

Eager to understand his new church, **Bob McFadden** set out to discover what the Covenant is all about.

Travels on the Covenant Road

Epic. That's the word today's teens use to describe everything: epic relationship, epic car, epic failure—everything is epic. Fresh off of a 4,910-mile journey through America's heartland, I am borrowing the word. My journey was *epic!*

Last spring I set out seeking tales about the Covenant Church. I am two years new to this amazing denomination, and my trip was sparked by my participation in the orientation process for ministerial credentialing. My goal was to try to get a picture of the vast quilt that is the Covenant and to explore the common threads that bring the patchwork together.

My Covenant travels grew out of a trip I had already planned, and lasted two weeks, taking me through parts of fifteen states. I visited six Covenant churches that were natural stopping points along the way.



Bob McFadden

Phoenix, Arizona

Appropriately the story begins with Genesis. Pat Stark, pastor of Genesis Covenant Church in Phoenix, Arizona, dressed in his trademark cowboy hat, a black shirt, dark sunglasses, and khaki shorts, is a hipster who looked strangely western and pastoral at the same time. I watched him interact with the regulars at the Starbucks where he prepares his sermons. And I prayed, “So here it begins, Father, with this wildly interesting fellow.”

Stark embodied my initial thesis that there is no typical Covenant church, even though we share the core truths of faith. We are people of passion—for Jesus, for justice, compassion, and mercy, and for joining with our loving Creator to bring redemption to a hopeless and hurting world. Genesis Covenant Church and Pat Stark embody these traits and many more.

Genesis Covenant was planted by nearby Paradise Valley Covenant Church in 2003. It began with a core group of fifty that has grown to more than 250. Nestled in the Salt River Valley at the edge of the Sonoran Desert, the church meets in Boulder Creek Elementary School.

Stark notes that the rule of thumb for Phoenix

schools is that an organization can only rent space in a school for two years, yet Genesis has been renting at Boulder Creek for more than six years. The church has made a point of reaching out to the school in return. When the school needed a new washing machine, the church bought one. In the face of budget constraints the school could not afford to buy new playground equipment; the church stepped in and provided what was needed. And each week the church provides snacks for the school’s staff meetings.

Genesis has a vision for reaching the world for Jesus through local, regional, and global outreach. Locally they are building a community center where they will serve the neighborhood throughout the week, and that will serve as their worship space on Sundays. Regionally they have ministries to the homeless and to Arizona Native American nations. Globally they are committed to rescuing chil-



Genesis Covenant Church

PHOENIX, ARIZONA
Pastoral staff:
Pat Stark, Billy Kerr,
Jaime Howard
Year organized: 2003
Conference:
Pacific Southwest
*Membership/
attendance:* 82/226

Community demographics: The capital and largest city of Arizona, Phoenix, population 1,567,924, is now the fifth largest city in the United States.

Ministry highlights: The church has built homes in Mexico every year since it began, and they have partnered with a ministry that rescues trafficked children in the African nation of Ghana. Closer to home, they serve the homeless in downtown Phoenix every other Saturday, and they also have a relationship with a Native American orphanage in Arizona. “Most people would describe us as an eclectic bunch of Jesus followers who long to live out our faith in community and desire to bring the love of Jesus into our daily relationships through justice and compassion,” says pastor Pat Stark.

Beloved church activities: Eating food together and camping together



A participant in Genesis Covenant Church’s outreach to Ghana makes friends with a young girl.

dren who have been sold as slaves in Ghana.

While Stark believes all of the church’s outreach is a crucial part of a healthy fellowship, their Ghana connection has had an especially profound impact. In Ghana one in four children are sold into slavery, according to activist Pam Cope. Through a combined influence of a Ghanaian national in their church, World Vision, and Cope’s work, the church has taken a team to Ghana to work specifically in rescuing kids from slavery.

