



The Memory That Unites Us

A LOOK AT HOW
OUR PAST CAN
PROPEL US INTO
OUR FUTURE

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Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. John 17:11b

Nearly 125 years ago this month, the Covenant Church was founded. On February 20, we commemorate this event through Founders' Day.

I know what many of you are thinking—it's Covenant heritage month, so let's trot out the North Park historian to convince us that the past is relevant. Well, that is exactly what is happening here.

But you may not get what you expect. My aim in these pages is not to praise unquestionably the Covenant's

past, but rather to discuss the nature of memory—what we remember from the past and what those memories mean. Nations, families, and denominations all create useable pasts from treasured memories that provide identity and rootedness.

Memory—divisive or unifying?

No saccharin subject, memory is treacherous ground. On one hand, memory can unite and inspire. Nations remember a storied past and call their citizens to a shared identity. Americans affirm the accomplishments of the founders,

recall Abraham Lincoln's principled defense of the constitution, tell stories of both suffering and perseverance during the Depression, and praise the "Greatest Generation" for their moral character and heroism. Such stories, told again and again, provide a shared memory that draws citizens together through space and time as family.

But memory can also divide and demonize. Recent history in the Balkans and the Middle East reveals that memory dies slowly. Combatants routinely recall events from centuries ago—sometimes 800 or 900 years—as if they happened yesterday. Past wrongs are nurtured over time, and maintaining the stories of those wounds creates deep divisions that result in suicide bombings, vicious public demonstrations, and widespread terror. Such memories do not draw humans together, but rather set us at each other's throats.

The Covenant also remembers a storied past. While violence does not accompany our disputed memories, we face the reality that stories that draw many into unity create distance for others. When a group of Covenanters gathers round the coffee table to discuss the wonders of Swedish food (meatballs with lingonberries, multiple kinds of pickled herring, rice pudding, rock-hard crackers, and potatoes prepared fifteen different ways), stories from the Old Country, or Swedish holiday practices and folkways, others quickly look for the door, feeling alienated and left out.

History, myth, memory, and tradition are intended to bring us together in common mission, not drive us apart. Covenant Pastor Oscar Backlund wrote twenty years ago, "Life points unerringly to the greatest heritage of all—the heritage of faith. Since the beginning of time, there has been a legacy of faith. It is this heritage which God, by grace through the Holy Spirit, endowed our parents, their children, and such future generations as will accept his gift, thus becoming part of his eternal family."

When we speak of Covenant heritage, we remember those who came be-

fore us to plant and grow a church—a church that adapts and grows with the people who comprise it. The memories we share today are intended to unite us together as Christian brothers and sisters whose goal is to congregate together and bring the good news of Jesus Christ to our neighborhoods and the world. While the Covenant had its origins as an ethnic denomination, there is room for more food on the table. No longer filled with just Swedish foods, our tables now contain baklava, kolacky, tacos, hummus, barbecued ribs, cheeseburgers, tofu salad, noodles, hot and sour soup, elk jerky, and spaghetti—something for, and something brought by everybody. While the table may have Swedish legs, its refinished surface and various dishes invite all to eat together, without distinction.

A shared mission

What makes that unity possible is our focus on the gospel. The Covenant was founded in late February 1885. On Thursday, February 19, delegates to the founding meeting discussed John 17 at length—searching the Scriptures to seek God's direction for their unity in faith. The experience of immigration had led Swedish immigrants to create several different Lutheran synods, mission meetings, and independent congregations—and they now set themselves about the task of coming together for a common mission. One delegate remarked, "Our union should be not only in word or tongue, but in deed and truth—we need a better knowledge of each other." Another cited John 17 as a warning against division. Separation "incites to destroying and opposing each other instead of destroying and opposing Satan's dominion." Still another remarked that this new affiliation would be "used for the furtherance of God's kingdom, the edification of God's Church and establishment in grace."

The focus these early Covenanters shared was the one Jesus Christ prayed for his disciples—and for us. It all starts with a simple commitment to

the gospel message—new life in Christ. In John 17:3, Christ remarks, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." We root ourselves here.

Among the one million plus Swedish immigrants to the United States in 1885 was a group of evangelical Lutherans who had experienced religious revival—a revival that led them to intensify their commitment to Jesus Christ and his mission in the world. These "Mission Friends" came by the thousands and gathered together in small groupings for mutual edification—to sing songs, read Scripture, pray, and

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share stories of faith. As strangers in a new land, they first met in one another's homes and then in little mission houses set aside for community gatherings and worship—and eventually built churches of their own.

