



THE CHURCH IS THE
BURDEN
OF GOD
... HE WILL PROVIDE

The title phrase of this article was said to Pastor Dan Collison of First Covenant Church in Minneapolis as he interacted with the pastor of a church in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, Africa. Collison had marveled at the resiliency of the pastor in the face of discharging his duties without the aid of any material goods. He had nothing, yet he still led the church forward to meet the needs of those within the camp ... and to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.

Collison asked the pastor how he could keep going in the midst of such obstacles. In essence, the pastor responded by stating that it was only through the power of God displaying His glory in the midst of human weakness, frailty and vulnerability. And while the pastor had nothing in his hands, he had the Spirit of God surrounding him and in him, and that was enough. God's glory could be displayed in spite of ... not because of.

Recently, I shared with the NWC staff and board some thoughts arising from Haggai 2 that had been shared with me by John Notehelfer, former pastor and Pacific Southwest Conference superintendent.

You know, some churches are more focused on the past than they

are on the future, and the importance of the past to a congregation is often in direct proportion to its age. The longer the history, the more likely it is that a congregation will be tempted to think that its best days are behind it (i.e. the older we get ... the better we were)!

This is especially true when a church has experienced a decline in numbers over the years. "I remember when these seats used to be filled," is a common response among some historic members in our churches. While this can lead to disappointment, it can be overcome ... but not easily. Let's face it; it is hard to move forward when we are always looking backward with regret over what has been lost.

And the word from the prophet Haggai is a response to the disappointment many expressed when the foundation of the second temple was laid. The assertion of verse 3 is more than a question; it is an admission. The eyes of those who were disappointed had not deceived them. Zerubbabel's temple did not compare with the former in either size or beauty. The "glory days" of Solomon were gone for good!

The "glory days" were gone—but just like in the refugee church in Malawi, Africa, not the glory! God had promised to manifest His pres-



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Minnehaha Academy celebrates Centennial

Minnehaha Academy will soon reach its 100-year milestone and will commemorate a century of integrating Christian faith and learning. The school is busy preparing many events and activities for the 2012-13 school year to honor Minnehaha's rich heritage and Covenant roots through celebration and thanksgiving.

We hope you come alongside us. Details announcing these happenings will be announced this spring.

Adventures in Leadership

Please pray for the high school students from the NWC that will participate in A.I.L. the week of June 16-23.

Annual Covenant Softball Tournament

The Annual Covenant Softball Tournament will take place on July 21 at Fridley Community Park (1 mile north of Fridley Covenant Church). In addition to tournament play, this year's event will also feature skills competitions, including: pitching accuracy, home run derby, and place hitting. For details, visit www.fridleycov.org.

NWC news in your inbox

Get our monthly UPDATE e-mail newsletter to learn more about NWC news and events. E-mail bryan@nwc-cov.org to sign up.

THE JOURNEY OF VITALITY: NOT A QUICK FIX

By Jon Kramka, Director of Congregational Vitality

Congregational Vitality has been identified as one of our Ministry Priorities in the Northwest Conference. We believe God's desire is for every church to be healthy and missional in its life together and witness in the world. By "healthy" we mean pursuing Christ. By "missional" we mean pursuing Christ's priorities. As we have developed a greater understanding of this priority, we have identified key factors that influence Congregational Vitality (10 Healthy Missional Markers) and have developed strategic inputs and resources for pastors and congregations to initiate healthy missional growth.

But, ultimately, we recognize that vitality is the responsibility of each church regardless of its current state of health. Guided by the Holy Spirit, churches need to invest in their own vitality; for as with any living, growing organism, the Church is in need of constant renewal.

One NWC church on the vitality journey is Salem Covenant of Duluth, MN. In a recent church newsletter, Pastor Dave Peterson offered the congregation some of his personal reflections on their progress:

"This past year (2011) was a crucial year as we entered the revitalization pathway as a congregation and began utilizing the vitality supports provided to us through the Covenant. In January 2011, the Veritas workshop helped us as a congregation honestly see ourselves as a 'critical moment' church. The Behavioral Covenant, formed and embraced by the church in April, continues to provide us with relational principles to guide us through our revitalization process.

