eye toward the sick and suffering, which He always sought to be near and heal. In the face of our sinful heart condition, which does not allow us to always instinctively welcome others in this way, Luke also exposes us to a theme of repentance; a humble turning back to God to realign our hearts with God’s will for us to live in authentic community.

Living in authentic community was difficult for Jews and Samaritans who had deep disdain for one another. Samaritans were considered Jewish “half-breeds,” being born from the union of Gentiles and Jews that inhabited Jerusalem during a time of exile. Authentic communal living was also a challenge for women who were treated like property more than complementary partners in life and ministry. It was shameful for women to be taught, especially by a rabbi as he was teaching other men. Jesus welcomed individuals His societal context determined didn’t deserve to be welcomed. His heart of compassion compelled Him to welcome them.

Questions:

1. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer expresses perfect knowledge of Scriptural law. But Jesus communicates that more is required. What is the more that is required as expressed in verses 28 & 37? How does this contradict what Jesus allows in the Mary/ Martha passage in verse 39? How do you reconcile what Jesus intended His audiences to understand by these seemingly mixed messages?
2. The hospitality of God should be evident where the truth of the Gospel is being preached. How and by whom is the hospitality of God displayed in the Good Samaritan passage? How and by whom is the hospitality of God displayed in the Mary/Martha passage? In what ways do you display the hospitality of God in your life? In what ways does your church exhibit the hospitality of God beyond the church community?
3. Look up Psalm 27:4 and note how it relates to the “one thing” Jesus emphasizes in Luke 10:42. How does this further explain the “one thing” Mary chose? How does this relate to the hospitality of God?
4. Look up Matthew 9:36 and note how it relates to Luke 10:33. What does this teach you about the motivation of hospitality?

5. In the Good Samaritan passage, the Levite, Priest and Samaritan each “saw him,” the victim on the road (Verses 10:31-33). But there was a difference in the way each of them “saw him.” Reread this entire passage and replace the word neighbor with the words *a human* or *humanity*, as is appropriate. (Example: Vs. 29 “and who is *human*?”) How does your perception of this passage change?
6. Both Martha and the lawyer are struggling with extending authentic welcome to Jesus. Martha questioned Jesus’ authority as a Jewish leader because He allowed Mary to behave unconventionally as she sat to learn from Him in the place of a disciple. The lawyer questioned Jesus’ ability to answer a perplexing question about Jewish Deuteronomic law. Their ability to host Jesus in their hearts was conditioned upon Him meeting their expectations for a traditional rabbi. Each of them had underlying obstacles to their full embrace of Jesus. What were those obstacles? Where in your life have you exhibited these obstacles to being hospitable to others? Identify other obstacles to your or your church’s extension of authentic hospitality. What are some practical ways you can overcome these obstacles?

Part 9: We are an immigrant conference.

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Immigration is an unavoidable topic of conversation in our country these days. In Europe, we are watching a crisis unfold as countries erect fences to keep out refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and other distressed countries. Closer to home we hear political candidates use bigoted language about immigrants in order to score cheap political points. These harsh responses toward immigrants are not available to we whose stories have been shaped by migration. For some of us, our place in this country is connected to forced migration like the displacement of First Nations or the abduction and enslavement of Africans. Others of us trace our stories through ancestors who chose to immigrate to this country, who left behind particular hardships and even persecutions in order to make a fresh start.

Apart from our individual stories, the Bible provides a response to immigration that is far more generous than we often see around us. As Matthew Soerens of World Relief [recently wrote](#),

*The Bible does talk about immigrants—a lot. The Hebrew word for an immigrant, *ger*, appears 92 times in the Old Testament. Nearly every time you read about God's concern for the orphan and the widow, the immigrant (or the alien, foreigner, sojourner, or stranger, depending upon your English translation) will be there as well, and we cannot be faithful to the authority of Scripture without applying that to our contemporary reality.*

This biblical perspective ties immigration to some of the other essays in this series. Priorities such as hospitality and justice should impact our response to those who feel their only option is to leave behind all they have ever known.

Beyond these responses to immigrants is an immigrant culture that exists within the Central Conference that is critical to our mission of starting, strengthening, and uniting churches. In a sermon preached in 1978, North Park College professor of history, Zenos Hawkinson, traced back our denomination's immigrant culture to its first days.