Fort Collins, Colorado

My next destination was nearly 900 miles away in the mountains of Colorado. Fort Collins is a college town that consistently ranks high on “best place to live and work in the country” lists. Bert Wright, pastor of Evangelical Covenant Church of Fort Collins, has the look of a suburban Colorado family man—handsome, thoughtful, and driven. He believes the goal of the church is people “walking the Jesus walk and inviting others to join them on the walk.”

The church was founded in 1981 and currently averages more than 300 attendees each Sunday. Early in the history of the church, Tom Glossi was called as the senior pastor. He served the church during its initial years of growth and ministry, including building programs and expansions. In 1998, the church called Wright to be the youth pastor, and he joined Glossi in leading a vibrant outreach to the

Bob McFadden is the youth pastor at Evangelical Covenant Church in Lafayette, Indiana.

Evangelical Covenant Church

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

Pastoral staff: Bert Wright, Tom Glossi, Brian Frable, Joe Thackwell, and Diane Borden

Year organized: 1981

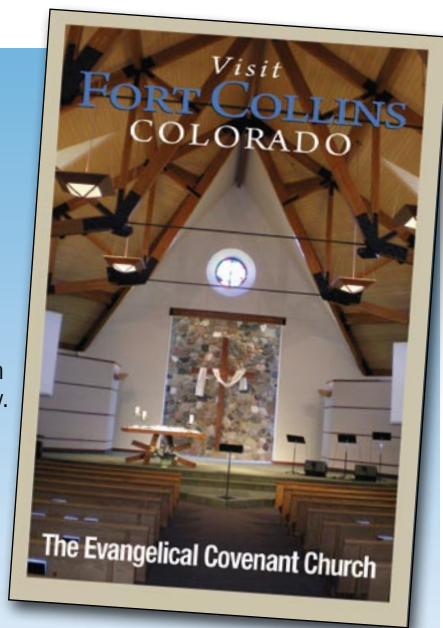
Conference: Midwest

Membership/attendance: 160/332

Community demographics: Located in the foothills of the Rockies, Fort Collins, population 136,509, is home to Colorado State University.

Ministry highlights: Through Covenant Merge Ministries, the congregation is building a relationship with the community of Ameya, Nicaragua. This summer a group began work on a medical clinic there. At home, the church hosts a day program for adults with special needs. They also serve meals at a local homeless shelter every month, and provide services for an assisted living center. Recently, the church was one of forty-three recipients in the United States and Canada of a worship renewal grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship in Grand Rapids.

Beloved church activities: Fall Festival, Chili Cook-off, Taco Talent Night



Fort Collins area.

While Christmas shopping together in 2003, Wright shared his heart with Glossi, explaining that he sensed God leading him away from youth ministry. Glossi made a passing comment—a joke really—that God was creating a new call in his own life as well, and maybe Wright should become the senior pastor. As is so often the case with God, the joke was on them. Two years later Glossi, who had been the senior pastor for twenty years, stepped aside to allow the youth pastor to take his job. Glossi became the associate pastor.

By all accounts, the shift has gone very well. Wright says that the key to the success of their unusual move was their initial attitude. They asked themselves, “If we could set aside how we are pre-programmed to think, what would we do?” But more important, Wright attributes their success to Glossi’s wisdom and humility.

The authenticity and connectedness of their pastors has infected the church community. The congregation is passionate about being in community with one another and has reached out to the community of Ameya in Nicaragua through a clothing drive, a kitchen shower that collected utensils for a local baking school, and a mis-

sion trip in the spring.

Wright says the church believes that the more churches reach out globally, the more they will reach unbelievers locally who will resonate with the need to reach out to people around the world. The people of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Fort Collins are trying to live this out.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Just north of Fort Collins, through a bit of Wyoming and a large chunk of Nebraska, I drove another 700-plus miles to Sioux Falls. South Dakota is known for many things, including low crime, the Black Hills, the Corn Palace (a 100-year-old tourist destination decorated with murals and designs made from native South Dakota corn and grains), and Mount Rushmore.

