

**RE-DISCOVERING INTENTIONAL USE OF THE CHURCH COVENANT  
AS THE BASIS FOR SELF-IDENTITY  
IN A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH COMMUNITY**

A précis of

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**A Narrative Dialogue**

“But our last minister said that we do not need vision or mission statements. We are a Congregational church.”

Initially, I reacted with shock at this statement. An entire shelf in my library held books on strategic planning, visioning, and composition of church mission statements that I had gathered since seminary. I wondered what my predecessor knew that my seminary professors failed to grasp. After all, I had been emphatically taught, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18 KJV). Diplomatically I asked, “Just what do you think she meant—that we do not need a vision or a mission?”

The entire group, which had met for some strategic planning for the future of our church, stared at one another with intense quizzical looks. Finally, one member broke the silence saying, “I am not sure we know.”

“We just said, ‘ok,’ and dropped the mission and vision statements that a committee had prepared a few years earlier. I think she said something about just having a covenant—that is all that a Congregational Church needs.”

“Yes! All we need is our covenant. That is the Congregational Way. Covenant is the glue,” said a long standing Congregationalist, “that is what binds us together and allows us to maintain our traditions.” Almost as if on cue, the jokester of the group struck a vocal note, singing the song from *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Tradition! Tradition!”

Indeed, the former minister had taught a historical Congregational belief that the church covenant is central to the church community and they should not use any prescribed creed as a test of fellowship. Rather, she taught that as with the first gathered body of Congregationalists at Salem in 1629, our churches should proclaim, “We covenant with you, O God, and with one another to walk together in all your ways as you reveal yourself to us in your blessed word of Truth.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to historic Congregationalism, covenant alone defines the church.

Clearly the group wanted to remain true to our Congregationalist heritage and traditions. However, no one knew what exactly that meant for the present, nor the future, of our church.

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<sup>1</sup> Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 116.

Complicating matters further, one lady stressed that she did not think we were much of a Congregational church any more. She said so many new people have been part of “other” churches; they did not grow up as Congregationalists and do not know “The Congregational Way.”

One fellow said, “I have been here most of my life, and I am not sure I know what that means either!”

“Things just are not the same any longer,” many lamented as discussion ensued about the differences in the congregation since various “such and such” events had happened. The conversation erupted among the people. Seemingly all at once, members of the group said to each other:

“To be honest, I am not sure that we all even like each other.”

“Nor do we know each other, not really.”

“I miss the community feeling we had at my old church,” one said.

“The door is always open for you to go back,” said another, tongue in cheek.

“Yes! That is a problem too! The back door is wide open, even when folks come in, they don’t always stay.”

“What *is* our problem?!”

“We are too busy gossiping and back-biting to do anything for God.”

“Things may never be like the old days. . . .”

Trying to pull the group back on task, I asked, “How can we grasp a sense of vision of where God is taking us and the mission God has called us to as a community of faith, while hanging on to the past tradition?”

Our beloved self-proclaimed congregational historian quickly chimed in, “We cannot break the tradition of covenant! Whatever we do it must be in the context of the covenant, that is our way, after all.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to approach the question differently. “How do we live as a covenanted community—true to our identity as Congregationalists? How do we live, love, care for one another? How do we become the church we are supposed to be?”

Again, the group stared at one another and me. “Well, you’re the pastor. You tell us!” one member said.

“With that, is there a motion to adjourn?” I smiled. But, the meeting basically ended. We all chuckled, but I knew that there was much true to the “you tell us” declaration. I had to figure out how we can live in covenanted community and share that knowledge with the congregation. I began to ask a series of questions: What are the ramifications of having a clearly defined understanding of our identity as a covenanted community of faith? What does this understanding mean for how the church worships, disciples, fellowships, reaches out, and cares in ministry for one another? What needs to be done to answer these questions?

### Statement of the Problem

In an ideal world, an intentional covenant community of faith knows itself and applies the self-knowledge formatively. Yet, all too often, in the real world, a church is confused about itself, holding conflicting ideas about whom and what it is. Lacking a sense of identity, a church will function as any other social organization—that is, an organized group of people who are together for a purpose, but not the God-given purpose of being a community of faith. Michael Foss says, “Organizational affiliations are casual for many individuals and a significant number of Christians view the church as just one more of these affiliations.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, this project seeks to awaken a clear identity of a Congregational church to its calling to be an intentional covenanted community.