Our spiritual parents in the Covenant Church, too, became wanderers across stormy seas, carrying their pathetic little sea chests, all that remained of the old life - a handful of clothes, a piece of needlework, a pot or a pan, a copper kettle and hope. And our parents, too, searched for a city not made with hands, for a haven from the storm, for land from which to feed their children, for space in which their spirits could expand, for the possibility of new life in new dignity. And if it is possible for the Lord God to move the children of Israel from Egypt, then it is possible for the Lord God to move the children of Europe to America. (Anatomy of the Pilgrim Experience, 62).

By pointing to their shared past, Hawkinson was calling his hearers to consider God's call in the present. Rather than succumb to American "careful, anxious middle-class consciousness" (69), he asked the congregation to remember the holy God who guided their migration and to allow him - and not their adopted homeland - to shape their priorities. Even then, in 1978, Hawkinson understood that those Swedish immigrants represented a larger movement and he challenged the Covenant to stand ready for God's call.

A few days ago, I had coffee with a Korean American church planter who was introducing me to a Nepalese immigrant pastor. The church planter shared with the Nepalese pastor that the Covenant was a good fit for him and his new, diverse congregation because the denomination retained a strong memory of its own immigrant history. He went on to share specific ways he and his church plant have been welcomed and experienced a deep connection in mission. This is what it means to be an immigrant conference: to remember our identity as pilgrim people whose identity comes not first from our country, but from the God who has called and kept us.

Bible Study

Psalm 107:1-15

Psalm 107 is the first psalm in Book V, the final collection of the Psalms. This psalm gives four examples of the "steadfast love" of the Lord (4-9; 10-16; 17-22; 23-32). Zenos Hawkinson took the first fifteen verses as his text for his sermon in 1978.

Questions:

1. What is your family's story of immigration or migration? What are the painful aspects of this story?
2. Verses 1-3 ask the worshippers to focus on God's love, redemption, and rescue from trouble. What are the ways God has shown you (and your family) his favor through the immigrant themes of your story?
3. Hawkinson was preaching to a people who were in danger of forgetting the desperation and dependence on God that was common to their immigrant ancestors. Reflecting on Psalm 107, he challenged his hearers:

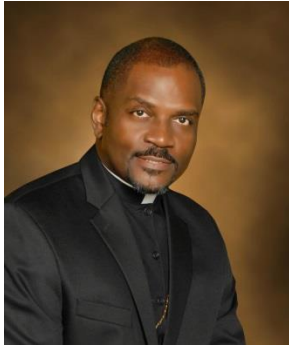
If you have come out of the pilgrim tradition of the children of Israel, from Egypt to the promised Land, and have used that magnificent opportunity only to become a Philistine, then take heed. Do you live comfortably behind high walls and bronzed gates, and worship regularly at the altar of Baal? Are you pleased with the prospects of Social Security and a special pension plan, or the apparent security of America's nuclear deterrent and the overwhelming power of its society and technology? If that provides comfort, then live in fear and trembling, because it will all be taken away from you as surely as the security of our forebears. I proclaim it. (69)

In what ways have you been tempted to “become a Philistine?” What are the particular ways that the American dream has become more attractive than our identity as God’s pilgrim people?

4. Verses 4-9 describe a people who were lost in the wilderness, without a homeland. Perhaps the psalmist has in mind the time between Israel’s liberation from Egypt and their arrival in the Promised Land. Who are the individuals and communities within your influence who are experiencing this desperation and dislocation? How might God be calling you to join him in their deliverance?
5. It may seem counterintuitive, but remembering our own particular immigrant past makes us more open to the diversity of people who God has called to our Covenant churches. We can see this in God’s command for his people to welcome immigrants (Deuteronomy 10:18-19) and in image Paul uses of a tree into which branches have been grafted (Romans 11). In what ways can your congregation remember its specific immigrant stories in order to see and welcome those whose stories (and languages, customs, and histories) may differ from yours?

Part 10: We are a justice-seeking conference.

