



*Covenant Ministries
of Benevolence*



A HISTORY OF
**Covenant Ministries
of Benevolence**

Introduction

I'm seeking to give back to a denomination I owe so much.
That is my motivation.

This is not a definitive history of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence. It is a humble attempt to capture, summarize, and place in some semblance of chronology the memories and recollections of those who were there and experienced it, before we are unable to do so.

I was introduced to a life of faith in Jesus Christ as a student at North Park College in the 1980s, and by extension, introduced to the small corner of Christendom that is the Evangelical Covenant Church. I cannot fathom what my life would have been like had I not come to know Jesus Christ. From my first steps as a follower, I was steeped in the idea that no-strings-attached-service with and to the marginalized is the most essential and best expression of one's faith in Jesus Christ. Through my career as a pastor, Bible college teacher, elementary school principal, health care executive, consultant, and now in my current role with CMB, I have endeavored to live out that truth.

As a trusted colleague and friend counseled me, sometimes a specific leader gets the credit when in fact it is the culmination of the collective work of many. So, while specific leaders are mentioned and quoted in these pages, it is important to acknowledge the many volunteers who were part of the boards, retreats, and gatherings who were—in many instances—"out in front" of the leaders by way of innovative thought and courageous initiative.

Different isn't always better, but better is always different. CMB looks very different today than it did at its inception, but we continue to strive to advance the ministry of Jesus Christ through development and support services to promote life-enhancing ministries.

For God's glory, and neighbor's good.



Todd Slechta

President and CEO of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence

The Beginning

It was 1885, and tens of thousands of immigrants guided by their hopes and dreams of a “promised land” in Chicago, streamed into the bustling city. Those dreams came true for some, but many new residents were stricken with deadly diseases such as cholera, or left penniless, their spirits broken. That year a group of Swedish Pietists—who had already spent more than thirty years serving God and anyone in need—formed the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church and declared one of their top priorities was to serve the poor.

Henry Palmblad, a missionary to the city since before the denomination’s founding, successfully urged at its second Annual Meeting in 1886 that they start a Home of Mercy. Although they had few funds between themselves, the members purchased a three-acre plot of land outside the city that included a brick building and a stable on then-unpaved Foster Avenue. They paid \$5,500 plus \$2,600 for remodeling. The building served as a combination orphanage, home for the elderly, and hospital.

On June 26, 1886, the Home of Mercy was dedicated. In Karl Olsson’s history of the growing church, *By One Spirit*, he cited a firsthand account, which read, “It was a moving moment. The sick were carried out and were laid on stretchers or placed on chairs before the speaker’s rostrum. Tears welled up and sobs could be heard throughout the whole gathering, and a feeling of gratitude to God for the home prevailed in the hearts of all.”

In its 1898 report to the Annual Meeting, the home noted that 105 of the 114 patients that year could not pay for their care. Regardless, this compassionate service was extended without condition as the best expression of faith in Jesus Christ, for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.

The Covenant Church elected a Board of Benevolence to oversee the Covenant Benevolent Institution, which later became known as Covenant Ministries of Benevolence (CMB). This board started to gather the various health care ministries such as Swedish Covenant Hospital, Covenant Home, and Covenant Palms into an organization that could help manage them, using shared expertise.

The first president was Nils Axelson, who had been named president (chief executive) of Swedish Covenant Hospital at the age of 27. He and the board engaged more professional financial and management expertise across the original institutions, which led to continued growth in ministry programs and assets that make up what are now affiliates of CMB.

Axelson was known for combining Christian compassion and ethical business savvy, inspiring CMB to raise the funds to endow a chair for nonprofit management at North Park University. Later, the university’s Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management would be developed in his honor, emerging as a widely respected center seeking to instill the same core values of moral responsibility and excellent management skills that guided Axelson. Since 1992, the Axel-

son Center for Not-for-Profit Management continues to offer graduate level classes, and sponsors symposiums and workshops in the field.