"In October, the EPIC workshop provided us with some necessary skills and steps, moving toward greater health and mission here at Salem. Now is the time for us to give

more intention to our vision. One initiative that was identified in our recent Leadership Summit was a need for us to become more efficient and intentional in connecting people to Salem. We see a need to create helpful 'structures' to connect people to people.

"Well, Duluth is a city of bridges. Using this metaphor, we as a church need to discover ways to build more bridges:

- Connecting Salem people to each other through social contacts and in discipleship.
- Connecting new people to Salem.
- Connecting youth and young families to our church.
- Connecting our church more vitally to the needs around us in Spirit Valley.
- Connecting with unbelievers and seekers through intentional evangelism.

"You'll be hearing a lot about 'building bridges' as we move ahead in God's call for us here at Salem. So grab your tool belt, prepare for some hard labor and get creative as we begin building bridges that will bring hope to the heart of Spirit Valley and beyond."

As with Salem, pursuing vitality for any congregation is to be centered in the mission and message of Jesus. Vitality begins with God who redeems all things for good. Therefore, vitality does not begin with systems, strategies, or structures but with redemptive theology, repentance and prayer.

In addition, vitality can take longer than planned, can be messier than expected, can cost more than originally figured and requires greater determination than once thought. But our prayer remains constant—that every congregation becomes a healthy missional church in the Northwest Conference.

We look forward to more churches accepting the invitation to pursue vitality, and we remain committed to walking with you in the journey.



SEASONS OF YOUTH MINISTRY

By Ginny Olson, Director of Youth Ministry

Youth ministry has its seasons, just like any vocation. Summer is a time of intense activity and relationship building. Autumn has its visions and plans for a new school year.

But come the dark depths of that time between New Year's and Memorial Day and ministry becomes more multi-layered and thus, more difficult. As youth workers go deeper into building relationships with students, family issues gather force, students reveal their harmful patterns, and church committees even get cranky.

It's during seasons like this that the words in Ecclesiastes 4:12 come readily to mind, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

The network of youth workers in the Northwest Conference is more than just a gathering of people exchanging professional tips. It is, as Merriam-Webster defines "network," "a fabric or structure of cords or wires that cross at regular intervals and are knotted or secured at the crossings."

This group of people gathers monthly for encouragement and training. They collaborate together on retreats and events. They speak at each other's churches and camps. They listen to each other when the going gets rough.

They advise each other on difficult and confidential issues, ones that only another youth worker could understand. And they pray together and for each other. They are knotted and secured together at their crossings.

It is uncommon to have such a sturdy network of youth workers, paid and unpaid, who seek to love God through loving teenagers. That speaks highly of the caliber of our people and our churches.

The result of this strong network is that



M.O.V.E. EXPERIENCES CHALLENGE 250 STUDENTS

On March 30-31, 250 students and youth workers from throughout the Northwest Conference converged on First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, MN, for M.O.V.E. 2012—a weekend of teaching, worship, service and experiential learning. This year's theme was "TRU: Faith. Justice. Love."

On Saturday morning, youth groups fanned out to 17 different agencies and ministry sites across the Twin Cities for three hours of service, which ranged from preparing meals for homeless, to lawn care and clean-up projects, to playing with shelter kids, to the restocking of supply shelves at thrift centers and distribution warehouses.

One unique feature of M.O.V.E. 2012 was a Light Rail Tour of Minneapolis. Students and leaders were divided into eight groups and boarded the train near the Metrodome. At each of five stops between downtown and the Mall of America, groups got off the train and heard presentations about issues facing that part of the city.

"Our group had a great time, and they're not always easy to please with this event," said Mark Hakanson, youth pastor at Community Covenant Church in Minneapolis. "Thanks for all the hard work piecing together the light rail experience. It was a highlight."

Read the full M.O.V.E. 2012 story at www.nwc-cov.org

the teenagers in our conference are able to experience collaborative efforts like CHIC and M.O.V.E.—and through those, get a sense of God calling them to follow Him.

This upcoming season will be a busy one on a conference level: Adventures in Leadership, CHIC (Covenant's tri-annual youth event), M.U.U.C.E., and camps. In order to prepare for this next season and to strengthen

our network and our souls, youth pastors from across our conference will gather together for a retreat in May. It will be a chance to rest, to talk, to pray and to strengthen the cords that bind us together.