This road will not be easy. Many Congregational churches over-stress individual autonomy and independency rather than community. Even forty years ago, in 1969, Harry Stubbs said,

My diagnosis is that Congregationalism is suffering from acute amnesia. In contemporary pseudo-scientific, psychological jargon, we are suffering from an identity crisis. From time to time we are urged, as individuals in such a case, to sit down and meditate on the questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? My judgment is that such a procedure for us as a religious body is just as bootless as it is for individuals.<sup>3</sup>

Congregational Churches struggle with their identity as covenanted communities of faith. Without rediscovering this identity, the church will continue to suffer from a lack of genuine care for one another. There will be no vehicle for the transmission of the faith. Nor will the church have the ability to articulate and live the gospel message in its particular context.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Harry J. Stubbs, “On Rediscovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Church Order” (lecture, First Congregational Church Annual Lecture on Congregationalism, Toledo, OH, February 2, 1969), 1.

Several questions help define this problem: (1) How does a well defined identity as an intentional covenanted community help a Congregational church be who Christ intends it to be? (2) What are the ramifications of the community embracing its identity as an intentional covenanted community of faith? And (3) how can a Congregational church apply its self-knowledge as a covenanted community? Thus, in short, the project attempts to discover a practical theology founded in the idea of intentional covenanted community and then explore the praxis of that theology, implementing covenant in community. To discover, or re-discover this identity, the project explores the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational concepts of the church covenant as foundational for an ecclesiastic-self-identity and then explores the implications of being intentional about the use of the covenant in living out the dynamics of faith in community.

### **Important Definitions**

Prior to an attempt to seek an answer to the question of the meaning of an intentional covenanted community, three words must be preliminarily defined. “Community,” “covenant,” and “praxis” will be presented here, with the intention that a full understanding of these terms will develop as the project unfolds.

#### **A Preliminary Definition of Community**

The idea of community cannot be assumed to be clear in the reader’s mind. The word is used in multiple ways: from a church to a section of a city, from therapeutic hospital wings to gatherings of various organisms. When used in this project, the word “community” signifies the gathered body of Christian believers into an organic and spiritual body. More than just a

gathering of people (a crowd), and more than a gathering of people claiming Christ in some fashion (a collective), the community is one of faith—intrinsically linked to one another by the Spirit of God. As Tod Bolsinger explains,

[T]here is, of course, a crucial difference between a *crowd* and a *community*. That is where a number of would-be models for the twenty-first-century Christianity get it wrong, and that is one of the key themes of this book. For many churches, the main goal is to build a big crowd, and community is tacked onto the bargain (usually in the form of a small group), the way that medical benefits and vacation days are tacked onto a job offer. But while *crowds* come and go, true and enduring Christian *community* is a foretaste of heaven, the essence of the discipleship, the enduring witness to an unbelieving world, and an absolutely necessity for human transformation. Even more subtly, but importantly, there is an enduring difference between a *collective* of individual Christians and a *community*. Many pastors and lay leaders talk the right talk—about needing to be relational rather than programmatic—but they then get hopelessly lost in creating relational programs so that their collective of individual Christians will have a sense of connection to each other. However, the fundamental reality of the church as an enduring covenantal, irreducible, and Trinity-reflecting entity *in and of itself* is overlooked entirely.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in the discussion of an intentional covenanted community, the spiritual (even mystical) connection between members of the community must be retained as an essential element to the community itself. The application of an understanding of covenanted community avoids Bolsinger's warning of a false sense of community.

The church is meant to live in community. Bernard Prusak writes,

As Christians, we live into the future, not as isolated individuals, but as members of a believing community, ever responding to a call and partaking in the liberating power of our faith tradition. The faith tradition of our mothers and fathers lives in us as we move into the future of the creation we are called to reshape in love. It pulsates in our efforts to live out an identity forged by the biblical narrative and empowered by the incarnational, sacramental expressions of our life in faith.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tod E. Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 314.