That commitment has guided Covenant Ministries of Benevolence while it has provided expertise and funding to local, national, and international ministries. Its work has been critical to the denomination’s numerical growth as a multiethnic mosaic of churches while also spreading the Covenant’s core values through

both strong and financially treacherous times. Today, CMB oversees ministries reflected in a variety of healthcare services, a widely respected family of retirement communities, community homes for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a grief program serving over 600 individuals, and a public school with wraparound services for children on the autism spectrum that is considered one of the premier nonprofits in Connecticut today. 🌿



Caring for the Sick

Emanuel Medical Center and Swedish Covenant Hospital

Growth in the denomination’s benevolence ministries happened quickly. The hospital staff gained a reputation for excellence, and people came from hundreds of miles to receive care. A nursing school was established in 1898, and a separate 81-bed hospital was built on the grounds in 1903 at a cost of \$26,000. It continued to expand, and a new wing was constructed in 1928 for \$501,000 to meet the growing need as admissions soared to more than 5,000 patients annually.

“People mortgaged their homes to make Swedish Covenant Hospital happen,” noted David Dwight, a former CMB president. “Who of us today would do that? Here we are [over 135] years later, and healthcare doesn’t work that way [anymore].”

As Swedish Covenant Hospital was expanding in Chicago, the swelling number of Covenanters in Turlock, California, and the surrounding area moved to meet the needs of the sick as well, dedicating a hospital in 1917 at the height of World War I. As was

the case in Chicago, the hospital was built with the financial sacrifices and commitment of churches and individuals. They launched a nursing program in 1923 and by the end of 1927 had a patient load of about 600 people with an annual budget of roughly \$43,000.

Due to the faithful dedication and sacrifices of Covenanters, both hospitals survived the stock market crash of 1929 and went on to have successful ministries in their communities. Swedish Covenant Hospital became an identity marker for the Covenant, providing excellent care to a community as it experienced dramatic changes to become one of the most ethnically diverse zip codes in the country.

Thousands of Covenanters were born there; numerous nurses and physicians, including medical missionaries, received their instruction at the hospital; and many North Park Theological Seminary students received valuable training through its chaplaincy programs. In the mid-1960s, Swedish Covenant Hospital and then North Park College partnered to launch the

North Park School of Nursing, which enabled students to earn a four-year nursing degree. Perhaps most important, the hospital provided millions of dollars' worth of care to people who could not afford it, preserving and embodying the compassionate spirit of the Home of Mercy.

Yet the large aging baby boomer population and reduced government and insurance reimbursements eventually meant independent community hospitals could not survive. Covenant leaders knew that to preserve the mission to care for the sick, the hospitals needed to become part of larger health systems. So, in 2014, Emanuel was sold to Tenet Health-Care, and in 2020, in what turned out to be the eve of the global pandemic, Swedish Covenant Hospital became part of NorthShore University Health Systems (now Endeavor Health).

Covenant Ministries of Benevolence knew multiple health systems would be interested in purchasing the hospitals but held a firm conviction that they would sell only to those who promised to uphold the Covenant's philanthropic values, commit to pro-

viding spiritual care with chaplains, and continue to offer clinical pastoral education programs.

"We knew if we didn't do that, then delegates at the Annual Meeting would never approve the sale," said Roger Oxendale, who was CMB president during the sale of Swedish Covenant Hospital.

The sale ensured that quality medical service would remain in those local communities and millions of dollars would be made available through grants.


Proceeds from the Emanuel Medical Center transaction provided funding to establish both the Legacy Health Endowment and EMC Health Foundation. Grants from these two funds are awarded within the 19 zip codes the hospital serves, providing health education, innovative programs, and expertise to Turlock and the surrounding rural areas.

One of those ministries is Jessica's House, a support program for school-age children grieving the loss of loved ones. It is overseen by CMB through its affiliate EMC Health, which has continued to provide management and financial expertise. From its inception in a Turlock bungalow more

than 20 years ago, Jessica's House offers nine specialized peer support groups as well as a group program at various school sites in Stanislaus and Merced counties. In recent years this unique ministry raised \$6.8 million and built a permanent home in Turlock on the grounds of Cornerstone Covenant Church. It opened for groups in October 2021 and currently supports more than 800 individuals from 38 surrounding cities.

Two months after the transfer of membership of Swedish Covenant Hospital, COVID-19 began to spread across the country. Had the hospital not been sold, it likely would not have survived the pandemic in its current form, potentially creating a financial crisis for the entire denomination as it tried to meet obligations such as pension payments for employees.

