

Updates from the Midwest Conference Administrators:

Superintendent Kenneth P. Carlson



“Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and breakup your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.”
Hosea 10:12

Almost half of our 83 conference churches are soon celebrating or have already celebrated one hundred years of congregational life, and some have celebrated over 125 years of ministry; remarkably a handful of churches are approaching 140 years of service to the Lord! These numbers suggest that the questions we are asking these churches about rekindling a healthy missional vision for their ministry are critical to their future life. In many situations, **(whether over 100 or younger)** churches need to re-plow ground that has become “compacted” by the complacency of contentedness and the lack of vision and spirit for future ministry. The response to the challenge given our pastors and church leaders in the Veritas seminars (with Dr. John Wenrich, Director of Congregational Vitality for the Covenant) is causing the “ground” of numerous congregations in our conference to begin breaking up. Many are grasping the fact that to be healthy and missional today, a local church needs to entertain discussions about “what needs to be done differently?” in order to reach a lost and biblically illiterate society with the truth of the biblical message. These conversations can be difficult, although absolutely necessary. The alternative to complacency for our churches is the reality that they will eventually go into crisis; as Dave Olson, Director of Church Planting for the Covenant, declares: “Most American churches (including Evangelical Covenant) are in decline and only 20% of the population in any community is attending worship services each week.” The call is clear: it is time to seek the LORD and listen to what He wants for our local ministries in these ever-changing times!

I am excited to see what God is going to do in the lives of our congregations that have a passion to become more healthy and missional. Our conference staff, led by conference Director of Congregational Vitality, Dave Benedict, is committed to help each church in any way we can, providing coaching for pastors, leading strategic Veritas seminars, bringing encouragement, and giving guidance to local church leadership teams as they lead steps to greater health and vitality. Dave has also become a master at coaching churches on how to restructure their governance system for more effective and efficient ministry.

FINANCES

God has blessed us abundantly this year and we give Him praise!! The irony of this blessing is that it came as our nation was going into its worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Our local church support reached an all time high, going over \$600,000 for the first time in our history. This is such an encouragement to our staff and conference executive board; we are so grateful for the commitment and sacrifice this represents from each of our local congregations that gave us support. Remarkably, this total giving is 25% more than the pledges we received from our churches early in the year. It indicates that we are partnering with a conference of churches that desire to be obedient and faithful in their support of the wider Kingdom ministry in which we share, as we see more and more local congregations **giving of their first fruits** to the conference. **WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER!**

In addition to this generous ministry support we have also received gifts from individuals and bequests this year totaling \$82,136. We have been blessed by two churches, Mason City, IA, and Oakland, NE, (actually Jan 2009) who each received a substantial bequest and chose to distribute a portion of their bequest to several ministry partners of which we were one. What a **wonderful example of faith and generosity!**

A LIVING LEGACY CHURCH

God was guiding our staff as we navigated the closing of **New Beginnings Community Church**, formerly First Covenant Church of Denver, during the first half of 2008. The harmony and unity of this painful resolve and closure in June can only be attributed to the powerful guiding of the Holy Spirit. We are grateful to Pastor Gary and Katie Copeland and the lay leadership team for shepherding this process with Associate Superintendent Rick Mylander and Rob Hall of the Covenant Dept. of Church Growth and Evangelism. This congregation’s decision to close and sell their property, with the proceeds going to church planting in the denomination and conference, is why it is considered a Living Legacy Church. Miraculously, the property sold and closed just 60 days after the final

celebration service; the conference and denomination each received over \$1 million to plant more churches. We have been blessed *"immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine..."* (Ephesians 3:20a)

TRENDS

Being more efficient and cost effective seems to be the heart cry of much of what we all do these days. To that end, the **conference executive board** has begun to reorganize itself to be more effective in communication, strategic thinking and planning, and support of our staff and churches. We are encouraged already as we see positive results from having three meetings and three conference calls a year, with more focused discussions and good energy generated from everyone. We also perceive that this format will be an encouragement for people who are approached about serving on the board as it requires less time away from home and work.

