



## Marks of a Denomination

At a recent gathering of leaders from several denominations, I was asked to talk on “what makes a denomination a denomination.” In other words, if you dropped an ounce of denomination into a spectrometer, what chemical ingredients would be revealed?

I proposed this: beliefs that we hold, mission that we share, and relationships that we value.

An interesting discussion ensued. Conceptually, there was near unanimous agreement with those three markers as we talked them through. Pragmatically, people began to identify that one or another of the variables had either been the predominant founding value for their denomination, or had become the current distinguishing characteristic.

Some saw themselves as principally a doctrinal movement, wishing there was more commitment to common ministry and relationships. Others identified their strength as relationships, especially if it was a movement principally identified with a particular cultural or ethnic community; however, they were observing that doctrinally people had become less theologically grounded and biblically literate. Others saw mission as the unifying center, but were finding that a waning of relationships was resulting in a gradual but notable erosion of support over time. Others saw doctrinal drift as having had a deleterious effect on relationships and mission. In other words, there was agreement that all three dimensions really do matter.

Vitality is found in the interplay of all three aspects. And so it will be for the Covenant as well. As all three are nurtured and deepened, so will be our collective identity and impact.

So, let me give you a three-part test. Part one is beliefs that we hold. Name the six Covenant affirmations. They are: the centrality of the word of God; the necessity of the new birth; a commitment to the whole mission of the church; the church as a fellowship of believers; a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit; and the reality of freedom in Christ.

Our formal confession of faith is brief. It states simply, “The Evangelical Covenant Church confesses that the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the word of God and the

only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” By this, we are essentially saying that the Bible itself is our creed.

These six affirmations in turn articulate particularly formative biblical truths and principles for our shared life and mission. In so doing, they provide a gravitational center for the Covenant, a sure point around which our life revolves.

Part two is the mission that we share. Name our five mission priorities. Maybe you are inclined to answer by our departmental structure, such as church growth and evangelism or world mission. We are moving away from talking about our structure in order to focus on the priorities that we pursue. In so doing, we name the five this way: start and strengthen churches; make and deepen disciples; develop leaders; love mercy, do justice; and serve globally (pursuing those same priorities in an international context).

These five help us maintain focus and frame initiatives that touch real lives in real places, including your congregation. The early nickname for Covenant people was Mission Friends. Those early immigrants had so little, yet gave so much to join with each other to make a difference. Now it is our turn to live into their sacrifice and generosity to do the same.

Part three is relationships that we value. Among a host of right options, list at least three settings where relationships are made and deepened. See if your answers match up with any of these: Midwinter Conference, Covenant Annual Meeting; your regional conference annual meeting; camps and retreats; CHIC (denominational conference for youth); Triennial (denominational conference for women); North Park University; North Park Theological Seminary; Centro Hispano Estudios Teológicos (CHET, our Spanish-language training institute); mission trips; Sankofa and Journey to Mosaic multiethnic trips; pulpit exchanges; clergy clusters; and regional missionary itineration events.

Common resources also deepen our common life. Things like the *Companion*, hymnal, *Book of Worship* (which contains service outlines for

Those early immigrants had so little, yet gave so much to join with each other to make a difference. Now it is our turn...

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.