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He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does The Lord require of you. (Micah 6:8)

I, therefore, the prisoner of The Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God? (Ephesians 4:1-3)

In November of 1884, C. A. Björk wrote a letter that could be classified as the inaugural letter of the Covenant Church. Björk sought to settle the dispute between the Mission and Ansgar Synods which centered on the subject of denominationalism. On the one hand, the Mission Friends wanted to establish a denominational Covenant and on the other hand, the Ansgar Mission repudiated the idea of establishing a denomination. In his argument for establishing a denomination, Björk insisted, "Taking such a step [the organization of a Covenant] will without doubt be pleasing to God and conduce to His glory, further His kingdom, and confound the enemies who now rejoice in the division which exists in the work." (Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit*, pg. 288)

Björk's argument for a denomination was not simply for the glory of God, but it was also to bring unity among the pastors who clung vehemently to opposing ideals. Perhaps, it can be said that at the very beginning of the establishment of the ECC that Ephesians 4:3 resonated with Björk and the other Mission Friends in that they endeavored to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." They desired to establish a unified community (or Covenant) that would weather the storms of opposing views because such a course would ultimately glorify God.

As we fast forward to the present, there are still many disputes that seek to divide the Christian Church. Today, however, the Church appears to be split over their varying opinions concerning social, political or economic issues. Chasms within the postmodern Church are now caused by issues of justice and not necessarily Church discipline or doctrine. Civil rights, women's rights, voting rights and rights of personal choice are not only being argued within courtrooms and boardrooms, but also in many denominational conferences and ecumenical circles. All too often, the mere discussion of the issues has been a cause for fall-out among Believers. Many churches and denominations have been chided and criticized for taking one position over another. The potential fallout from simply discussing issues of rights and justice has caused many churches and denominations to clamp-down and refuse to discuss certain issues of justice at all. However, avoiding the issues all too often create division within the church as well.

Unlike many Christian denominations, the Evangelical Covenant Church has taken a different approach towards addressing issues of justice by making it one of its Mission Priorities; Love Mercy, Do Justice. While our approach is different, it's not new. As Björk and the Mission Friends sought unity within diversity in the early days of the Covenant, so do we today. The ECC seeks to expose and explore the issues of justice as a means to do justice. Doing justice means that we must expose injustices such as mass incarceration, human trafficking, and immigration. Exposing the injustices that plague our society informs the Christian practices of Covenant congregations and the communities that we serve. Once our communities are adequately informed of the challenges we face, then collectively we can explore ways to eradicate or at least minimize the effects of the injustices.

Not only are we a Covenant that resolves to do justice, but as an intentionally multi-ethnic Covenant, we seek to do justice together. As Björk desired, we too desire to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by working together to make life better for the communities we serve with everyone at the table. We in the Central Conference aim to do our part in this collective justice-seeking work by maintaining a functional and relevant multiethnic Compassion, Mercy and Justice Commission. As a commission, the Central Conference CMJ exposes and explores societal injustices and seeks God's will in redressing the challenges of our world. As individuals, when we try to discuss the injustices within our ministry contexts, we help the world to see the problem; but when we seek and do justice together, we show the world the power of our God. In the ECC we've learned that "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together." The Central Conference: Doing Justice Together.

Bible Study

Ephesians 4:1-3; Psalm 82:3

The harmony and syncopation of a well-trained orchestra improves only as the group learns to work together. Unity within the orchestral community produces magnificent music flawlessly and repeatedly. The same holds true with any group whose success depends upon the relentless cooperation of the whole. Athletic teams, organizations and corporations all benefit proportionately to the group's desire to operate as one. As a denomination, one of the Mission Priorities of the ECC is to "Love Mercy, Do Justice." Another major objective of the Covenant is to reflect the mosaic of humanity that gathers around the throne of God by being intentionally multiethnic. Therefore, as we seek to carry out the mission aim of loving mercy and doing justice, we also seek to do so in complete harmony (or unity) with our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is our desire as Covenanters to avoid disunity within the Body in the matters of doctrine as long as we refrain from biblical heresy.