About fifteen years ago our conference board made an intentional **commitment to plant two new churches a year**. As we reflect on these years, we praise God that He has helped bless that commitment. It has not always been precisely two churches a year (at times more, at times less), but 31 churches have been planted in our conference since 1994. Three of these plants were already in their infancy when there was a mutual decision for them to join our denomination. During this period, we have had two fully established churches affiliate with us. Four of our church plants concluded their ministries when they no longer were sustainable. The attendance in our "new" churches represents a 61% increase in all conference churches from the number in 1994. We plant churches seeking the fruit of transformed lives and we praise God for the harvest He has brought through them. The impact of church planting during this season for our conference can be attributed in large measure to Rick Mylander who joined our staff as the Director of Church Planting in 1996 and his work with our regional church planting committees.

ALASKA VILLAGE PARTNERSHIP

Each conference in the Covenant is establishing a partnership with at least one Alaskan bush village church. The Evangelical Covenant Church of Mountain Village, Alaska, will be our partner, and the focus of this relationship will be to send mission teams to Mountain Village each summer to work on projects for the church and village AND to build relationships with the congregation and village residents that will grow through the years. Visualizing the opportunity to help a congregation and village which are so remote and cope with such harsh weather conditions truly excites me. Think about it; we as a conference of churches can make a huge difference in the lives of a few hundred people in this village through our prayers, compassion and donations. The mission team members who travel there will tangibly embody the love of God to the people of Mountain Village through their time, talent and treasure. This is another way in which **Midwest Conference churches can DO IT BETTER TOGETHER!**

GRATITUDE

God has so graciously blessed the relationships that have grown for me among the people of the Midwest Conference; He is so good! This journey of ministry would not be possible without the support of my colleagues, and Associate Superintendents, Dave Benedict and Rick Mylander and our very capable and committed office staff, Reva Neal and Lori Anderson; they are friends and ministry partners. Our gifted conference board members also provide great support while creating a climate in which to test ideas, stretch and generate vision and mission for the future. These people are all special gifts to me and I treasure their partnership and friendship. My dear wife, Nancy, continues to amaze me (after almost 40 years of marriage) with her strong commitment as a ministry partner, her patience and flexibility, and her passion to also remain involved in the ministry of our home church.

As we look ahead at the potential for this coming year, the temptation is great to become pessimistic and gloomy because of the downturn the world economy has taken. However, as followers of Jesus Christ our hope is in Him and His provision for us in this life and the life to come. Therefore, these times provide an even greater opportunity to minister to people who may be more open to God's love and message as they face difficult or even desperate circumstances and choices. May we be diligent in our ministry to reach out to those in our circle of influence and relationship with compassionate hearts and generous spirits.

We Welcomed the Following New Pastors and Full-time Staff

Joel Adams, Co-director of Student Ministries, Arvada CO (Arvada Covenant)
 Betsy Anderson, Associate Youth Director, Salina KS (First Covenant)
 Cesar Arroyo, Pastor, Colorado Springs CO (Iglesia Christiana Getsemani)
 Eric Bain, Pastor, Westminster CO
 Sten Carlson, High School Director, Loveland CO (Crossroads)
 Melvin Cole, Pastor, Kansas City MO (Freedom Fire Ministries)
 Justin Dillard, Children's Ministry, Westminster CO

Marty Garrett, Associate Pastor/Youth, Mason City IA
 Kurt Gewinner, Co-director of Student Ministries, Arvada CO (Arvada Covenant)
 Mike Gillett, Advocate for Army Wounded Warriors, Wichita KS
 Jules Glanzer, President of Tabor College, Hillsboro KS
 Jeffrey Hill, Resident Minister, Prairie Village KS
 Tyler Hust, Tech Team Director, Loveland CO (Crossroads)
 Paul Lessard, Off-site Center Director at Colorado Christian University, Grand Junction CO
 Brad Mann, Interim Pastor, Castle Rock CO
 Marc Murchison, Pastor, Lanyon IA
 Dick Nystrom, Interim Pastor, Decorah IA
 Wilford Portillo, Pastor, Carthage MO
 Nathan Powell, Associate Pastor, Arvada CO (Arvada Covenant)
 Philip Rohler, Interim Pastor, Wausa NE
 Daniel Schmidt, Next Generation and Family Pastor, Loveland CO (Crossroads)
 Richard Skar, Pastor, McPherson KS (New Gottland)
 Brian Sky, Church Planting Pastor, Fort Collins CO (Gratitude Covenant)
 Carl Sutter, Pastor of Equipping Ministries, Loveland CO (Crossroads)
 Johan Tredoux, Pastor, Lenexa KS
 Joel Wentworth, Pastor, Bristow NE
 Heidi Wiebe, Pastor, Topeka KS
 Chris Williams, Associate Pastor, Lee's Summit MO
 Dane Wutke, Worship and Youth Pastor, Clay Center KS