Miraslav Volf, likewise, states, “The search of contemporary human beings for community is a search for those particular forms of socialization in which they themselves are taken seriously with their various religious and social needs, in which their personal engagement is valued, and in which they can participate formatively.”<sup>6</sup>

### A Preliminary Definition of Covenanted Community

The covenant is a theological concept found as a major emphasis in churches of the Reformed tradition, including the Congregational heritage passed-on from the Puritans and Pilgrims. Foundational Congregational documents, such as the Cambridge Platform, outline the essentiality of covenant for the church community.<sup>7</sup> One of the major distinctions between other types of groups and a covenanted community is the level of commitment to the community that a covenant should bear. John English comments,

Commitments are expressed by *contracts* or *covenants*. Whether contract arrangements can express community is a moot point. Contracts involve a give-and-take arrangement. The parties pay in one form or another for goods or services rendered. In a covenant arrangement the parties share their goods, talents, and lives. Ideally, covenant is the sharing of each other’s person.<sup>8</sup>

This last line must be re-emphasized: Covenant is the sharing of each other’s person. This sharing happens in the context of relationship. Shelton notes that “[T]he concept of covenant reflects a relationship that is interpersonal rather than an objective impersonal statement of law.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Robert E. Davis, *Historic Documents of Congregationalism* (Miller Falls, MA: Puritan Press, 2005), 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 39.

Thus, a covenanted community participates in the (interpersonal) sharing of each other's person in a spiritual (even mystical) connective bond. Persons commit (I.e., covenant) themselves to carry each other's burdens and share in their joys and fears. They covenant to "do life" together. The covenanted community participates in common successes and failures and bears each other's sufferings and disappointments while carrying out their God given purpose of transmitting faith and living out the gospel. Grenz says,

The community focus indicative of the New Testament images is sharpened by the reciprocal relationship between the individual believer and the corporate fellowship indicative of the church as a covenant people . . . . The church is formed through the coming together of those who have entered into covenant with God in Christ and thus with each other. At the same time, the corporate fellowship fosters the faith of those who come to participate in it. As a body of people in covenantal relationship with each other and as a faith-facilitating people, the church is a community.<sup>10</sup>

C. Kirk Hadaway, however, cautions that the church functions more like a social-club when its only reason for existence is community.<sup>11</sup> The community has a purpose and function beyond merely "being together." The intentional-covenanted community is to be the vessel in which transformative process of both the community and the individual can, and should, take place.

### Definition of Praxis

Praxis is a buzzword in many fields of study, and, therefore, requires definition here. Praxis, as used in this project, refers to the practical application of knowledge. Praxis is "practice as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the goal of

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 625.

<sup>11</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>12</sup> *The Random House College Dictionary*, revised edition, s.v. "Praxis."

the project's research is to discover the praxis of a covenant community, the practical application of the knowledge of intentional covenanted community. Theoretical knowledge of living in covenant is of little use. In fact, such unapplied knowledge may harm the community instead of healing it. The research of this project must be applied, incarnated, and enlivened. In the preface to his book, Hadaway writes, "The goal, if it can be called a goal, is to engage in a process of continuous incarnation, flowering and fruiting, that cannot be predicted nor controlled. It can only be cultivated, planted and pruned, nurtured and nourished."<sup>13</sup>

### **Thesis and Plan of Approach**

The journey toward becoming an intentional covenanted community mandates an understanding of the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data concerning covenanted community. Anthony Robinson states, "[W]ithout an ecclesiology formed and informed by Scripture and tradition, clergy and congregations can find themselves seriously misled and confused about their identity and purpose."<sup>14</sup> Armed with such data, an implementation of knowledge can be sought. The thesis of this project is that the application of a biblical, historical, theological and Congregational understanding of living in a covenanted community will enable a Congregational Church to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists. This project begins with four survey chapters viewing covenant community from biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational perspectives. Then the data are applied to the praxis of the data in specific aspects of the community's life.

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<sup>13</sup> Hadaway, *Behold*, x.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 158.



### **A Summary of the Project's Findings**

Chapter 2 examines scriptural materials regarding community. Rich biblical metaphors and images describe the community of faith. The church must realize its identity as a continuation of God's people. The community is God's own possession, gathered together in intimate connection for the purpose of serving God. Because of this connection, the community must engage in the retelling of its narrative (I.e., *anamnesis*). The community also must strive to live out, in praxis, the virtues of Christian faith while eradicating the vices of human nature. The church must live as community because God created it to be community.

