



Simple Rhythms: Pursuing Christ's Priorities

The Big Bang Theory postulates that the expanding marvels of the universe emanate from a single dense matter. I am not promoting the Big Bang Theory, but if you will grant me the privilege of analogy, in these first few columns I am seeking to capture the original potent nature of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) as concisely as possible. Over the next months we will find the rich matter that set this movement in motion 125 years ago provides our expansive energy today, and can propel us into the considerable promise of our future.

The ECC is what you get when Pietists join together to do mission. We are missional Pietists. Pietism, the renewal movement from which we emerged, emphasized a deeply personal approach to faith—a commitment to the new and ever-deepening life in Christ. Missional means that we join together to live not just with God, but for God as well. And so, as missional Pietists, our simple rhythm is to pursue Christ and to pursue Christ's priorities; to go deeper in Christ and further in mission. Today we add the tenaciously held value of being *in it together*. We are missional Pietists, in it together.

The choice of the name Covenant was not made in connection to our covenant with God, as important as that might be. No, "Covenant" describes our relationship to each other. A covenant is an agreement, a mutual commitment. The spirit of the name Covenant can be paraphrased as "in it together." And what is the "it"? Our first name, the evangel, the entirety of our life in Christ. Our very name points us to a connective spirit central to our identity. We place a uniquely high value on living this life and mission in partnership, graciousness, and friendship. Indeed, the early nickname for our movement was "Mission Friends," friends in Christ joining together to do the work of Christ.

Timothy L. Johnson, associate professor of ministry at North Park Theological Seminary, has written on the instructive nature of the image of Mission Friends. He says in part, "Mission Friends is a name that offers a balanced, healthy corrective against being either missionless friends or an unfriendly mission people. This befriending mission is critical for our culture. In a world where estrangement and loneliness

thrive and fierce convictions are flaunted without concern for even basic civility, the coupling of these two wonderful words lavish us with rich material for contemplating, clarifying, and celebrating who we are."

Did you ever wonder why we chose the name the Evangelical Covenant *Church*, not the *Churches* of the Evangelical Covenant? We purposefully chose the single, more organic name. It intentionally invokes Paul's teaching on the living body of Christ—made up of many parts, yes, but never standing apart from one another. "Churches" has an organizational implication of retaining separateness; "Church" as a living organism has the implication of essential oneness, unity, and even order. Indeed, we are by polity actually a "single congregation of 800 members," with the members being each of our churches.

So, to frame what an "in it together" connection within the ECC can look like for your church, think of your church's membership to the ECC in the same way you would like your members to engage your own congregation.

There are at least four healthy habits we all value when it comes to people taking church membership seriously. We value their 1) concerted prayers, 2) regular and engaged attendance, 3) service to advance mission and ministry, and 4) commitment to financial support.

Take to heart those same dimensions in reflecting on your congregation's membership in the ECC. Ask yourself: 1) Do we pray faithfully for the ECC? 2) Are we faithfully present when the church gathers? 3) How are we as a congregation finding a greater role in the collective mission and ministry of the ECC? 4) Are we modeling the kind of generous (even sacrificial) giving as a member of the ECC that we hope for and expect from our own members? As you answer those questions thoughtfully and prayerfully, you embody the "in it together" character that is so important to our common life. Then apply those same standards to your relationship with your regional conference.

Our founders understood the importance of being good and strong friends in mission. It is no less important today. I hope to see you in June as we gather for the 125th time as Mission Friends. ■

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