We are Grateful to the Following Pastors and Staff Concluding Ministry in our Conference

Lance Albin, Youth Pastor, Salina KS (First Covenant)
 Ken Busse, Pastor, McPherson KS (New Gottland)
 Martha Freeman, Pastor, Omaha NE (Community Covenant)
 Herb Frost, Pastor, Castle Rock CO
 Marty Garrett, Interim Pastor, Lanyon IA
 Jeff Grote, Associate Pastor, Westminster CO
 Chris Icenogle, Pastor, Olathe KS
 Matt Kronberg, Pastor, Decorah IA
 Brad Mann, Pastor, Springfield MO
 Cary Mock, Minister of Worship and Arts, Prairie Village KS
 Jason Mohn, Worship Pastor, Salina KS (First Covenant)
 Scott Oas, Associate Pastor, Loveland CO (Crossroads)
 Craig Pinley, Co-Associate Youth and Family Pastor, Mason City IA
 Mary Pinley, Co-Associate Youth and Family Pastor, Mason City IA
 Randy Rodenborg, Pastor, Wausa NE
 Allan Serrano, Pastor, Carthage MO
 Heidi Wiebe, Pastor, Oberlin KS

Special Acknowledgements

- **Ordained to Word and Sacrament:**
 - Karl Peter Freeberg, Pastor, Evangelical Covenant Church, Pomeroy IA
 - Jodi Kaye Moore, Pastor, Evangelical Covenant Church, Ceresco NE
 - Joe E. Thackwell, Youth Pastor, Evangelical Covenant Church, Fort Collins CO
 - Dario Vasquez, Church Planting Pastor, LaMiel Covenant Church, Salina KS
- **Church Anniversaries:**
 - Westminster CO – Colorado Ridge (10 years)
 - Decorah IA – Decorah Covenant (10 years)
- **Deaths:**
 - Edgar Lindstrom, April 1, 2008
 - Marie Wiebe, July 11, 2008
 - Paul Westburg, October 14, 2008

Thanks be to God for the life and witness of these servants.

In His Grace,
 Kenneth P. Carlson, Superintendent

Associate Superintendent, Coordinator for Western Hub Ministries, and Director of Conference Church Planting, Richard G. Mylander



Several years ago, that fantastic Christian tenor Steve Green popularized a song, the chorus of which goes:

*To love the Lord our God is the heartbeat of our mission,
The spring from which our service overflows.
Across the street or around the world, the mission's still the same:
Proclaim and live the truth in Jesus' name.*

The question could well be asked: if loving the Lord our God is the heartbeat of our mission, is mission itself then the heartbeat of our ministry? Through the ages it has been so, hasn't it? Our love for God (which of course is only made possible by His first having loved us -- see 1 John 4:19) is the motivator, the passion behind the service we perform for Him. God's mission is our mission, it's that simple, both next door and on the other side of "this terrestrial ball." I am so grateful to be a partner in this ministry with you here in the Midwest Conference, as we together seek to tell of and live what we have found in Jesus.

As is typical, the year found several western hub churches completing or initiating pastoral search processes. These periods of time present moments of more extreme vulnerability for every church, so we are developing initiatives for more intentional service and care to churches during this interim/transitional period, one such time when our closer proximity to our hub churches allows more frequent coaching and connection points. More challenging and potentially debilitating than transitional periods, however, are periods of conflict when mediation has been demanded; the western hub has seen its share of these circumstances as well this year, but God has been good to us as we have sought to deal with issues in Christ-honoring ways. Additionally, several churches are in the throes of turnaround strategies, and these have been a particular delight to work with. How we pray, long for, and work toward the renewed refreshing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:20) in all our church settings. Building programs, or the planning for such, have also greatly challenged some of our western hub ministries. It is unfortunate that such a mundane need as a place to hang a coat challenges us so often. I believe there is a culture-shift in the wind on this particular issue, and that the reality of building needs will demand greater prayerfulness and creativity than ever before.

An interesting development in our conference has been the recent availability of newly Covenant-trained and certified spiritual directors. These friends will become important resources for us as we seek to develop healthy spiritual formation in our pastors and lay leaders. So far, six persons have been certified in this new program, with several more from our conference in process. As this ministry gains visibility, please avail yourselves to its growth benefits.

On the church planting and development scene, 2008 saw us welcoming into full Covenant membership three new churches, only the second time in our history that we have been able to do this. And two of these three were churches that increase our ethnic diversity, a wonderful and continuing answer to prayer. New Day Covenant of Boulder, Colorado, was founded in early 2005 by Pastor Doug and Lesa White, and though it has been a difficult beachhead to establish, Doug's persistence, sacrifice and commitment to the mission have been key here. Iglesia Cristiana Getsemani of Colorado Springs was established about the same time by Pastor Cesar and Lyn Arroyo, reaching out to the huge Latino/Latina population in this growing Colorado city. Also very sacrificial in their leadership, Cesar runs a tailor shop full-time, from which he draws his financial support, allowing the church to utilize offerings for ministry. Just recently, Getsemani has partnered with Faith Covenant to share worship and ministry space. Finally, we received by affiliation the predominantly African-American Abyssinian Christian Church of Fort Collins, Colorado. Pastor David and Debbie Williams began this ministry in the early 90's, after completing campus ministry service at Colorado State University. This is a wonderful established ministry, and we are delighted to be in partnership and fellowship with them.

Additionally, 2008 also found the conference partnering in the planting of two new churches, one in Kansas City, Missouri, and another in Fort Collins, Colorado. Freedom Fire Urban Ministries of Kansas City has served the youth of its intense inner-city neighborhood for over ten years. Recently, the ministry has dreamed of planting a multi-ethnic church to extend the outreach more deeply and permanently into the community's families. Pastors Melvin Cole and Bruce McGregor have undertaken the leadership, along with their spouses Marie and Linda, and we are

testing a youth-ministry-to-church model for the first time. Additionally, Pastor Brian and Pam Sky have begun a pioneering work in Fort Collins called, delightfully, Gratitude Covenant Church. Brian is a gifted and Godly pastor with strong connections in the community, though, of course, it is not his plan to exploit former church contacts. Pray for both of these fledgling churches.

As we look to new church memberships in 2009, we find ourselves in an interesting place. There are five churches "on the bubble," as is said, two Covenant plants and three affiliations. However, all of them seem just a bit short of readiness for joining, so we have recently decided to not pursue membership for any of them during this year. Unfortunately, this will put us in a position of no churches joining this year for the first time in well over a decade. Though this is a sad development as far as I am concerned, I know it is a timing issue only, and could be followed by a year in which we end up with a record number of churches joining! (The most we have ever had at one time is three, in 2008.) So we will press on in development of these, and trust the Lord with their readiness.

A challenge presents itself, however. Once again, you may see that we continue to undertake pioneered works. These are not the most advisable of starts, as pioneering work requires extreme risks that parented or partnered projects do not. Pioneered work tends also to be slower. I ask you to join us in praying for the raising up of parented church planting mission projects. Might this be your church?

