

# Preaching Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

An interview with Covenant president  
Glenn R. Palmberg | DON MEYER

**I**n June 2007, following the Covenant Annual Meeting, Glenn Palmberg announced his decision to retire as president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, effective this fall after ten years in that position. Recently Don Meyer, executive minister of communication, spoke with Palmberg about his tenure as president, the future of the denomination, and advice he'd like to give his successor.

## **What goes through your mind as you ponder this final year in your presidency?**

I've got things I want to accomplish. One of them is to address the location of Covenant Offices. Another involves the new Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice that has been established. I want to work with Debbie Blue [the department's executive minister] to get that better defined and on its way.

## **What prompted you to retire at this time and not complete a third term?**

I feel very good about the future. In fact, it is one of the issues that caused me to feel called to leave the office—to look at the potential [candidates] and

the energy level and to realize that the length of my time in office sort of determines who's in the next generation of leadership. Right now the church has some really good, energetic, bright, gifted people.

## **In what ways were your expectations of the presidency different from the realities you experienced?**

I did not anticipate the number of committee, board, and commission meetings and what that would mean. That has been a larger portion of my time than I expected. And, I didn't anticipate the importance of being present. If I don't show up, it makes a statement about how the church values them.

## **How many weekends a year do you spend away from home representing the church?**

My guess is that it would average three out of four. There are months I am gone every weekend. A lot of those meetings are board meetings.

## **What things surprised you?**

On the one hand, I would say the office is more important in representing the church than I thought. On the other hand, I am less in charge than I think I anticipated. I realize this is a large

organization and it's complicated. You have a lot of strong and gifted people. I realize a lot of things go on without my knowledge. You're not in charge of the whole Covenant world.

## **How do you convey the mission to the staff?**

Rather than say I am going to run and control everything, I say that I am going to get really good people around me in charge of the various parts of the ministry. I think that's what we've done. And, I'm not going to let myself get into the politics of the church.

## **How do you convey the vision to the larger church?**

I think the major public appearances are significant—preaching at a Midwinter and an Annual Meeting, or my report to the Annual Meeting. Those are key places where you lay out the vision to the whole church. But, then I think of the priorities you keep going after. A friend once told me, "The responsibility of a leader is to tell the people who they are, and they will live into it." I really took that to heart from the very beginning. I picked up on something that the Covenant Church has always been, and that is evangelicals who care about compassion, mercy, and justice.



I watch denominations that focus on constantly maintaining the right belief and then drawing those boundaries.... That's not who we are, and I hope we never become that.

And I keep saying, that's who we are, that's who we are.

Some people may say he's only got one message. Well, that's pretty much true. And maybe that's why if the church has gotten that message, it's time for a new message—and a new messenger!

#### **What are the important lessons you believe you have learned?**

I'm making a list of things I want to tell my successor.

Number one: don't think you're going to run the whole church—and don't try to. You will have plenty to do managing your own time and demands. Don't try to run everyone's department. Set good people free.

Number two: don't ignore some part of the church—it will drift away. Don't think you do not need to attend

a particular board meeting, including affiliated ministries. They will make decisions and move on whether you're there or not. You need to show up.

Number three: with respect to leadership style, watch for the opportunities to affirm. Don't just watch for the opportunities to critique. Try to be sensitive to those opportunities, and don't miss them.

Number four: it's a more difficult thing, but be a pastor to the church as much as you can. By that I mean, be in contact with people when they go through tragedy or when they have accomplishment. Try and stay connected.

**Surveys show that loyalty to denominations continues to decline. Is that true for the Covenant Church, and if so, what does that suggest for the**

#### **future of our shared ministry?**

It's a huge challenge for leadership in the Covenant. That is the direction. I think the alternative would be to not grow and include new people. Something like 60 percent of Covenant people are new in the last ten years. You can't expect people who have no church background to walk into a local church and commit to the denomination. And when we get people from other denominations, if they were denominational loyalists, they wouldn't have come. So, by definition they are people who commit to a local church by and large and not to a denomination.