In 1884, A.L. Skoog and A.A. Svensen jointly wrote a statement in reference to the division that arose between the Mission Friends and the Ansgar Mission over the issue of establishing a denomination. The former opted for a denomination [The Covenant] and the latter vehemently opposed becoming a denomination. Skoog and Svensen wrote, "[The suggestion to form a Covenant] was first proposed by some of the brethren in the board of the Tabernacle Church in Chicago who observed with sorrow the division which prevailed among Christians and who

believed that there ought to be a meeting whereat the question of the best means of uniting Christians might be explored." (Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit*, pg. 285) It can be said then that the ECC was birthed out of the idea that we as Believers should do all that we can, as the Apostle Paul would put it, to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3)

When Paul penned those words, he was under house arrest in Rome. As he encouraged the Church of Ephesus to "walk worthy of the calling with which [they] were called" (4:1), he also insisted that they stay unified while walking the walk of their calling. Paul's admonishment to the Ephesians to "preserve the unity" tells of his concern for the potential for division among the Believers. Ephesus was a major trading artery of the Roman Empire. As such, there were many cultures and ethnicities that either lived or traded there. Additionally, Ephesus was the home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world; the Temple of Diana. This pagan fertility goddess which was worshipped by many, if not most, of the Ephesians, also attracted many worshippers and admirers from surrounding territories.

Paul established the Church of Ephesus towards the end of his second missionary journey and left Priscilla and Aquila to continue the gospel ministry after his departure (Acts 18:18-21). On Paul's third missionary journey, he stayed in Ephesus for three years. During this time, many miracles were performed by Paul under the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:18-20). The Spirit of God moved so mightily that many Ephesians dropped their pagan worship, believed the gospel message and accepted Jesus as their Lord. Many craftsmen who made and sold Diana trinkets and objects of worship became enraged and began rioting in the streets after they began to lose revenue.

Many who came to Christ in Ephesus during those days were both, Jew and gentile, men and women, young and old; a mosaic of humanity and a wide range of cultures. Paul, reminds the believers from his place of confinement to walk "with all lowliness and gentleness [with] long-suffering." (4:2) Such virtues would be needed as the family of faith sought to do the will of God. He knew that they would need to walk in supernatural harmony if the Lord were to get the glory from His people. Paul follows up by insisting that the Church should "endeavor" or make haste to protect and preserve the unity of the Body which is made possible by the Holy Spirit. With all of its cultural, social and economic diversity, the Church of Ephesus needed to make sure that it glorified God through their unity. In His prayer to the Father for His followers, Jesus says, "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one..."

(John 17:22) Our greatest gift to give back to God is our capacity to unify as Believers and servants of The Lord.

At the same time, our unity is made perfect in our service. Our service to the Lord, to one another and to the lost, lonely and marginalized evidences our obedience to Christ and our willingness to follow Him. When we serve together, the world sees our collective service or our collective lights shining and then glorifies the Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16) Again, Jesus says in John 17:21, "that they all may be one... that the world may believe that you sent Me." Our role as disciples of Christ is to become one as we work the works of God. While these works draw the world's attention to us, it is our unity that turns their attention to God. But what are the works of the Church? What works should the Church of Jesus be involved in

today? Psalm 82:3 provides a clear answer to the question. Righteousness working within the hearts of the Believers should compel us to "Defend the poor and fatherless [and] Do justice to the afflicted and needy." James 1:27 says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." Again, as Believers we are to "do something" in light of what we see in the world; we are not to shy away.

As we worship, pray, eat and fellowship together, we should additionally find ourselves serving and advocating for the less fortunate and the socially challenged as a unified body; as the family of heaven. Collectively, the Christian community should be engaged in "Doing Justice" and not merely talking about justice issues. Doreen Olson, executive minister of Christian formation, once stated that "Doing justice is not peripheral to being a Christian. It is one of the central aspects of our faith." When we see the world engaging in activities that takes advantage of the outcast, the fatherless, the poor and the oppressed, we have a divine obligation to "get involved." However, getting involved should not always be about the Lone Ranger Christian coming up against the "wiles of the enemy" alone. On the contrary, the world should see Christians banding together to redress the social, political and economic injustices that ravage the land and destroys the hope of humanity. Serving Christ means more than looking only to the things of "me and mine." Moreover, it is a walk that requires us to look at the struggles and challenges of others and to collectively do what we can to bring relief to the hurt and hope to the poor.

Justice is defined in a general sense as the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims. More briefly, justice means conformity to truth, fact, or reason. In John 14:5, Jesus exclaims, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Therefore, it is Christ that sets the standard for justice as well as judgment, especially among Believers who are called to "walk" according to Christ. To live as Christ would require that we not only seek justice, but do justice. And in our doing justice we've been called by God to do it together.