If you're interested in learning more about the different leadership development opportunities for NWC youth workers, contact Ginny Olson at gabby@nwc-cov.org.

THE CHURCH IS THE BURDEN OF GOD, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ence to His people. The God who had gone before them in the wilderness and had been a "sanctuary" for them during the exile was still with them, and He promised to fill this new house with His glory.

Verse 8 confirms that those who were disappointed with Zerubbabel's temple were focusing on its external beauty—on the structure. But God assured the leaders and the people that even while the new temple could not measure up to the previous one in its appearance, God would do a new thing; an

even greater thing because of His glory and through His glory!

Oh, the second temple would also be adorned with silver and gold, and Herod would eventually renovate and expand Zerubbabel's temple in an attempt to match the dimensions and grandeur of its predecessor. But he only partly succeeded. Yes, his improvements were impressive enough for Jesus' disciples to comment on the massive size of the temple's stones and the magnificence of its buildings (Mark 13:1). But note

what Jesus says in the following verse ... hmmm!

No! The power is not found in what can be seen or owned or orchestrated. The power is in the glory of God's presence—filling our lives, and our ministries, and our churches, and our conference—maybe in far greater ways than could have ever been imagined in the past.

After all, the Church is the Burden of God and He will provide!

Mark R. Stromberg, Superintendent

RIVERWOOD MOVES INTO NEW BUILDING

Riverwood Covenant Church was planted in 2000 in the city of Rockford, MN. The church met at the local high school for the last 12 years. The NWC has walked with this new church over the years, providing coaching and assistance as the church grew.

"I can honestly say that without the intentional, strong help of the Northwest Conference staff, I very much doubt if our church would even be in existence today, much less opening our first building," said Keith Robinson, senior pastor of Riverwood. "Stated another way, we owe a huge debt of gratitude and honor to the Northwest Conference staff, who have been more than instrumental in the success of this church."

Two years ago Riverwood started Riverworks, a Community Development Corporation that is meeting tangible needs in the Rockford community and beyond through its food pantry and thrift shop ministries.

"The NWC provided a grant to help us launch RiverWorks This grant paid for all the initial costs of getting the paperwork and legal standing taken care of," Robinson said. "RiverWorks has served over 2,000 people in our area since its inception. We have a fantastic partnership between Riverwood and RiverWorks, and it is a mutual blessing."

Land was purchased early in the process of planting, but the church was unable to build on that property until construction on a first



Members of Riverwood look on as the cross is carried out of the school building during a move-in celebration on March 4.

phase worship and office space began last year. Riverwood moved into its new building on March 4, and celebrated with a Grand Opening on April 15.

"The move in day was a tremendous celebration with an escort from the fire and sheriff's departments from the high school to the new building, complete with sirens," said Mike Brown, NWC director of church planting.

Riverwood's new church building is situated in the township of Greenfield and is the first new church constructed in the township in 108 years.

"The monthly Church Planter's Connection,

led by Mike Brown, has really helped support and guide me as a pastor, and the church as a whole," Robinson said.

"Riverwood is thriving today because of God's faithfulness and visionary lay and pastoral leadership who stayed focused on the reason they were planted throughout the ups and downs of the last 12 years," Brown said.

While we are really excited about Riverwood moving into their new facility, we are more excited about all the people they are reaching and will reach in the days ahead. After all, you don't build a church building for yourselves, you build it for your children and their children, and all those that God will bring. Church planting is first and foremost about reaching people, people we might not reach any other way. So we celebrate with Riverwood and are anticipating more great stories of God's faithfulness as they continue to live into their call.

NORTHWEST CONFERENCE CALENDAR

MAY 20-22 // Youth Pastor's Retreat – Lake Beauty Bible Camp

JUNE 16-23 // Adventures in Leadership - Adventurous Christians

JUNE 21-23 // ECC Annual Meeting – Irvine, CA

JULY 15-20 // CHIC – Knoxville, TN

SEPTEMBER 30 - OCTOBER 1 // Town and Country Workshop – Grand Rapids, MN

OCTOBER 1-3 // Ministerial Association Retreat – Grand Rapids, MN

OCTOBER 9-10 // Parish Nurse Retreat – Covenant Pines Bible Camp

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developing leaders. thriving churches.

The Northwest Conference is a regional conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. We are approximately 140 churches in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota.