



More like Jesus

I have a brother with profound disabilities. He has the reasoning capacity of an eight-year-old, vision problems, mild cerebral palsy, and personality adjustment issues. My whole life I have watched even people of good intent awkwardly slink away when Mark comes around. He notices too.

I committed my life to following Jesus when I was in high school. As a new believer I devoured the Gospels. One thing that drew me to Jesus was knowing that Jesus would be drawn to my brother. And in fact Mark responded to the love of Jesus soon after I did. If being missional means following the heart of God into the world, it means that God will draw us also to “the last and the least” in the eyes of society.

In these first columns we have been building a concise statement of the identity, character, and mission of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). We have focused on how we are missional Pietists (identity), in it together (character), to see more disciples among more populations. Today we add the last missional marker: “in a more caring and just world.”

We see this dimension at every point in the teaching of Jesus—from the onset of his public ministry in Luke 4 where he announces that he himself is the embodiment of the grand reversals of God, all the way through Matthew 25 where the image of separating the sheep from the goats reminds us there is accountability for how we treat “the least of these.” We see it in his actions. He gives sight to a blind man, strength to the paralytic, acceptance to the despised tax collector. He cleanses the leper, heals the hemorrhaging woman, hugs the child, raises the widow’s son from the dead. We see it in the contours of his life. He was a refugee in Egypt as a child, essentially homeless as an adult, and sentenced to death for crimes he did not commit.

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The scriptural call extends beyond caring. Caring addresses the hurt; justice addresses the causes of the hurt. As Debbie Blue, head of our Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice, says, “Compassion pulls people out of the river; justice goes upstream to find out why they’re

falling in—or being pushed in—in the first place.” Compassion extends care when things go wrong in the world; justice seeks to make things right in God’s world.

This is part of our grand missional heritage. Following our founding 125 years ago, one of the very first decisions made was to purchase a big house to care for the sick, the elderly, and the orphaned. The Home of Mercy set in motion what today is two hospitals, a network of retirement communities, multiple enabling residences for adults with developmental disabilities, world relief endeavors, and human trafficking initiatives.

Walking this path isn’t always easy. But as I have watched the ECC at multiple points rise to the high aspirations of the gospel, I have seen three constants. When the cause is biblically rooted, calls out the best in us as followers of Jesus, and demonstrates life transformation, then Covenant people want to respond. And that’s how we will move forward in areas of compassion, mercy, and justice—a pathway that is thoroughly biblically rooted, that calls out the best in aspiring to follow Jesus, and that celebrates the fruit of changed lives and transformed communities.

When preaching on the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The first two who passed by asked the question, ‘If I do stop what will happen to me?’ The one who helped asked a different question: ‘If I don’t stop, what will happen to him?’” The way we will contribute to a more caring and just world is to stop and ask that same question. As we do, we will more and more imitate the Lord of this church. Miles McPherson puts it this way, “We are never more like Jesus than when we are serving and sacrificing for others.”

When you put it all together, here is the essential identity, character, and mission of the ECC: We are missional Pietists, in it together to see more disciples, among more populations, in a more caring and just world.

That is the dimensionality of the spiritual heritage that founded this movement. It is the dimensionality of our call going forward in following the heart of God into the world. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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