Yet we go forward, prayerful and hopeful. Several active church-planting committees are looking at potential planting sites. We are deeply grateful to many Midwest Conference Covenanters for their outreach passion and labor on these committees. The Front Range Church Growth and Development Committee oversees planting in Colorado, and also provides an important connectional opportunity for our churches and leaders in that area. The Central Kansas Church Planting Committee has prayed through and supported our newer ministries in El Dorado, Salina and Wichita, Kansas, and is seeking vision as to where the Lord will lead next. Our faithful Iowa Church Planting and Renewal Committee (IowaCPR) also has valued regular connection and prayer as it awaits the call of another church planter to its region. In addition to these, there are three inactive committees in Nebraska, also awaiting the discovery of church-planting personnel to reengage their gathering – one in Omaha, one in northeast Nebraska, and another connecting our churches from Mead out the I-80 corridor to Brady. All six of these committees have funds gathered over time with which to work, some more than others, of course; please ask me if you would like to see financials relative to any of the committees. All are seeking God for new churches in their respective regions. Our thanks go to them all for their vision and heart. It is becoming increasingly clear that churches do best at planting churches, not denominations. The former provide greater local and regional understanding, better connections and communication, and even superior accountability systems.

Finally, please continue to pray for harvesters for our Plains States mission fields. As always, it is most difficult to find planters for Iowa and Nebraska. Continue to join me in praying them in. As we seek qualified church planters, we want to encourage the calling out of new church planters from within our own Plains States churches. Nobody knows the area better than those who have grown up here. Please encourage gifted people of all ages in your congregations, that God may call them into ministry, some even church-planting ministry. Church planting is one of the ways we can remain on the cutting edge of mission advancement in our established churches.

The scriptures say we have nothing we have not first received. I am keenly aware of this, grateful for those without whom all of what I do would not be possible. Thanks be to God who "daily bears me up." Thank you also: to my colleagues and brothers Ken Carlson and Dave Benedict, with whom God has joined my heart in service to the conference; to Reva Neal and Lori Anderson, who have become much more than co-laborers in our office, but sisters in faith and beloved friends; to my faithful prayer partners -- there isn't a day that passes that I take their prayer for granted; to our committed conference board members, sharing key ministry roles in unseen ways; to you all, Midwest Covenant mission friends, for the privilege that is mine to minister alongside you; to my family, especially my dear wife, Gail, who fills my life with love and joy, supporting me in quiet yet enormous ways.

It is a joy for me to serve you. Our mission is not finished. God's heart is to reach thousands of lost men, women and children in our conference region. We trust Him to continue to provide us all the energy and resources required to serve His Kingdom well.

By His Grace, With You, and Respectfully Submitted with Anticipation and Confidence,
Richard G. Mylander,
Associate Superintendent, West Hub Coordinator and Director of Conference Church Planting

Associate Superintendent and Director of Congregational Vitality, David Benedict



Greetings and many blessings to you. The year of our Lord 2008 will long be remembered by historians as the year when a perfect storm of economic forces united and then plunged the world into a financial crisis that transcended the contributions of any single country, either in causing or in curing the crisis. It was the year we discovered that the fortunes of all the world's peoples, whether friends or foes, are inextricably linked, one to another. If any nation's economy is to recover, all economies must recover. We are in this life together.

This is something we, in the Church, have always known. No man, no people, no nation is an island. Nor is any congregation. We are better together.

Better Together is not just the slogan of the Midwest Conference. It is the key piece of DNA that formed the Covenant; individual congregations banding together to impact the Kingdom in a way no single congregation could by itself.

And, for me, 2008 was a ***Better Together*** kind of year. From my vantage point, traveling among the 26 churches in the Kansas-Missouri hub area, and working in revitalization with churches in the other two hubs, I experienced a new level of connection and cooperation between congregations and pastors that encourages me greatly.

Here are a couple of examples:

Pastors supporting pastors; throughout the Midwest Conference there are groups of Covenant pastors meeting regularly to build relationships, to encourage and pray for one another, and to find ways to share ministry and resources. Even though pastors are surrounded by people, sometimes day and night, it can be a lonely profession, and pastors minister to other pastors in a way no one else can.

Churches working together; 2008 was another year when several MWC churches joined together to help rebuild the communities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Hillcrest Covenant of Prairie Village, KS, took the lead on a project to help rebuild the town of Phoenix, LA, but they couldn't have made the progress they did without being joined by other churches, including Covenant churches from Springfield, MO, Overland Park and Shawnee, KS.

Churches supporting the MWC budget; 2008 was a good financial year for us, even though the economy faltered, because the highest percentage of churches ever made and kept pledges to support our ministry to all the churches of the conference as pastors for pastors, coaches for churches, and resources when there is trouble or a pastoral transition.