“Home to international refugees” is not an appellation that immediately jumps to mind.

But that’s exactly what a Covenant congregation in Sioux Falls has become. I met Allan Holte, former pastor of Prairie Hills Covenant Church in Sioux Falls, at a coffee shop on 41st Street. While Holte sipped his coffee and I dove into my chai tea latte, I listened to the story

of Sudanese refugees and the loving embrace they received in this rural community.

When refugees from Sudan came to the United States in the 1990s, the government determined that members of the Nuer cattle-herding tribe would find the meat-packing industry in Sioux Falls familiar. Holte was pastor at Prairie Hills when the local chapter of Lutheran Social Services

South Sudan Evangelical Covenant Church

SIoux FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

Pastor: Samuel Kuach

Year organized: 1996

Conference: Northwest

Membership/attendance: 95/34

Community demographics: Sioux Falls, population 154,997, is the largest city in the state, and the largest growing metropolitan area in the Midwest.

Ministry highlights: The congregation meets at Prairie Hills Covenant Church, and the two congregations join together each month for communion. One Sunday a month they meet with Sudanese congregations from other denominations for joint worship and to pray for Sudan, where their ties remain strong. Most Sudanese send at least one-third of their income back to their families in Sudan each month. When the original members of the congregation came to the United States in the 1990s as refugees, there were as many as 175. In succeeding years, many moved from Sioux Falls because of employment opportunities or family connections.

Beloved church activities: Potluck meals to celebrate a child’s birthday, an important day in the political life of South Sudan, a wedding back in Sudan, a completion of U.S. citizenship process





Samuel Kuach came to the United States as a refugee from Sudan and now pastors the Sudanese Covenant Church in Sioux Falls.

approached him about assisting the refugees. The church began actively reaching out to refugees from around the world, but the specific outreach to the Nuer tribe produced a tremendous harvest. Under the leadership of Pastor Samuel Kuach, the South Sudan Evangelical Covenant Church was formed in 1996 and shares worship space with Prairie Hills.

There are nine Sudanese Covenant churches around the United States and Canada and more than 50,000 Sudanese Covenanters in Sudan and Ethiopia, all born out of the refugee work done by Prairie Hills Covenant Church.

Dawn Burnett, who currently co-pastors Prairie Hills with her husband, Andrew, describes the connections between Prairie Hills and the Sudanese church, saying, "We continue to be blessed by our relationship with our Sudanese brothers and sisters. They have joined with us for vacation Bible school, Sunday school, and special music." She adds, "Their witness encourages our faith. We are also grateful to partner with James Tang, one of the original Sudanese visitors to our church, as he returns to Sudan as the Covenant's first missionary there."

Brandon, South Dakota

Just minutes from Sioux Falls is the suburb of Brandon, South Dakota, where I met an old friend of Holte's. Kendall Carlson is pastor of the Living Springs Covenant Church in Brandon. Living Springs is a ten-year-old church planted by a congregation that was originally planted by Prairie Hills.

I have met a cadre of very inter-

esting people in the Covenant, and Carlson is one of the more colorful personalities. His passion for the Covenant is relentless. As we talked, his eyes misted over more than once as he described deeply profound friendships he has developed through his more than thirty years in the denomination. He shared many poignant stories, including one about a memorable trip to Sweden with the late Karl Olsson, Covenant historian and former president of North Park College and Theological Seminary.

Now, in what he describes as the

asked where his passion for people came from, Carlson told me about a conference he attended in California some twenty years ago.

At that conference Carlson came across some kids playing under the Los Angeles freeways. Having spent most of his life in rural areas, he thought it strange to see children playing in such unusual places. On his drive back to his hotel that evening, he noticed campfires blazing and small camps set up under those same freeways. It was then that he realized he was witnessing the daily activities

Living Springs Covenant Church

BRANDON, SOUTH DAKOTA

Pastor: Kendall Carlson

Year organized: 1999

Conference: Northwest

Membership/attendance: 133/235

Community demographics: Brandon, population 8,757, is a rapidly growing suburb of Sioux Falls.