Today, both Swedish Covenant Hospital and Emanuel Medical Center continue to provide the same quality services they have historically offered.

In many instances, they provide even more services along with new and innovative programs that directly benefit the most vulnerable in their communities. 

California. Some grew into what would become local Covenant Retirement Communities.

In the 1940s, Covenanters including Paul Brandel, Nils Axelson, and others developed the idea to offer a continuum of care, from independent living to comprehensive care, to meet the changing needs of aging adults. It was the foundational idea for launching



Caring for Seniors

Covenant Living Communities and Services

In the spirit of the Home of Mercy, local churches and conferences developed homes across the country dedicated to giving care to seniors in places such as Bronx, New York; Stromsburg, Nebraska; and Tujunga,



Covenant Palms in Miami, Florida, in 1951, a prototype community that started with eight duplex cottages. This expanded concept of senior living served as the blueprint for expansion in the following decades.

Over the years, increasingly comprehensive regulations and the need for professional management progressed beyond what local ministries and conferences could address. So, in the 1970s at the request of regional conferences, responsibilities for many of the local communities were transferred to the national Board of Benevolence. The operation remained largely decentralized, with each location having its own board and practices.

In the 1970s and 1980s, nationwide financial upheaval that included high inflation and interest rates put many of the communities at significant risk. “I remember the bookkeeper standing at my door and saying we might not make payroll this week,” recalled David Dwight, executive director of the Northbrook Retirement Community at the time. “And so, I would call Nils Axelson (then president of Covenant Benevolent Institutions, the forerunner of CMB), and he would be on the phone in the afternoon to check to see how much revenue had come in. The situation was precarious.”

It became clear that a new structure was needed. The retirement communities around the country morphed from a loosely knit group of 14 organizations in six states to one national organization, first as a management committee under the Board of Benevolence and then incorporated as

Covenant Retirement Communities in 1986. Paul Peterson, who was appointed president, led efforts to formalize policies, standardize business operations, and implement new technologies.

This trajectory yielded new long-range strategies, and Covenant Retirement Communities became one of the top performing nonprofit, retirement residential organizations in the country. In 1989 it was the first such organization to be accredited by the Continuing Care Commission of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging for its innovative continuum of care.

To reflect its emphasis on wellness and fullness of life, Covenant Retirement Communities changed its name to Covenant Living Communities and Services in 2019 and continues to be recognized for excellence. In recent years it has expanded the number of campuses and now serves more than 5,700 people in twenty-two communities in ten states. The thread of benevolence was given further expression in the 1990s when the Board of Covenant Living established a policy that a significant percentage of undesignated estate bequests would go into an endowment fund to provide support for residents who had outlived their financial resources. These funds—and other sources, including individual donors—have helped accommodate Covenant clergy and global personnel who desired to live in a Covenant Living facility. 🌿



Caring for the Orphaned

Covenant Initiatives for Care

Just as CMB serves seniors through Covenant Living Communities and Services, it also has provided expertise and strategic intervention funding through Covenant Initiatives for Care to help ministries that serve vulnerable people. These ministries continue to draw their inspiration from the values embedded in the Home of Mercy and now include residential programs serving children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a public school with wraparound services serving children on the autism spectrum, and resources and expertise for developing community-based efforts to serve at-risk children.

Princeton Children's Home

Presently Covenant Children's Ministries

In 1917, a group of Covenanters from the Central Conference raised \$3,316 in Princeton, Illinois, with a dream to build what would open four years later as the Princeton Children's Home. At its peak in the late 1990s the children's home employed nearly 200 people on the campus and had an annual budget of \$5 million with an eighty-year history of ministry. At that point, Covenant Children's Home had provided care for more than 1,700 children.

As the state of Illinois shifted its philosophy—and funding—from supporting on-site residential programs to more community-based models, the board of directors voted to discontinue the residential program, and the



remaining children moved out of the home in 2000. The ministry continued as the renamed Covenant Children's Ministries, providing several grant initiatives that benefit at-risk children and their families.

In 2021, the Board decided to parcel the property, selling significant portions to nonprofits that had previously rented space at the site. These organizations include Freedom House, a domestic violence shelter, and Braveheart, an accredited member of the National Children's Alliance whose mission is to strengthen community response to child abuse. In the spirit of the original mission of Princeton Children's Home, these programs

continue to serve at-risk children in Princeton and other communities.

Over the years Covenant Children's Ministries has granted more than \$4 million to a broad spectrum of Covenant churches and organizations who provided various programs and services to at-risk children, youth, and families. Legacy grants continue in the form of scholarships for at-risk children and youth to attend Covenant camps, North Park University, and Alaska Christian College, as well as grants that benefit various Serve Globally partnerships and initiatives such as Covenant World Relief and Development, Paul Carlson Partnership, and Covenant Kids Congo.



programs to more community-based models, the entire ministry nearly collapsed.

"We were literally months from closing our doors," recalls Dwight. "We gave ourselves three months to figure out whether we had a future." Gary Mullaney, president of the children's home at the time, had a vision for serving young adults and others with autism. His extensive experience with governmental agencies and services in the state of Connecticut proved to be crucial in revising the ministry. Through his unique understanding, knowledge, and strategic relationships, he was able to cast a new vision and mission that resulted in the ministry's resurgence.

Today, Ädelbrook is one of the largest nonprofit human service

organizations in Connecticut, with 20 locations throughout the state and more than 600 dedicated staff serving over 350 children with complex developmental and behavioral needs. Programs include four special education schools, group homes, a residential treatment center, and home and community-based services. In 2023 a respite home was added, which provides short-term care for children with special needs, allowing their primary care givers—typically parents or guardians—time for personal relief and restoration. School districts throughout the country have turned to Ädelbrook for consultation as they seek to expand or implement similar programs.

"It's mind-boggling what they've been able to do," says Dwight.

The Swedish Christian Orphanage

Presently Ädelbrook Behavioral and Developmental Services

Ädelbrook Behavioral and Developmental Services in Cromwell, Connecticut, is now one of the premier ministries in the country serving young people with autism, but in 2010 it came close to closing.

It would have been the end of a ministry that started as the Swedish Covenant Orphanage in 1900, later known as Covenant Children's Home of Cromwell. The fledgling denomination had started the ministry to "provide a home for homeless and neglected children...and provide not only for the physical needs of a child,

but that the Word of God be taught... so that each child may discover the joy and security of a Christian faith." Several farmers donated land for the current location in 1915 so that the ministry could expand. A three-and-a-half story home was built, and seventy-two children plus staff moved in that same year.

It continued to expand and offered numerous treatment programs, and with that growth came a need for increasingly complex expertise. As a result, the East Coast Conference of the Covenant, which had operated the ministry, transferred it to Covenant Ministries of Benevolence in 2000. New programs to help local school district expansions continued, but when the state decided to move from supporting on-site residential





Covenant Ability Network

Formerly Covenant Enabling Residences

In 1995, Covenant Women ministries recognized a desperate need to develop permanent group residences for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and, in the spirit of the early Covenanters who founded the Home of Mercy, started Bjorklund House in Oak Park, Illinois. They also opened another home in Duluth, Minnesota. When deeper expertise was required to navigate the state and federal regulations as well as funding sources, the ministry was transferred to Covenant Ministries of Benevolence in 1998. Under its guidance, the number of homes has grown to 18 in Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota, comprising what is now known as the Covenant Ability Network.

Several of the homes enjoy a unique partnership with local congregations, and others are located on property adjacent to Covenant Living communities. The residences can be the life-long homes for young adults as they mature, living as independently as possible in a community setting while receiving individual attention.

The homes have developed solid reputations to the point that several years ago, a county in Minnesota

asked Covenant Ability Network of Minnesota (CANMN) to take over the operations of a home in which residents had been mistreated.

“The staff essentially rescued the men,” says Ron Dixon, who was vice president of Covenant Initiatives for Care at the time. “The three men were living in horrible conditions, eye hook locks on bedrooms. It was dirty, old, and institutional. The employees drove the people they served around in a ‘caged van,’ which was the term the previous company used when transporting folks.” The residents initially lashed out at CANMN staff and property. However, Executive Director Dana Norton recalls, “They were testing us.” Today, the same men are known for their kindness, after being treated with respect by people determined to show love.

“Of all my years of working with CMB, among the things I am most proud of is Covenant Ability Network,” says Larry Anderson, former executive vice president of finance. “What they do is so needed and there still is such a need.”

Covenant Ability Network is constantly investigating opportunities to provide additional residences that can be operated in a financially stable setting. Whenever the possibility of opening another home is announced, the number of potential applicants exceed any possible wait list. 🙌

Disproportionate Impact

“The Evangelical Covenant Church has a footprint that is disproportionate to its relatively small size,” observes Todd Slechta, current president and CEO of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence. As the history of the Home of Mercy demonstrates, many compassion and mercy ministries were started among local churches and groups of Covenanters who dedicated their time, effort, and finances. Eventually, these efforts grew increasingly more complex, requiring state and federal funding along with expert compliance and oversight. These multi-million-dollar ministries with national reach eventually came to be operat-

ed under the corporation Covenant Benevolent Institutions, which served as a holding company. As is often the story, as those ministries grew to a large, national scale, the connection to local churches and the denomination waned.

That began to change in 1987 and the early 1990s with a series of meetings and decisions that would forever change the course of the Covenant, beginning as a concerted effort to help the ministries of urban churches and eventually encompassing social justice efforts and increasing the number of ethnic and multiethnic congregations. Covenant Ministries of Benevolence would play a crucial role in this transformation.

FROM INSTITUTION TO MINISTRY BEYOND

Love Mercy Do Justice

The Urban Ministries Coalition, which was the precursor to the Urban Commission, had been pushing for more focus on cities when CMB brought close to 60 people together in 1992 for the Consultation on the Cities, held in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The meeting included speakers such as Ray Bakke, a widely respected urban missiologist, and numerous proposals.

“I think a lot of our recent history of planting and developing churches in urban areas traces back to that meeting,”

says Mark Olson, who was chair of the Board of Benevolence at the time. Rollie Carlson, who was elected president of the Board of Benevolence in June 1992, was determined that CMB should take the lead in funding initial efforts as the denomination sought to identify, coalesce, and navigate the emerging emphasis on compassion, mercy, and justice min-



istries. At the time, the market was strong and investment returns were exceeding expectations, so Board of Benevolence Director Dick Sundholm suggested that monies be set aside for the work.

In November 1994, Don Miller, a member of Faith Covenant Church in Colorado Springs and vice president of Compassion International, facilitated a two-day retreat in Chicago with several administrators and members of the Board of Benevolence. One result of the retreat was to propose changing the name of Covenant Benevolent Institutions to Covenant Ministries of Benevolence, along with the formal expansion of the scope of CMB responsibilities to include leadership, guidance, and coordination of the development of benevolent ministries throughout the Covenant. The 1995 Annual Meeting approved both proposals.

“The name change was crucial because it broadened the focus from being solely on the institutions to include ministries by local churches across the Covenant,” says Olson. “This reconceiving of CMB to work with churches—envisioning churches doing more things in their communities—wouldn’t have happened without the name change. Coupled with the new responsibilities, this eventually led to the creation of the Office

of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice.”

The word “justice” also highlighted a new emphasis. Early Covenant ministries focused on compassion and mercy. However, over the years, Covenanters had increasingly become mindful of the need to engage in justice work as well.

Under Carlson’s leadership, funding was secured to assist conference



initiatives that started a micro-business in Gary, Indiana, and included a \$500,000 grant that was leveraged to purchase a funeral home in Detroit, Michigan to launch Covenant Community Care (CCC) under the leadership of Rev. Bob Hoey and with the financial acumen of Covenant lay leader Kim Carlson. Today CCC is a thriving Federally Qualified Health Center providing medical, dental, and other health related services free of charge to more than 20,000 Detroit area residents each year.

“It is my conviction that of the three—mercy, compassion, and

justice—justice is the foundational virtue,” John Weborg, then-professor of theology at North Park Theological Seminary, told a CMB gathering in 1996. “Mercy and compassion are intrinsic to life. But they deal with immediate problems. Mercy and compassion in my mind, have more to do with charity to persons in distress; justice has more to do with systemic and structural grievances that require

exposure and redress. Justice deals particularly with the long-term problems that have become institutionalized and are always accepted as a matter of course until finally somebody’s rage erupts and asks, ‘Has it always been this way?’”

CHURCHES PLANTING MINISTRIES

The Covenant Mosaic

Another significant initiative began when Covenant Ministries of Benevolence partnered with the denomination’s Department of Church Growth and Evangelism to launch the Churches Planting Churches campaign. “The intent was for us to offer matching grants for churches to do community development projects for five years,” recalls Harold Spooner, who held multiple leadership posi-

tions during his tenure within CMB. “We wound up doing it for ten. That helped develop a lot of churches.”

In the early 1990s the Covenant was largely a white denomination, but leaders were convicted that the church had to become more multi-ethnic, which meant not only planting more churches or starting additional ministries, but also listening more and being proactive.

A significant step occurred when Spooner was hired as the first African American executive in the denomination. “I had spent a good part of my life in the white evangelical world becoming increasingly frustrated and wondering, ‘What is the point?’” he says. He first learned of the Covenant when African American friends suggested he take the new position of assistant director of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice. “I knew the Covenant was



going to be focusing on issues of race and class, and there really weren't any other evangelical denominations doing that," Spooner recalls.

Jim Lundeen, who was executive director of CMJ, believed it was important to have a person of color leading the Covenant's justice ministries. In 1998, he switched positions with Spooner.

"It was the right thing to do although nobody expected it," Lundeen recalls.

Paul Larsen, president of the denomination, suggested at a 1997 Midwinter Conference planning meeting that "Celebrating Ethnic Diversity" be the theme of the 1998 annual gathering of Covenant ministers.

"It was one of those moments when you look around the table, and people had to hold in their laughs," recalls Spooner.

"We might have been lucky to have ten percent diversity, even with African American, Korean, Alaskan, and Hispanic churches combined."

Despite the initially incredulous response, Larsen was determined to proceed. Covenant minister Don Davenport, who was head of what was then the Ethnic Commission, said that if Larsen were serious, the theme needed to expand over two years. Others agreed, and Spooner volunteered the office of CMJ to spearhead the effort. As a result, CMJ guided the effort to develop curriculum that was used throughout the 1998 Midwinter Conference.



Sankofa Journey

The Covenant's first Sankofa trip occurred at the conclusion of the 1999 Midwinter Conference. The experience was called "Sankofa," a word from the Akan tribe in Ghana, meaning san (to return), ko (to go) fa (to fetch, seek, and take). Sankofa attests that we must look backward (into our history) before we can faithfully move forward together in the present and into the future.

A forerunner of the trip had been held in August 1997 when Lundeen led a cross-racial bus trip to attend

a Promise Keepers conference. "We didn't call it Sankofa, but it was intense," Spooner says. "We were showing videos, having discussions." The following year, Lundeen, Spooner, and Covenant minister Jim Sundholm attended a meeting of the Christian Community Development Association in Birmingham, Alabama, where the theme was Sankofa. The gathering visited civil rights sites in the city. Afterward, Sundholm suggested to his Covenant colleagues that they reprise their earlier bus trip and travel to civil rights sites throughout the South.

Debbie Blue, who was working in the Department of Christian Formation,

was asked to help develop a curriculum that would inspire participants to practice solidarity in accountable relationships as well as empower them to become ambassadors for reconciliation inside and outside the church.

Covenant Ministries of Benevolence funded the initial project, which has since been replicated by other denominations and organizations and is now led by the Covenant's Love Mercy Do Justice team. From those beginnings, the Sankofa Journey has become a sacred pilgrimage laying the foundation for the spiritual practices of remembrance, confession, lament, and repentance.