With their basic reliance upon the gospel message, Mission Friends gathered to create the Covenant—a unique church that patterned itself after Scripture and focused on reaching the world with the gospel. Jesus's mission was to reconcile us to God—to point us to God through the gracious provision of life made possible by his death and resurrection. In John 17:18, Jesus prays, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Early Covenanters took this seriously and gathered together not just to protect their ethnic identity, but to make Christ known.

Wide open doors

Their avoidance of divisive sectarian-

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ism was clear. They were looking to expand not to protect their ethnic boundaries. Early Covenanters would have bristled at the term “denomination,” not wanting to be associated with a bureaucratic entity that stifled the spirit. Now known as “The Evangelical Covenant Church,” the denomination was originally called, “The Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant,” the words “Church of America” something of an afterthought. The word “Covenant” (*Forbundet*) is key here. At its founding, the Covenant was not a denomination, but a gathering of like-minded churches that covenanted together for mission.

In the process of voraciously pursuing their mission, Covenant leaders constructed a church that was to

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be “as big as the New Testament”—welcoming anyone who would confess Jesus Christ as Lord. From the very beginning, the Covenant notion of the church was *inclusive*, not *exclusive*—planted among Swedish-Americans, but designed to include all who would come and profess Jesus as Lord.

The Covenant Affirmations quote a Covenant founder, “The doors of the church are wide enough to admit all who believe and narrow enough to exclude those who do not.” The only category for membership was faith in Jesus Christ. Unity was found not through creed, confession, or ethnic brotherhood, but through the Holy Spirit who bound together all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. Today we remember our Covenant forebears, not for their ethnic identity—for the food they ate or the language they spoke—but for their desire to join together for mission and to create a church that would extend to include any believing person.

Unity was key for them, as it is key

for us today. In John 17:11, Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Just as the Father and the Son are different persons but the same essence, so are we, Christ’s church, bonded together in unity. The theme of unity dominated the organizational meetings of the Covenant in 1885 as Mission Friends discussed the parameters under which they would come together. The week of meetings included a worship service during which Pastor F. M. Johnson preached, using the text of Psalm 119:63 where David says to God, “I am a companion of all who fear you.” David’s words were Johnson’s words, and they were the words of each Covenanter to each other and to the world. They sought to be companions united in common mission.

Unity amidst disagreement

The companionship early Covenanters sought was not a shallow, least-common-denominator friendship that glossed over differences. In fact, the differences among the Mission Friends were significant. They differed about how much centralization was needed to govern church life. They argued about creeds and the confessions of the Lutheran tradition. They disagreed about whether to develop their own institutions or partner with existing American bodies. They debated views of the atonement, of baptism, of the Lord’s Supper, of the eschaton. They disagreed! But they chose to see beyond their differences and to unite together under the power of the Holy Spirit, which made possible the unity they sought. Johnson remarked that the differences were significant, but the cause of the gospel was bigger and called for freedom on non-essentials so kingdom work could be done.

The companionship they sought was displayed practically. When visitors came to town, fellow Covenanters would house them, feed them, and encourage them. These simple and humble Mission Friends gathered not around restaurant tables, but around

dining room tables in one another’s homes. There they drank coffee and shared from the heart.

Newer members of the denomination may wonder about Covenanters’ almost irrational commitment to coffee. Whenever two or three Covenanters gather together, one in the group has to brew a pot of coffee—but this is for a very important reason. When you gather for coffee, you slow down, eat a cookie, and converse with those drinking with you. My grandfather came close to making coffee an entire worldview, even a sacrament. Drinking coffee involved a ritual that I remember watching as a child. After stirring cream into his steaming cup, he would pour the coffee onto the saucer so it would cool faster. Then he would place a sugar cube between his front teeth and suck the coffee from the saucer through the sugar cube. Sometimes one cup would take multiple cubes of sugar.

One Sunday morning in church I asked my grandfather how he liked the previous week’s organ concert commemorating the rebuilding of the church’s organ. He responded, “It was great—I had two cups.” All he could remember was the fellowship time afterward. The music (and usually the sermon) was beside the point. Coffee starts with hospitality and ends with unity. I make coffee for people when they come to my office, and remember my grandfather when I do it.

Room for both old and new

While we make companionship a priority, there will be obstacles to the unity we seek. Appreciating diversity while valuing unity for the sake of the gospel becomes increasingly more difficult the more we change as a denomination. Currently, one out of every five Covenant churches is either ethnic or multiethnic, the latter being defined as containing more than 20 percent non-Anglo population. At the same time, one in three Covenanters attend churches that have been part of the denomination for less than ten years. In our new rapid growth, we continue to grow in diversity and difference.

