

PONDERING THE FUTURE

An interview with President
Glenn R. Palmberg

When he sits quietly in his office and contemplates what the Evangelical Covenant Church could look like ten or twenty years from now, President Glenn R. Palmberg sees a church that has broadly enlarged its ministry vision and has warmly embraced the needs of others who are growing up in an increasingly secularized culture.

The needs of others—both spiritual and material—are never far from the forefront of his thinking. Since first being elected in 1998, Palmberg has stressed the importance of the great commandment and the great commission—compassionate outreach and evangelism—as vital to the life and ministry of the Covenant Church.

During a recent interview, Palmberg discussed a number of concerns and opportunities facing the church, all connected in some way to that broader sense of passion he reflects for seeking the lost and helping the hurting.

“One of my concerns is that we have an even more secular culture, I mean, a growing number of totally unchurched individuals,” Palmberg says. “The Christian Church faces a challenge to impact this secular culture for Christ. I believe all of us [denominations] are losing ground [in trying to reach this newer generation], so there is a sense of urgency.

“We must realize that a larger segment of this younger, emerging generation is growing up without personal ties to faith in Christ and involvement with the church. The Covenant is as well positioned as any in the evan-

gelical world to reach and attract the emerging generation. We have a solid evangelical commitment and theological openness that positions us well.”

The following are snapshots of the president’s thoughts on a number of challenges and ministry areas.

Growth

I encounter [references to] our reputation for effective church planting with great frequency within the wider Christian Church body. Today’s new church plants model the church of tomorrow—ethnically diverse, actively involved in evangelism and ministries of compassion and justice and committed to replicating themselves. We’re doing it well and we’re doing it aggressively.

A relatively new phenomenon in the Covenant is an increasing number of large congregations requiring different resources and different governance structures. One response is the newly proposed model constitution for local Covenant churches—a leadership team approach—that maintains congregational polity while addressing the dynamics of a large and growing congregation.

Outreach

The Covenant Church historically has responded very well to needs around the world. We see new opportunities for increased synergy as World Mission increasingly moves into valid [community] development opportunities as part of its outreach ministries

and as Covenant World Relief is able to come alongside to support these efforts.

The conference-driven Churches Planting Ministries effort has created structures and resources to encourage local churches to reach out beyond their own walls. It has moved beyond the vision stage—it’s happening.

Partnerships

The Covenant needs to be ever asking the question: In what ways should the Covenant interact with other church groups within the larger Christian body? The Covenant has some history in this respect, including our involvement in the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches and the U.S. Church Leaders group, which was organized and convened by Covenant president Milton Engebretson. We are recognized as an evangelical church body that is not closed to the wider church. We need to take seriously God’s call in that we are a voice that has something to say to the wider church—and we have a responsibility to say it.

Leadership

It is a privilege to interact with the quality of leadership and people with whom I work. It is inspiring to see the way God continues to call gifted people into service. One important opportunity for leadership development is the women in ministry initiative. The Commission on Biblical Gender Equality is developing new resources for local churches as they seek to empower all

of their members in ministry.

My sense of optimism for the future also is based in part on the incredible growth and changes at North Park Theological Seminary. We are attracting and training tomorrow's church leaders. The passion, quality, and commitment to Christ found among the many godly people called to ministry is very encouraging—the seminary is now able to supply four to five times as many leaders to serve these emerging churches as in the past.

Support

Year after year we continue to be rated among the best-supported denominations, both in terms of financial giving and in the talent that volunteers bring to the boards and commissions at conference and denominational levels. What a privilege it is to be able to dream and to help advance the church because the resources are there to do it. When presented with a need and the opportunities to respond, this denomination responds.

Relationships

Maintaining relationships and the sense of being firmly connected are struggles for every denomination challenged by growth. I was recently with the leader of a much larger denomination who estimates that 70 percent of the people in his church do not know they belong to something bigger than their local church. Being smaller, I believe we remain better connected. One reason why we stay better connected is the creative way we have incorporated new technology in our communications structure. As I travel and speak, during the question-and-answer period I am impressed by the frequency of comments that begin with, "I saw on the Covenant website . . ." [The website currently averages 7,000 pages accessed daily.] We are doing a good job of taking advantage of new technological opportunities.



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Paul Carlson

In 2004, we will celebrate the life and ministry of Paul Carlson, a Covenant medical missionary and martyr [killed in the Congo in 1964] who represents all of those who have invested their lives in worldwide ministry. People who give of themselves in such an incredible manner should not be forgotten by the church they so faithfully served. It is important for people new to the Covenant to know of Paul and all that he represents. We all need to be mindful of the price paid by those who went before. It also is important for young people to be influenced by and inspired by these stories as they consider their life direction.

The needs that Paul Carlson sought to address are just as urgent today in all parts of the world where God calls us as a church and as individuals to serve. We are developing a relationship with an international medical group to

send volunteer Covenant medical teams into areas of vital need. Career medical missionaries like Paul may be less common today; however, we can continue to make an impact using medical teams sent out for three to four weeks at a time.

Future

The challenge to today's church leadership is to be looking ahead to where the church needs to be ten, fifteen, and twenty years from now, to position ourselves for the future. It is easy to experience success and rest in it and not be ready to move on. We have a responsibility to do things today that position our church for tomorrow, building on our sense of shared ministry and partnerships with our conferences and local churches. It is a team effort involving every segment of the Covenant. □

Donald L. Meyer is the editor of the *Companion* and executive minister of communication.