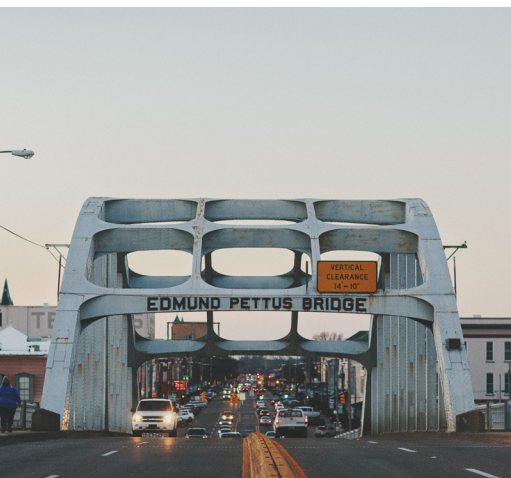
The Six-Fold Test for Multiethnic Ministry

But more than celebrating diversity and learning to understand one another was needed if the Covenant were to act justly. During the late 1990s, Gary Walter, executive director of the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism, launched an initia-



tive of churches-planting-churches in which one or more congregations would help launch another. Walter and

other leaders were committed to prioritizing the planting of ethnic and multiethnic churches, underscoring the importance of the denomination reflecting the kingdom of God in which all walls had been broken down. In 2004, Walter worked with Harold Spooner, who represented CMB, and the Ethnic Commission to develop The Five-Fold Test for guiding



the Covenant in its whole mission, not just planting congregations, which asked the following questions:

1. Population: Is the Covenant reaching increasing numbers of people among increasing numbers of populations?
2. Participation: Are we finding ways to engage life together through denominational, conference, and local events, service, and fellowship?
3. Power: Are the positions and structures of influence (boards, committees, and positions at both the conference and denominational level) influenced by the perspective and gifts of diverse populations?
4. Pacesetting: With additional perspectives, burdens, and gifts in our midst, what new ministry opportunities is the Evangelical Covenant Church now better positioned to strengthen and initiate?

5. Purposeful Narrative: How do the stories of new backgrounds become incorporated into our overarching history? How do all these streams flow together into one story moving forward?

Covenant Ministries of Benevolence sponsored a summit that included every top-level Covenant leader and prominent clergy member of color. The gathering created goals around each “P,” as well as plans for reaching them. “It was a highly significant event,” Spooner says.

In 2019, a sixth “P” was added under the leadership of President John Wenrich:

6. Practicing Solidarity: In what ways are we standing with and advocating for the multiethnic mosaic? How are we sharing in the suffering of others on both an individual and communal level?



sisters. Her mother died at the birth of her last one. Her father was an alcoholic and abusive. He was banned from the county. The Covenant pastor in a little church in Aurora, Nebraska, said, ‘We are going to care for these girls.’ And I saw my mom, whenever she could, send \$35 a month to the Covenant—and \$35 to Billy Graham—and she told people, ‘They saved my life.’”

Palmberg’s understanding of Scripture was foundational in his pursuit of forming the new department. “There’s as much said in the Bible about compassion, mercy, and justice—if not more—as there is evangelism, and those two ought not be separated,” he says. “The goal was to put the Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice on par with Church Growth and Evangelism. The Covenant has always valued that ministry, but making it a department placed it up front.”

There were obstacles, however. Some expressed suspicion about what was meant by “justice.” People were concerned that the Covenant was placing more emphasis on a “social gospel” than on bringing people to Christ. Others saw no reason to add the expense of a new department to the general budget. Ultimately in 2007, the Annual Meeting voted to approve the bylaw changes necessary to move forward. Following the vote, a sustained standing ovation pointedly expressed the broad and enthusiastic support the proposal had inspired. Debbie Blue was elected to be the first executive director of the new Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice the following year. Upon her election, she asked for input on direction for the department, which led the Covenant to write its second resource paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice.” She explains, “I needed something to pro-



Love Mercy Do Justice

As its impact expanded, so did the number of people who advocated making Compassion, Mercy, and Justice its own full-fledged denominational department. Some early leaders such as Lundeen had advocated for that from the beginning. “The Bible talks about justice more than it does evangelism,” Lundeen reasoned. “If it’s as important as evangelism, then it should be its own department.”

Glenn Palmberg, superintendent of the Pacific Northwest Conference, initially intended to decline an invitation to be nominated for president in 1998, but he changed his mind when he saw the possibility of making Compassion, Mercy, and Justice a full department. His own family experience helped motivate Palmberg, a story he shared at a Midwinter Conference with great impact.

“My mother lived in horrible poverty,” Palmberg recalled. “There were nine

vide the guide rails, spelling out what our philosophy is.”