Ministry highlights: After a mission trip to Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Guatemala, in 2008, the congregation decided to form a partnership with the Christian community there. They returned last spring, and are planning to develop the relationships they have formed there for many years to come. Locally, the church has a strong ministry to youth, as well as men's and women's Bible studies. They are also involved in an outreach program with the homeless in Sioux Falls.

Beloved church activity: Easter walk to the tomb of Jesus



waning days of his ministry, Carlson is energized to be leading a relatively new congregation. Living Springs already has a beautiful facility with plans for expansion as the church increases its outreach to the Brandon and Sioux Falls communities.

Even as we sat in the Chinese restaurant in Brandon enjoying our late-afternoon buffet, Carlson wondered aloud if the people who were coming into the restaurant knew Jesus and how Living Springs could reach as many as possible with the gospel. When I

of people who were homeless. At that moment Carlson says the Lord spoke to him and revealed that his mission in life was to provide a home for the spiritually homeless.

The people of Living Springs

extend this passion to their work in Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Guatemala. The church has adopted a village of 15,000 people whose population is 95 percent Mayan. Living Springs works alongside believers like Felipa, a local woman who feeds and cares for more than forty



Kendall Carlson, pastor of Living Springs

widows, most of whom lost their husbands in a recent war.

During a missions trip to Xenacoj last spring, members of Living Springs distributed wheelchairs to people in the village. One family had been using a child's umbrella stroller to transport their young disabled daughter until they received one of the wheelchairs, which are specially designed to accommodate children. Church member Mark Richards founded Hope Haven International Ministries to provide low-cost wheelchairs for people all over the world. A year ago Hope Haven opened a new manufacturing facility in Guatemala, and the facility now has twenty local employees, all of whom were former wheelchair recipients.

Trimont, Minnesota

After picking up my sixteen-year-old daughter from her grandparents' house in South Dakota, I began my return trip home to Indiana. Our first stop was the small town of Trimont, just north of Interstate 90 in



Trimont pastor Mark Anderson and his family bus after church members reconditioned it

southern Minnesota. In a town of less than a thousand residents, it was easy to find Trimont Covenant Church.

Upon our arrival, Sterling Adamson showed us the beautiful church facility. He explained that Pastor Mark Anderson was out of town and had arranged for Adamson, a lifelong Covenanter, to show me around. Adamson began to relate the 112-year history of the church, then he called his wife to come over and help tell the story.

Dianne Adamson is kind, thoughtful, and a bit fiery. She and Sterling proceeded to share story after story of the amazing things God has done in and around Trimont through the Covenant church and its people.

AWANA and youth group activities are so popular that attendance is usually even higher at these events on Wednesday nights than at worship services on Sunday mornings. Students come from throughout the community, and the Wednesday activities are a vibrant outreach of the church.

Last year the church sent sixty-two



Youth activities at Trimont are well-attended by students from the community.



Evangelical Covenant Church

TRIMONT, MINNESOTA

Pastor: Mark Anderson

Year organized: 1894

Conference: Northwest

Membership/attendance: 166/149

Community demographics: Located in south central Minnesota, Trimont, population 686, was established in 1959 when the twin villages of Triumph and Monterey consolidated.

Ministry highlights: In addition to a number of groups for all ages and interests, and a strong outreach to youth, the church is involved in programs at the local health-care center, including a weekly game time with junior-high students and residents. A strong supporter of many denominational and conference ministries, the church also runs a week of camp at Covenant Mountain Mission Bible Camp in Jonesville, Virginia. "We try together in Jesus," says pastor Mark Anderson.