Questions:

1. What are some of the obvious social injustices that impact your community or the community in which your church is located?
2. List some of the barriers to serving the needy, the poor and the marginalized.
3. Discuss the social climate and overall culture of Ephesus. Explain how your community is similar and how it differs from Ephesus. Take note of population diversity and cultural norms.
4. After reading our lesson, do you believe that Christians should or should not engage in social injustice issues?
5. Explain how the church today can become more relevant within the broader society.
6. Do you believe the church of today has let the poor and needy down or that the church has done an adequate job of defending the poor and attending to their needs?
7. What can you do within your own context to foster an environment of spiritual cooperation in addressing injustices?
8. Discuss some of the triumphs and challenges of unifying church members.

Part 11: We are a courageous conference.

Peter Sjoblom has worked as Director of Congregational Vitality for the Central Conference for that last decade to assist congregations in transition as well as helping them to move toward a more healthy and missional approach to their unique calling.



Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land...

These are interesting days for the church. We've heard reports of this disillusioned "post Christian age" where folks no longer are seeking meaning through institutional religion. The church struggles for answers.

As Director of Congregational Vitality for the Central Conference, I've noticed an increasing anxiety on the part of established congregations which are experiencing the disequilibrium of a world which doesn't work the way it used to. Many of us experienced the most compelling times of vitality in the 70's and 80's when people seemed to flock to our churches. We got older, and our children, somewhat more critical than we were, haven't found the identity of the "tribe" quite as nurturing as before.

Just recently, reading through several stories in Numbers, I was taken by the sense of turbulence created in the wilderness wanderings. Chapter 13 accounts the spies being sent into Canaan to see if it was as good as was promised. All the spies came back saying to Moses that the land was what was promised but... 10 of the spies gave scary reports of the land. "It devours its inhabitants", they said. "Huge, really huge people in there." "We can't go against them." "We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes." An old pastor friend once said, "When you think you're a grasshopper, you're a grasshopper!"

But, in chapter 14 we are told that Caleb had a "different spirit."

The "spirits" are not named. All we know is that Caleb (and Joshua) had a "different" one than the spirit which gripped the others. The story itself leads us to some conclusions. The word "anxiety" comes from the Greek word "Ananke", the god of constraint who presided over slavery. Constraint was accomplished through a tight yoke or chain which constricted the throat, limiting one's movement. Anxiety is always accompanied by constriction. (Think of angina, the tightness of arteries which produce pain.)

Generations of slavery in Egypt had produced a population of Israelites whose collective memory was only such a yoke. All that was needed was an alarming report to send them into chronic anxiety.

Whether experienced as individuals, or in collective groups, when anxiety becomes chronic we lose the ability to think in creative ways. The only way we can function is to go back to what we know. And that was the collective "spirit" of Israel. The yoke of slavery continued to accomplish

its purposes even though Israel was supposedly free from that constriction. “Let’s get some new leaders who will bring us back to Egypt,” they cried.

Would it be safe to say that the “different spirit” attributed to Caleb was “courage”? The passage tells us that it allowed Caleb to “follow God wholeheartedly”.

Caleb was not in dread of major obstacles. Caleb was not sidetracked by exaggerated fears. Caleb could engage the promise of God. Caleb could dwell in the new land. Caleb seemed to invite adventure. Caleb could see creative options. Caleb could see the salvation of the Lord.

The Central Conference has a wonderful history in leading some of the most creative enterprises in our denomination. Though the fight continues over which was the first official Covenant church, beyond a doubt Princeton, Galesburg, Rockford, and Chicago were all early influencers in the building of this movement.

This focus on mission has resulted in thousands of people coming to Christ. The disenfranchised finding a place of care and concern. Covenant Home was founded for the elderly. Covenant Children’s Home in Princeton assisted many families and children as orphans. Swedish Covenant Hospital has promoted commitment to health and wellness. More recently enabling residences have provided assistance for those struggling through various disabilities. These and so many others are an outgrowth of gospel compassion.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, we entered the land of racial righteousness. In many cases as white congregations fled the cities to suburbia, several congregations in Chicago made decisions to stay and become more reflective of the changing face of the communities they served. I feel I could name so many more ways congregations have stepped up to a courageous representation of the Kingdom of God. We are indeed a courageous conference.

