

# Navigating the Way Ahead



Direction for the journey  
toward healthy ministry

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**W**hat does it mean to be the church? When Jesus said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18), what did he envision? Can we envision it—what would that church look like?

Innumerable books, seminars, and websites offer countless answers to those questions. Experts offer advice. Practitioners describe their experiences. Instruction manuals abound. And still, we struggle to understand the mystery of what makes the church the church.

Culture tells us what kind of data

marks a successful organization or entity. A packed parking lot on Sunday mornings. Well-funded ministries. State-of-the-art facilities. Yet we know the world’s standards are not ours. We are God’s people, created and called together by God. Together, as God’s called-out ones, we participate in the new life in Christ as a fellowship of believers. In community we worship God. We participate in the sacraments, in nurture, evangelism, and service—essential elements of the church. That’s what we believe the church looks like. We don’t call it success; we call it healthy. We call it fulfilling our mission.

Are we being *that* church?

As we seek to be Christ’s church, we

must face one clear fact: we struggle. A new generation replaces an older one. Industry changes, reducing employment opportunities in a given region. Unresolved conflict wounds a body of believers. In short, imperfect people comprise imperfect churches. So how do we best become a gathered community set apart for involvement in Christ's mission to the world? How does an individual congregation fully embody Christ's call to be his church?

It can be a challenge to understand and identify the shape of our mission in changing contexts and settings. Recognizing that challenge, the Covenant has identified as one of its key priorities the importance of both starting and strengthening churches. Both new and existing churches need to be vibrant and healthy. "We're not into the church growth movement. We're into the church health movement," says John Wenrich, director of congregational vitality for the denomination. "Healthy things usually grow. Growth is a byproduct, not the main goal."

Eight years ago, few resources were available for established churches that were looking for ways to revitalize their ministries. Now a range of options are available, specifically created for Covenant churches—from workshops to diagnostic and assessment tools to consultation and coaching resources.

The first step is a conversation between the pastor and the conference superintendent or director of congregational vitality. "We seek to honor the office of pastor," Wenrich says.

The Veritas workshop extends that conversation to the congregation. In the one-day workshop, laypeople and pastors join together to ask, where are we as a church—healthy and missional, stable, critical moment, or at-risk? What are we doing that we need to continue and strengthen? What

should we stop doing? Do we have the vision, intention, and means to move forward? They also consider several identifying characteristics of what a healthy and missional church might look like. Organized and funded by conference offices, Veritas is facilitated by the director of congregational vitality of the congregation's conference.

Wenrich is quick to clarify that Veritas—and the other congregational vitality resources—are not quick fixes or magic bullets. He intentionally avoids terms like "program" or "event," instead describing the work of renewing a congregation's vision and mission with words like "pathway," "process," and "journey." Pursuing vitality in the church does not mean adhering to formulas or rigid equations—it's organic, and each congregation travels the road in its own way.

Several years ago, Milwaukie (Oregon) Covenant Church was considering a building program. They were maxing out their space and wondered where they would go next as a congregation. After extensively evaluating their options, the church decided not to build. The conversation—and the decision itself—had provoked other questions. In what direction would the ministry go now?

The chair of their elder board suggested investigating Veritas, which at the time was a new denominational resource. The pastor and leadership explored the idea, and soon they had embarked on the vitality pathway. Pastor Bill Nylund says, "I remember John Wenrich saying this will be a four- to seven-year journey, where we will be challenged to face the truth about our church. Looking back upon those five years and the various components of this process, I would say our church has experienced its healthiest point in years."

Resources such as Veritas don't provide all the answers. But they do

encourage churches to start asking questions together—and to use a shared language to help them identify where they have come from and where they are going.

Nylund says, "One primary reason the vitality process worked for us is that we didn't expect these answers to come from outside our own body." He adds, "We needed to identify the uniqueness of our own church and then work within that framework."

One component of the process is to create a "behavioral covenant"—a written statement describing how individuals within the congregation agree to interact with each other when they don't agree with or understand each other. "The behavior covenant is

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not a law to live up to but a lifestyle to live into," says Wenrich. Milwaukie Covenant displays theirs on a banner in the church—and asks all staff and lay leaders to sign it. They use it at the beginning of their business meetings, and they cite it as one of the most significant benefits of their work together. Such a covenant serves as a touchstone for community engagement, fair play, and common mission.

Participating in church revitalization looks different for different congregations. Abraham Bejarano came to Emmanuel Covenant Church in Northridge, California, three years ago. The demographics of the sixty-two-year-old congregation were changing. The congregation is multicultural, and attendees speak a variety of languages, including Chinese, Spanish, and Korean, as well as

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English. What used to be two separate congregations with separate pastors have now been joined into one—and Bejarano is the pastor of both.

Last fall Emmanuel Covenant was invited to participate in Navigate, another congregational vitality resource. Specifically aimed at churches that are stable or “critical moment,” Navigate joins congregations together in the vitality process.

Wenrich and the directors of congregational vitality recognized that it can be effective for a church to walk the vitality pathway as an individual congregation, but, they wondered, what if three churches in a geographic region pursued vitality together as a cohort? Surely that would enhance their experience and possibilities. So Navigate was created.

Ideally three churches located within 100 miles of each other join together in this work. The denomination holds a weekend conference for a new group of Navigate churches every year. Each conference is allotted a specific number of slots, and directors of congregational vitality in conference offices throughout the Covenant invite churches to participate. Each church that attends brings its pastor and a handful of lay leaders. Through Navigate, the local church, the conference, and the denomination all partner together.

Throughout the weekend participants meet together to discuss what Wenrich calls “ten healthy missional markers.” Those include managing conflict, developing a culture of creative worship, transforming com-

munities, and developing a fruitful organizational structure. When each church returns home, they continue to meet together—the pastors in each triad meet monthly, and their vitality teams join together for support and encouragement as well.

“Sometimes you think you are alone, but you realize that now you are not alone,” Bejarano says. Lay leader Julio Ramos echoed his sentiment. “Before, I thought we were alone in the process. See-



**Mark Swanson (above) and the congregation of Wiley Heights Covenant Church (right) discovered they needed to change organizational structures in order to move forward.**



ing so many churches in the same process, brings new revival in our congregation.” One of the primary purposes of the conference is exactly that—to offer support, connection, and guidance to churches, based on Ecclesiastes 4:12, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

When Bill Anthes helped plant Grace Evangelical Covenant Church in Clay, New York, in 1991, the area was transitioning from rural to suburban. Since then, housing developments and retail stores have grown up around the church and its community. In the midst of its changing setting, the church remained solid and stable. Yet, Anthes says, “I had been setting aside time to ask God for direction on behalf of the congregation and myself as well.” When Steve Armfield, the director of congrega-

tional vitality for the Great Lakes Conference, invited Grace to participate in Navigate, the timing seemed providential.

After the conference, Anthes said, “We believe that God has something next for us. My hope is that outreach will be a big part of that ‘next thing’—and that Navigate will help us see that as a congregation.” As the church envisions its future, both the pastor and lay leaders have access to new resources for ministry. Such equipping for ministry makes way for

new growth and new understandings of being the church in a given context.

Sometimes, though, the path leads in unexpected directions. That’s what happened in Wiley Heights Covenant Church in Yakima, Washington. They are reworking some of the organizational structures of their church. Pastor Mark Swanson says, “I honestly didn’t imagine ever engaging in the conversation around structure, but as we begin to tell and hear stories of what God has done through Wiley Heights and then piggybacking on that with what dreams we have because of who we are, it seemed clear that our current system was not conducive to turning those dreams into a reality.”