Beloved church activity: Midweek AWANA and youth group program

kids, many of them from the community, to Lake Beauty Bible Camp in Long Prairie, Minnesota. Each family from the community paid only \$50 to send their child to camp, and the church paid the rest of the costs (more than \$14,000 overall). It is a significant investment on the part of the church, but the congregation considers this to be another important part of their outreach.

The Andersons and their six children have clearly made a profound impact on this community. Mark's wife, Suzi, has a vibrant pizza outreach to area high-school students. Every Friday she makes fifteen to twenty pizzas, and whoever shows up in her kitchen is welcome to enjoy them—it's as "simple" as that. She and Mark started making pizzas seven years ago, soon after moving to town, in an effort to get to know their son's

friends on the football team. They've been doing it ever since.

Recently, the community had the chance to show its appreciation for the Andersons. Mark had always wanted a bus to carry his large family around, and he had finally purchased an old one, intending to fix it up at some point. But one weekend Sterling and others in town kidnapped the bus, and by the time they were done with it, they had reconditioned the engine, painted the bus red, and completely redone the interior. Needless to say, the outpouring of love the church and community showed them blew the Andersons away.

Madison, Wisconsin

As the miles racked up on the car I had borrowed from a very generous church member who was willing to let me put nearly 5,000 miles on his Toyota, I was eager to get home. But I had one last stop to make.

I already knew Jim and Cathy Stanley-Erickson, the co-pastors of Arbor Covenant Church in Madison, Wisconsin. We arrived at their little gray house on a Saturday afternoon just as they had finished teaching a confirmation class there. As I sat down to talk to this amazing couple, my daughter set about the task of entertaining their delightful three-year-old daughter, Kajsa.

Begun in 1964, Arbor Covenant has long been a light to its community. Even when the city thwarted their building plan by not making their road a through street, the church continued to move forward in ministry.

Despite its small size, the church is a hub of continuous activity. Generous stewards of their facility, Arbor shares their building with a community daycare on weekdays, and with an African American fellowship—Vessels of Praise Apostolic Church—on Sundays. Even the church's yard is put to use as a community garden. About a third of the plots are used by church members, Jim explained, and the rest



Arbor Covenant's community garden not only provides nutritious food, it brings people together.

are cultivated by residents of nearby apartment buildings. For many, the garden is their primary source of vegetables.

The church's outreach has been spurred by members who are committed to serving those who are often forgotten and overlooked in a community. Twenty-five years ago, Phil Keillor, who died earlier this year, was appalled when three homeless men in Madison froze to death during the winter. With two other friends he started a homeless shelter, which has since blossomed into an agency that offers employment services, counseling, and help for transitional and permanent housing, as well as shelter and food. Church members regularly volunteer at the shelter.

They also participate in the Community Meal Program with other Madison churches. For more than two decades, church member Jeannette Levin has organized a group of volunteers to provide lunch on the third Thursday of every month to anyone who is interested—the homeless, underemployed, or anyone who just wants the company of others.

There, at my last stop, the details of my trip came together. I began the journey with the idea that no two Covenant churches and no two Covenanters are alike. After many thousands of miles, I came to believe that

my original premise was flawed. I learned instead that many Covenanters—and Covenant churches—are indeed alike. Full of grace and generosity, they care about their communities, not merely in words but in deeds as well.

Each of us is a vital part of the holy Christian church, formed by God to

provide hope to a hurting and hopeless world through the person of Jesus Christ. Amen and amen! I am a Christian and I am a Covenanter. ■



Arbor Covenant Church

MADISON, WISCONSIN

Co-pastors: Cathy Stanley-Erickson and Jim Stanley-Erickson

Year organized: 1964

Conference: Central

Membership/attendance: 102/79

Community demographics: Madison, population 231,916, is the capital of Wisconsin, the state's second largest city, and home to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Ministry highlights: The church is active in homeless ministries, community food programs, and tutoring in the public elementary school, and is a strong supporter of Covenant World Relief, intergenerational mission trips with Merge Ministries, and Global Development Network.

Beloved church activity: worship