



Others for the Journey

One of God's great gifts is others for the journey. One fundamental lesson from the Apostle Paul's imagery of the body of Christ is this: we are better together. Interdependence is the biblical pattern that leads to the flourishing and encouragement of all. On our own we are less than we can be; together we find our encouragement, strength, and resource to walk in greater faithfulness and fruitfulness.

Indeed, among the clergy of the Evangelical Covenant Church we use a cautionary phrase: isolation kills. Nothing good ever happens when we separate ourselves from encouragement and accountability. It is true not just for clergy but for every follower of Christ, our own congregation's connection with others, and even for us as a denomination. We are at our best when we are connected to others who both speak truth and spark vision into our lives, and vice-versa.

One example of how our mission is amplified through connection to others came in the aftermath of the catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. Connections through missionary Jim Gustafson led to a partnership with the Sustainable Development Research Foundation (SDRF) in the devastated coastal area of southern Thailand. There, ostracized victims with AIDS became known to SDRF President Nujon Singpila. She and Jim befriended two women who were crying out for help. They cared for their needs, and shared the good news of God's grace in Christ with them. One woman died, but not before receiving the gift of eternal hope and peace in Christ by faith. The second woman, Srinuan, embraced the good news as well and began to form small communities of advocacy and care for those who had experienced similar rejection. Today nine large care groups of HIV/AIDS survivors are supporting one another under Srinuan's leadership and the support of Nujon, Jim, and the SDRF. These communities of care and blessing have developed micro-enterprise projects to support their needs, and more than 200 were baptized as new followers of Christ last year. We are part of that story, and our mission is stronger because of the compassionate people God brings across our path.

It then becomes incumbent upon us to be generous in turn with what we learn along the way.

We're doing that in a fresh movement of church planting across Europe.

One of our historic connections has been with the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, an international fellowship of Protestant groups that share a similar historical background. All were formed apart from government-sanctioned religion (*free* meaning "free from government sponsorship"). In our case, our deeper history emerged as a renewal movement in Sweden where Lutheranism was the state-sponsored religion. The Covenant has a long history of participation and leadership in the federation.

Europe has long been a post-Christian region of the world with church attendance of less than 3 percent in almost every nation. Many of the IFFEC groups have been struggling and focused on surviving, let alone advancing.

Just a few years ago, IFFEC hosted "Joining Hands Across Europe," an event to encourage church planting and congregational vitality. The Covenant Church shared its recommitment to church planting as a missional strategy.

This spring IFFEC hosted a follow-up event attended by 120 people from twenty-two countries. This time the conference heard from nation after nation—Switzerland, France, Sweden, Poland, Bulgaria, and more—about great progress in planting new churches. There is a quiet explosion of missional advance in Europe, and the faithfulness of Covenant people to support church planting in North America is now having a major impact in church planting there. There is clearly a new wind of the Holy Spirit blowing through Europe. We have the privilege of being a part of it because of the partnership we share.

Covenant pastor Ray Johnston has said the wonder of the body of Christ is that one plus one can equal 10,000. In other words, when people come together with a common passion and energy, amazing things can happen that never could have been accomplished by remaining alone. At our core we are people who covenant together to align our hearts and energies in pursuing Christ and Christ's priorities in the world. What a gift it is indeed to be given others for the journey. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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