In the midst of this process of change, many are fighting heritage wars—looking to the Covenant’s past to support a current cultural or theological frame of mind. Some Covenant traditionalists, in an effort to stave off changes in worship practice and the rejection of sacramental theology, have constructed an exclusivist Covenant heritage that alienates newer members. When others argue that the Covenant’s particular history is divisive, they convey more their own cultural location and sense of alienation than a helpful understanding of memory. Some newcomers see the old timers as cliquish exclusivists, while many longstanding members of the Covenant fear the disintegration of their own heritage. While most in the Covenant lie somewhere between the stereotyped polar extremes of “old timer” and “newcomer,” our struggle over heritage conveys these competing perspectives.

Memory, then, can be divisive, fostering separation rather than promoting unity as groups mine the past for evidence that their view is correct. We find ourselves today in the same position as those early founders, living with significant difference but looking toward unity for the sake of the gospel. And the differences are real! We are having conversations about doctrinal issues: baptism, the atonement, eschatology; we are battling the culture war, addressing topics like human sexuality, abortion, and war; we are living with growing ethnic diversity that demands changes in denominational structures and leadership.

What role does historical memory play in this current context? Many view our Swedish-American ethnic heritage as an albatross around the denomination’s neck that must be jettisoned in order for the Covenant to strike a new multicultural identity. Since the 1970s, some Covenant leaders have argued that “Swedishness” pits newcomers against “ethnic purists.” Yet such a view of the past is ultimately unhelpful. The Old Swedes planted a church of a distinct type; when we lop them off we forget who we are.

Our rooted identity is not static and confining, but dynamic and flexible. To diminish the Covenant’s ethnic past is to lose not only an identity marker, but a history that is indispensable in explaining denominational development. Covenant historian Philip Anderson has remarked, “A non-creedal, biblically based, and relationally oriented church [like the Covenant] has only its history to maintain this identity in the fresh openness of the present and future, and thus serve as a trustworthy beacon.” The Covenant past is filled with resources that help make sense of the present.

A couple of years ago, my family attended Oakdale Covenant Church—an African American congregation on Chicago’s South Side. As we entered the building (a few minutes late), the band was jamming, and Haydon, my then five-year-old son, put his hands over his ears and yelled over the music, “Daddy, the music is too loud!” We deposited the kids in the children’s activities and then went upstairs to participate in the worship service. When I retrieved Haydon after the service, my blue-eyed towhead yelled in excitement, “Daddy, we had fried chicken for our snack!” This was way better than the usual graham crackers and Dixie cup filled with water. As we talked about the experience together, he never once mentioned that the children he played with were black. He didn’t see it. We were the newcomers, and we had to adjust to a new way of doing things—and we loved it. His playmates were the children of God, whose companionship and food he enjoyed. We can learn from children who do not share our prejudices and fears, but who, when confronted with something new, simply dive right in.

The Covenant has exciting, if challenging, days ahead. Past meets present and propels us into the future. Equipped with a sense of dynamic memory, we move forward, rooted in a particular identity, to embrace what God has for us as a denomination and as a church. When we look at our tradition, we do not become mired in old ways of do-

ing things, but we revel in our past to remember who we are.

Historian Jaroslav Pelikan once distinguished tradition from traditionalism: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” When we forget who we are, we need to remember. We tell the stories of humble immigrant Mission Friends who gathered together as newcomers in a strange land, looking for genuine companionship and a way to work together in service of the gos-

ECC Denominational Statistics

Number of churches in the U.S. and Canada	747
Number of members	121,549
Number of attenders	162,935
Number of current churches founded in the 1800s	204
Number of churches where English is not the primary language	60
Number of Spanish-speaking churches	33
Number of ethnic and multiethnic churches	149
Number of current churches that joined the denomination between 2003 and 2007	89
Number of states and provinces represented by ECC churches	46
Number of churches that sent delegates to the 2007 Annual Meeting	201
Number of churches with attendance over 1,000	16

Sources: *Covenant Yearbooks* 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Department of Church Growth & Evangelism. Statistics reflect member churches only.

pel. Such a heritage should not divide us, but can unite us together, calling us back to a simple faith, rooted in the gospel story and committed to reaching others with the good news of Jesus Christ. Such a heritage emboldens us both to embrace change and to remember our past in the same breath, in the same prayer, over the same meal, and sharing a cup of coffee together.

Thanks be to God for our precious heritage, and may God bless our promising future. □