



Who We Are at Our Best

Happy birthday, Covenanters far and wide. On February 20, the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) officially turned 125 years old. I'm reminded of the farmer who stated proudly that his axe had been in the family for more than a century. Then he added, "Sure, sometimes we had to change the blade, and other times we had to change the handle, but we've had this same axe for all these generations." The reality is the "same axe" had been made entirely new several times over. The ECC at 125 is similar: an essential continuity, recognizable over time, yet ever-renewing.

Indeed, when I think about the future of the ECC, I often ask myself this clarifying question: What were we about when all we ever had *was* a future? In other words, what were the hopes and aspirations that gave rise to the vision, sacrifice, and commitment necessary to set this movement in motion? How does that instruct us 125 years later as we prepare for our future?

It is no trivial matter, nor a nostalgic journey. The book *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Eerdmans, 2008), which includes a chapter by Covenant pastor Kyle Small, traces how congregations and denominations tend to ossify over time. It identifies how easy it is to forget the founding life-giving missional impulses that birthed passion, devotion, and commitment, instead drifting over time toward deadening self-perpetuation and mere survival.

A key differentiating factor between groups that are ossifying and those finding vitality is this: *having a clear sense of identity and purpose on the one hand in an environment that fosters flexibility and innovation on the other*. The ECC is noted as a positive example.

Note, it is not untethered innovation. It is innovation unfolding from a clear sense of who you are and what you are called to do. Sinking the identity pole securely into the ground allows tethered adaptive energy all around it.

In the first months of this column I will be expanding on key factors of identity, character, and mission that I am convinced galvanized our energies in 1885 when all we ever had was a future, and which I am convinced must capture our hearts as we anticipate our own.

For today let me just say that at our most elemental the Evangelical Covenant Church is what you get when Pietists join together to do mission.

Pietism is the spiritual renewal movement out of which the ECC was birthed. In contrast to mere intellectual agreement with an externalized creed that could have no impact on a person's heart, it recaptured the importance of a living, deeply personal, ever-growing relationship with God. Pietists are committed to both the new and ever-deepening life in Christ. This approach is intrinsic, and indispensable, to our ongoing identity.

Often I hear people newer to the ECC say, "I've been Covenant all along—I just didn't know it." I think what they are really saying is, "I've been a Pietist all along—I just didn't know it." What resonates is our devotional approach to an orthodox faith more than the orthodoxy alone.

But we are more than simply Pietists. We are missional Pietists. That deeply personal faith calls us to be deeply engaged with the world God loves.

In 1893, shortly after our founding, the ECC was invited to present a paper about itself to religious leaders from around the world at the Parliament of World Religions. Here is how we described ourselves: "The Covenant is not a church organization in the ordinary sense, but a *mission society* having churches as its members. These churches have consolidated together because of the missionary spirit which led them to missionary enterprises too large for any single church to undertake." The framing image we used to identify ourselves was that of a mission society. A mission society is simply followers of Christ joining together to do the work of Christ in the world.

What happens when Pietists join together to do mission? It means at our essence we are always wanting to move in two directions at the same time: deeper in Christ (our pietistic side) and further in mission. In other words, we pursue Christ, and we pursue Christ's priorities in the world. John Weborg, professor emeritus of theology at North Park Theological Seminary, describes it in these simple terms: we live with God and for God. That is the simple rhythm to our faith. That is who we are at our best. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

We are missional Pietists. That deeply personal faith calls us to be deeply engaged with the world God loves.