Bible Study

Questions:

1. Try to put yourself in the place of the Israelites in the wilderness. What “spirit” was in place that romanticized the yoke of Egypt? What are ways we are subject to that same spirit?
2. Why do you think Caleb and Joshua countered with such a different version of what they saw?
3. How would you define the present situation or context (spying out the land) for your church in this day and age?
4. Have an honest conversation about the anxieties that your congregation currently faces?
5. How do we experience the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us courageously face our current challenges?

Part 12: We are a hopeful conference.

Peter Erickson is the Senior Pastor of First Covenant Church in Iron Mountain, MI. He and his wife Carol are empty nesters but always enjoy having the house filled with grandchildren.



The word hope has applications that fall along a wide spectrum of understandings. At one end of the spectrum, a young teenage lady hopes that a certain young man will ask her out on a date. At the other end a middle age recently widowed woman lives from one disability payment to the next, unable to work due to health issues, looking for help with her prescriptions, and a way to pay her electric bill, all the while holding on to the hope that there are brighter days ahead. Each one of us will find ourselves on that spectrum as we go from day to day. What distinguishes a disciple of Jesus is what we allow hope to do for us.

Abraham Miller is quoted: a man begins to die when he ceases to expect anything from tomorrow. The state of our world could easily cause us to lament our future and any sense of hope for what is to come. The country's moral decline, the threat of domestic terrorism, race issues, an uncertain economy, and so many more obstacles all gang up together to leave us with feelings of despair and a sense of hopelessness.

The hope we have is based upon the certainty of the new life that is ours by virtue of Jesus' saving work on the cross 2,000 years ago. This hope we have is strengthened day by day as we continue to experience the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This hope gives us a confident expectation for what is ahead of us. The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. This is hope. An expectation that God, in his faithfulness, will continue to work on our behalf as we look out beyond the present into the future that is before us.

The Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church has a long history of a living, active hope based upon the promises found in scripture and the faithfulness of a holy and righteous God. This hope that we hold onto rises above the turmoil of prejudice, provides a moral compass and energizes the compassion to meet the basic needs that people face each and every day. The things going on in the world around us test us and tempt us to want to give up or give in. The easiest thing for any person to do is to despair and become frustrated by what he sees in the suffering and pain of the world. But, we know that this is only temporary and one day it will give way to eternal glory. This hope informs how we will plan, live and work in this present life. We have a great God who has done a great thing, who is doing great things in and through his people right now and our unwavering hope is to ask, why should we expect anything different?

Bible Study

Romans 8:18-25

Have you ever eagerly expected something that did not come off as planned? How did you handle your disappointment? In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, he has been writing about the glory of our adoption into the family of God. At the same time, he reminds his readers of the turmoil that their present world consists of. This creation is a decaying and a dying world but all the while it is waiting for God's glory to become a reality. He then moves from creation to man and his human longing for this glory.

Paul, in verse 24 makes a tremendous claim. We are saved by hope. Paul operates on the basis that our human situation is not a hopeless situation. He sees salvation as past, present and future. It is past because of the work of Christ on the cross that took place at one point in history. We were saved the moment we placed our trust and belief in Jesus Christ. It is present because we are being saved through the ongoing, sanctifying, purifying work of the Holy Spirit to make us holy. It is future in that, while we have not fully and completely received all the blessings of salvation, we can look forward with expectation to what awaits us and these weak mortal human bodies. With that in mind, hope helps us now because we have something to expect for tomorrow.

In verse 19, Paul refers to the eager anticipation of creation. It describes the attitude of a person whose eyes scan the horizon in anticipation of the first signs of glory. Verse 24, Can we call what we are seeing and experiencing hope? Hope sees beyond what is tangible and easily discerned. As individuals, as a body of followers of Jesus Christ we have a hopeful vision not for where we are presently but for where God, through his Holy Spirit desires us to go. Paul refers, in Titus 2:13, to that blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ. In other words, for the follower of Jesus Christ, the best is yet to come.

Questions:

1. What frustrates you most about living in a fallen world? What is most difficult?
2. What is the difference between hope and wishful thinking?
3. In Romans 8:18-22 what is creation groaning about? What words does Paul use to describe the plight of creation?
4. What do believers groan over?
5. What are we waiting for? (verse 23)
6. How do verses 24, 25 help define what hope is all about? How does this get you through each day?