No one knows what awaits us in 2009 and beyond, but this much we do know; it is no time for churches to try and face their challenges alone. We are simply better when we are together.

Veritas and EPIC

Conversations have started as a result of the Veritas "architecture" (four kinds of churches: healthy-missional churches, stable churches, critical moment churches, and at-risk churches) that are producing real fruit for the churches that have pursued them intentionally. *The big idea of Veritas is that each church begins to tell itself the truth about its own vitality.* And, as always in God's Kingdom, the truth sets us free, even when it is difficult or painful. Three major results have emerged:

- Churches are adopting Behavioral Covenants. A behavioral covenant is a conversation about how to have conversations that are difficult and potentially painful. *How can we be our best selves while we are telling ourselves the truth about ourselves? How can we have difficult conversations that are civil, compassionate, and Christ-honoring?* A number of churches in the conference have recognized the importance of this step and have developed written commitments that guide them when the conversations become difficult. This step alone can revolutionize a church's life together and jump-start a commitment to becoming a more healthy, more missional church.

- Churches are establishing Veritas Teams. A Veritas Team is an appointed or elected team of leaders who are committed to moving the church along the path to becoming more and more *healthy*, more and more *missional*. The typical church board, council, or leadership team has such a variety of duties and responsibilities that it is usually more than they can do to keep a church moving along the path toward renewed vitality. Churches that are serious about their vitality are finding it helpful to set up a Veritas Team to chart a course and then be responsible for moving things along. I've noticed that many of the churches that haven't created a Veritas Team are bogging down and losing momentum. The journey toward renewed vitality is a long one; it takes focus, diligence and patience to make progress, qualities a Veritas Team can help supply.
- Churches and pastors are asking VIM Questions. (VIM stands for Vision, Intentionality, and Means) If by vision we mean "God's preferred future for our church," it's easy to see that without a vision, no church can move toward renewed vitality. Many of our churches have started asking, "What does God want for our church?" instead of, "What do I want?" and most cases, the results are stunning (listen to the story of our church in Osage City, KS, during the business session of the Annual Meeting or watch the video that will come to your church). But, landing on a vision is only part of the process. The next question that must be answered is, "Do we have the intentionality...the will...the *fire in our bellies* to pursue our vision?" And, if that answer is yes, the next question is, "Do we have the means...the human, spiritual, and financial resources to move ahead?" This series of questions is crucial to take the stars out of our eyes and to lock in the reality that we *need* God if we want real vitality instead of just new programs.

Another step a number of our conference churches have taken is attending an EPIC seminar. EPIC stands for *Empowering People, Inspiring Change*, and it was developed by John Wenrich because leading change is hard, and, for some reason, it is even harder in the Church. In the Fall of 2008, we invited John to present this six-hour seminar in each of our three hub areas, and over half of our conference churches sent delegations. Just as we've found ways to help push Veritas deeper and deeper into our churches, we'll look for ways to make sure EPIC is not just another seminar that comes and goes. It is a powerful tool.

Governance Reorganization

One other vitality initiative I'd like to report on is the degree to which MWC churches are taking advantage of Veritas to examine their own governance systems and to begin revitalizing their "ministry delivery systems" if necessary. To date, I've visited with leadership groups in 25% of our churches, conference wide, and over 70% of the churches in Kansas and Missouri about changing the way they organize themselves in order to do the ministry God is calling them to do. Too many churches have meetings, that's what our boards, councils and committees do, "meet." Dozens of churches are discovering a way to organize things so that "getting ministry done" rather than "having a meeting" characterizes their church gatherings.

Thank You!

I am so grateful for the partnership of my brothers and colleagues, Ken Carlson and Rick Mylander. Their love and patience has been a deep ministry to me. And I'm grateful for the support of our conference office staff, Reva Neal and Lori Anderson. They are the greatest!

And I'm grateful for you, the member churches of the Midwest Conference. May we never lose sight of our shared life and high calling!

God's richest blessings,

David P. Benedict, Associate Superintendent
Director of Congregational Vitality and facilitator of the Kansas-Missouri Hub