While changing a leadership structure is hardly a glamorous task, Wiley Heights decided that the bureaucratic



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**Tom Greentree, Joanne Gailius, and Bryce Loughran of the Covenant church in Erickson, British Columbia**

structures they currently had in place might stall the momentum that was building in the congregation. Swanson explains, “Our people are great, but the system stifled their gifts. So we are in a yearlong process of changing our constitution and bylaws. And while this can change structure, we’re also looking to this as a catalyst to strengthen our leadership culture within the church around things like expectations, spiritual life, and discernment of God’s will.”

Sometimes the hard questions that begin at Veritas require even harder responses. Sometimes a church decides to become a “legacy” church—closing its doors and giving the proceeds to the conference to be used for church planting or other ministry.

One key aspect of the conversation is for a congregation to learn to recognize its own culture. It’s a difficult task—deep-rooted customs and traditions might be hard to recognize, especially when they are part of the warp and woof of a church’s identity. The shorthand definition for culture, says Wenrich, is “how we do things around here.” So participating churches are encouraged to name some elements of their culture. What kind of paint is on the walls? What does the church website look like? What do people wear on Sunday mornings? What’s the décor in the bathrooms or church office? What values do those marks of a congregation’s culture communicate?

Often a difficult time in the life of a

church triggers its interest in the vitality journey. After a painful transition, the Evangelical Covenant Church in Erickson, British Columbia, was ready to evaluate its future. Gerald Froese, director of congregational vitality for the Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada, helped them identify where the church was through a Veritas

seminar, and then they were invited to attend Navigate.

The church is a rural congregation located in an orchard valley, and the fall is especially busy as crops are harvested and preparations are made for winter. So their pathway has taken its own shape, structured around those seasonal rhythms.

“Navigate was a huge boost to our vision for our church and for our vitality pathway,” says pastor Tom Greentree. “It gave us the courage and the clarity we needed.” He adds, “Navigate has given us the needed tools to actually walk this path.”

**M**embers of Grace Covenant Church in South San Francisco attended the first Veritas workshop in 2007. Grace’s new part-time, bivocational pastor, Cameron Wu-Cardona, was eager to participate. “As I recall, it was a full house,” he says. “The Covenant had uncovered a huge need and Veritas was the zeitgeist that established churches like ours needed.”

At the time, the congregation of less than fifty people was aging even as its community was growing. Twenty years ago the population of South City was declining. An elementary school across the street from the church was closed and eventually sold to developers who built track housing. But influxes of Hispanic and Asian families in recent years have now made Buri Buri Elementary School, a half-mile down the road, the largest elementary school in the district.

After the workshop, the church did some initial follow-up, but their efforts ended up on the back burner. Then three years later they learned that more tools had been made available. They enthusiastically put them to use. Wu-Cardona, who by this point was serving Grace full-time, participated in the pastors’ coaching program (CO-OP), and a team from the church attended the second Navigate conference. They continued to hold monthly meetings with their vitality team, which facilitated some changes in their church culture. Those included a congregational vote for a new “leadership team” constitution, which replaced the previous long-standing “council” model. That adjustment has led to the implementation of ministry teams and a new organizational structure. Today they anticipate holding a “One” workshop soon to focus on developing a strategic ministry plan. It’s one of the last stages of the journey, and Wu-Cardona talks about their dreams for the future.

“Certainly, I want to continue to see our church grow. We border between being ‘stable’ and ‘healthy missional,’ but we still need more of a critical mass to enable the ministry to feel more viable and sustainable. But having been at the church for almost six years, I’ve already jumped through some hurdles and feel confident that God’s continuing to do a good work. I would love to see the church grow in size and spiritual depth, but in a sustainable, healthy, and missional way that doesn’t take away from the intimacy and closeness we feel. I’d love to see us raising disciples, seeing people grow and come to faith, embodying our vision statement of ‘changing lives from the inside out,’” says Wu-Cardona. “And despite our size and the challenges ahead, I remain hopeful that ‘he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion’ (Philippians 1:6).” ■