The paper drew on Scripture as well as Covenant history. It defined justice, as “Joining God in making things right. Justice is the work of God confronting and overcoming evil and sin, both individually and systemically in our world.” The spirit behind the founding of the Home of Mercy, the growth of hospitals, retirement communities, and the growth of multiethnic ministries all reflected the denomination’s commitment to serving people on the margins.

One of Blue’s first priorities was engaging the issue of mass incarceration, the result of an unjust justice system that disproportionately punishes people of color. Local churches took a year to discuss a resolution on the difficult topic.

“It was a very painful conversation,” Blue reflected. “Yet I rejoiced in that because it was bringing out where we entered into the conversation. We took a draft, gave it to the church, and provided resources. The churches did the work, and the conversation changed how the Covenant understood the issue.”

“One of Debbie’s biggest contributions was to build trust,” says Gary Walter. “She worked hard at being a trusted leader.”

During his presidency Walter led the church in an effort he called Organizing for Mission. Department names

were changed, and the Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice became the Love Mercy Do Justice mission priority. As part of the process, a new mission statement was crafted for the Covenant: “We join God in God’s mission to see more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world.”

“It was very important that ‘just world’ be part of that statement,” said Walter. “Evangelism, discipleship, compassion, mercy, and justice are all part of a whole.”



The ministry continued to expand under the guidance of Cecilia Williams and Paul Robinson, who succeeded Blue. It continues to shepherd the Covenant’s national disaster relief efforts; operates immersive experiences, including Sankofa, Journey to Mosaic, Indigenous, and immigration learning experiences; and provides resources to help churches confront domestic violence. Additionally, they enhance intercultural development through training, coaching, leadership development, assessments, curriculum, and practical tools. 🌿



International Work

Paul Carlson Partnership

For nearly 60 years, Paul Carlson Partnership (initially Paul Carlson Medical Program) has provided holistic assistance to the people in the northwest region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Named for Covenant martyr Dr. Paul Carlson, PCP has trained medical workers, provided funding for hospitals and clinics, and helped expand economic opportunities.

The ministry started in 1965, one year after Carlson was killed. In the 1990s war in the region necessitated a pause in their work. By 2000, PCP became a 501c3 affiliate of the Evangelical Covenant Church. During his tenure as president, Glenn Palmberg shared the story of how, following some flooding in his basement, he came upon a previously unopened box of items from his mother, which contained a copy of the December 4, 1964, Life Magazine with Dr. Paul Carlson on the cover. Recalling again how the Covenant had helped his mother and sisters, along with

recalling the images of children in the Congo in need, Palmberg endeavored to re-invigorate the ministry. Several million dollars were raised, including a \$1 million gift from Swedish Covenant Hospital.

Today, Paul Carlson Partnership partners with the Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM) in medical, infrastructure, and economic development. The CEUM sets the ministry context through evangelism, discipleship, pastor training, and chaplaincies, carried out through over 2,100 local churches with more than 2 million in attendance and serving a population of over 6 million. With five hospitals, more than 120 clinics, new bridges providing access to health care, education, commerce and worship, and economic development through Karawa Coffee growing and export, the CEUM and Paul Carlson Partnership create solutions that endure over time and throughout generations. 🌿



Conclusion: The Arc of the Home of Mercy

“From its inception, the Covenant has sought to live out the words of Pietist theologian August Hermann Francke to promote ‘God’s glory, neighbor’s good,’” says Slechta. “Francke was echoing the call of Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We have not done it perfectly, but it has been our goal and always will be. That is why the early Covenanters opened the Home of Mercy in 1886 and why we continue to serve the marginalized.”

In 1886 those Pietists never could have foreseen how their collective, responsive heart of service to the sick, the elderly, and the orphan would unfold over the decades. They never could have envisioned a trajec-

tory that would, at its peak, include two medical hospitals (now part of health systems reaching tens of thousands of patients), a multi-state, missional organization offering a continuum of care for the elderly serving more than 5,700 residents, and ministries providing specialized services to children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities across the country.

While the services of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence now encompass the administration of legacy investments and risk assessment and mitigation efforts, the arc of the Home of Mercy continues through the work of its affiliates EMC Health Foundation, Covenant Living and Community Services, Ädelbrook Behavioral and Developmental Services, and Covenant Ability Network—all for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.

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*Covenant Ministries
of Benevolence*