I think it's something we just have to live with. It's not a horrible thing, except that getting the resources we

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need to carry on the larger ministries to which we are called will become more and more challenging. Giving in relation to the budget is getting more and more difficult every year. That's true for every denomination—you read about the huge layoffs at some denominations.

### **Are we too delicate in addressing the issue of giving with the larger Covenant constituency?**

To lay it out at an Annual Meeting is to address the most loyal, small group of our denomination. We still have a pretty loyal group, and we've got people who are new that are very loyal, incredibly so. It's not an easy thing to convey. The person who doesn't want to hear it won't. The pastor who doesn't want their church to hear it, that church won't hear it. The knowledge of the challenge will not cause them to step up. We need to build the relationship—that's what causes them to respond.

### **More local churches now originate their own mission initiatives. What does this suggest for the future role of those involved in denominational ministries?**

I think the most dramatic example of that is Covenant World Mission. We are shifting. We're not saying here's your only way to do mission. We're moving where the churches are moving. That's been a big change from our old "you send the money to us and we'll pick the missionaries and send them out. And we'll send them to your church when they itinerate, and you support them." There are churches that still want to do it that way. But, we've got a lot of churches that are taking their own initiative in mission. We are providing multiple ways to still be supportive and loyal, but also to come alongside when a church says it feels led to do their own projects. And, to celebrate that the gospel is being proclaimed and people are being helped and that we will be a part of it in a different way.

### **Does the denomination plan to replace retiring career missionaries?**

World Mission moves closer to financial

stability all the time. Career missionaries will be one of the ways we continue to do mission. There are churches that want to do mission that way, so that will continue in the budget. There are career missionaries in our future.

World Mission has changed not only in how it is supported, but in what is needed. There are many places in our mission field where career missionaries are not the primary need. The church in Congo is one example—it is larger than we are. We used to send career medical people there—they now have their own doctors. Some of the teams going over to teach new methods or introduce new equipment at times are more helpful than sending medical teams who do all the medicine themselves.

### **How do we embrace new people coming into the Covenant and still preserve our Covenant identity and distinctives?**

We always have to be careful that we don't consider some things unchangeable and then diminish because we hold on to them. I think we always have to be willing to ask, is this essential to being Covenant? And, can you be Covenant in a different way?

One example. Sacred to us has been congregational polity. The local autonomy of the congregation sets us apart from a lot of denominations. I think churches want to select their own pastors, not have a bishop appoint them. Churches want to own their own buildings, not have them owned by a denomination.

But to have a megachurch and have a model of congregational polity like the church I grew up in is not realistic. You're not going to hold a congregational meeting and have everyone discuss and vote on virtually every issue. We always have to look at how we maintain the pieces that are healthy, and how we flex and change.

We do have to stick to our commitment of saying we agree on these things that are essential and not start adding to that. I don't want to give up our affirmations, and I don't want to start adding things to them. Once you start

adding, there's no end to it. And if you begin to be a church that defines itself by "you've got to agree here, and you've got to agree there," we will become a church of doctrine. For me, that would be to lose who we are.

### **Why is it that our Covenant sense of freedom in Christ seems to attract some people who, once here, want more rules and definition?**

For some groups, faith is about believing the right things, and they continue to define those things. For us, faith is more of a commitment to the authority of the word of God and living. Pietism is about walking with Jesus. It's not about "just think the right things and that's all you have to do." I think that's a tension. People say, you're an evangelical church, and they come with their evangelical church definition. And they discover there's something a little different about this group. I watch denominations that focus on constantly maintaining the right belief and then drawing those boundaries—always drawing those boundaries. That's not who we are, and I hope we never become that.

### **Is there a "Chicago perspective"?**

I think there is one. When I travel I pick up the Chicago perspective. I know I have my blind spots, so when I am talking about something in particular, and people are smiling, they are thinking, yeah, he's got that Chicago perspective.

### **What is the Chicago perspective exactly?**

For me it's a church that used to exist that doesn't any longer. It's a naïveté about the church out there. I find people here [Chicago] who are shocked when they find out the number of churches that send delegates to an Annual Meeting. They assume that almost everybody does—but that's a long time ago. Or they think that people know and care about some of the things that are going on here that they really don't care about.

I don't mean to say that Chicago is

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always wrong. I just think that people who have been in the Covenant a long time and in Chicago would find it difficult to believe how often I'm in a church and someone will say, "Now what is it that you do?" The Chicago perspective would say, everyone knows who the president of the Covenant is. The truth is there are places where they wouldn't know there is a president of the Covenant.

You could survey our churches, and some—particularly the very large ones—would say we don't belong to a denomination. I don't think that should be used as a negative. It can mean they are drawing in a lot of new people. There's something positive about that, that they are preaching the gospel and not the denomination.

I also want to say that the Covenant Church, on these issues and challenges, is still way better off than any other denomination I know.

### **Will the matter of human sexuality, which has divided many church groups, be a challenge for the Covenant?**

It's one of the most painful pieces of my experience, yet to say we are not embroiled in it is still an accurate statement. I would attribute that to the way leadership in the Covenant has responded.

My goal has been to focus on mission and keep human sexuality off the front page. I think we've been able to do that by saying we'll be clear with where most of the church is—this is the consensus of the church. This is what we believe the word of God says. The church voted not to throw people out—clergy out—who do not hold the same view. You can have a view that is different. But, we've said, you don't teach against the church.

I feel bad. We have people in our churches who are suffering as families over this issue. It's not uncommon for me to be contacted by someone—and they can be longtime Covenant people—who say my family is struggling. Our son or our daughter—some member of our family—is gay. And

they can't come to church anymore because it's mentioned, it's talked about, and they're put down. We've got some parents really suffering. I fear for the person who is growing up and maybe hasn't told anyone of their orientation and is being made to feel horrible about who they are. The church can contribute to that feeling.

I think we've handled it well. I would be disappointed if the forces in our church that push for us to be



prophetic prevail and blow the church apart no matter what. I also would be disappointed if the people who say "agree or get out" carried the day. I hope that we can keep room for people who disagree with the official statements of the church, even clergy. I think what we've done is maybe the best course, to be clear where the church stands and be clear that we don't throw people out who disagree. That's a very fine line—a difficult place to maintain.

### **What is the biggest challenge facing the Covenant Church?**

I think the biggest challenge is maintaining some identity and cohesion as a denomination and the support that comes with that for our shared ministries. That is at stake all the time.

### **What is the greatest opportunity for the Covenant?**

We have the opportunity to be a deeply committed evangelical church that

brings in new ministries of compassion and addresses issues of justice. Evangelical bodies have a difficulty not with compassion so much, but with justice. And some bodies confront justice issues all the time, but have lost their evangelical edge. I think we have a chance to be a catalyst in the wider church that says here are people who believe in personal relationship to Jesus Christ and take seriously the biblical call to be involved in issues of justice.

This is a great opportunity for us.

This church has done its biblical work in affirming God's calling of both women and men at all levels of ministry. That is an area where even more can be accomplished.

We also have a chance to continue our progression on diversity. The commitment is there—it's genuine. We have incredible momentum, and I see that continuing. We will continue to be a more and more ethnically diverse church. It's unstoppable. And I'm very glad that it is. This church isn't becoming diverse—it is diverse. That is just going to grow.

Then, I think we have a chance to really grow. You know, church growth is not the most important thing, but it is a measure of reaching people. I'd put it this way: we've got a real chance to build on what this church has been about for a long time. Just keep building on it. I think we are well positioned for that. □