Chapter 3 reviews the biblical concept of covenant to build upon chapter 2's findings and create a clear idea of how covenant impacts the community. The primary covenants in Scripture serve as a model of living and loving for the community. Community implies a relationship, and covenant magnifies the commitment in that relationship. Covenant points to a sharing (*koinonia*) of each other's person. Covenant also reveals a broad responsibility of the community to bless those around it. The covenant must be taught in authentic relationships. Covenant must be lived by the community, not merely talked about or written down; although these are vital in the praxis of covenant community.

Chapter 4 offered an overview of the change in emphasis from the early biblical communities to the institutionalization of the church. The shift away from the "covenantal glue" began in the second century and was not fully recovered until the sixteenth century in the onslaught of the Reformation and Puritan movements. Creeds, bishops, apostolic succession, and the papal hierarchy took the place of the binding agent of the community within the first six centuries of the Christian church. The medieval period saw a further hardening of these adhesive

agents as power became increasingly centralized and the Pope became the most powerful man on earth.

The historical survey in chapter 4 cautions the community to use creeds wisely as expressions, rather than tests, of faith. Unity and purity must come from within the relationship—not external to it. Power must not be used as a means of control since all members of the community are on equal footing—pastor and people alike. The survey also reveals the church as a movement of change rather than a static institution. The faith community is far from perfect; it has made mistakes. The present community of faith can learn by reading its history and retelling its story.

Chapter 5 addresses covenant community from a theological perspective. Theology and ecclesiology were simply defined as thinking about God and thinking about church; tasks in which the community must engage. Some pitfalls were highlighted for the community to avoid. The community must realize that God has created diversity; and open dialogue is paramount for the people of God.

A survey of systematic theologies emphasized a deeper understanding of the faith community. From a passage of Grenz, five points were distilled.<sup>15</sup> The chapter ends with eight theological practices in which the community must engage to help the community reflect on who it is and what it is to become.

(1) The community must teach one another about the process of theology and ecclesiology; (2) the community must find creative ways to promote ongoing theological reflection; (3) the community must live with the inherent tensions of its paradoxical

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<sup>15</sup> That is, (1) the essence of the church lies with its people; (2) the church is called out to live in covenantal relationship in God through Christ; (3) members have a consciousness of special standing in fellowship with each other; (4) the covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God; and (5) there is a responsibility to belong to God and one another.

nature, not stressing one aspect over the other; (4) it must avoid the pitfall of entertaining thoughts of superiority and rigid doctrinal boundaries, and keep itself open to dialogue with others while learning to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit; (5) the community must carefully watch how it speaks of itself; (6) it must work at being real, not idealizing or creating a false image of itself, accepting itself for what it is while reaching for what it is to become (note: an open invitation to the Holy Spirit is indispensable to this process); (7) the community must understand its covenant relationship with God and one another as a living-dynamic relation, much more than a statement on paper; (8) the community must be active in its God-given task of proclamation and transformation rather than a self-preserving institution.

Chapter 6 defined and explored the Congregational Way. The history of the Congregational church was laid out from its origins in England. The chapter presents evidence that the Congregational Way of covenanting communities has slowly faded from its proper role as the defining element of Congregationalism. Early writers, Cotton, Ames, and Robinson, as well as foundational-defining documents, such as the Cambridge Platform of 1648, all point to a covenant community as the definition of church. However, conflict, “discipline and detail,”<sup>16</sup> all encroached upon the use of covenant as the defining and binding agent of the church community. Further evidence of decline was presented in a survey of various Congregational manuals, worship books, and hymnals. The twenty-first century church is left without a clear declaration of the use of covenant as the basis for church community.<sup>17</sup>

Chapter 7 examined the application of the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data of covenanted community. Covenant was applied to six areas of the church: worship; fellowship; discipleship; evangelism; ministry; and reflection. The praxis of intentional covenanted community changes the way the community views itself and what it does. At the

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<sup>16</sup> Rouner, A. A., Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life: What it Means to Love and Worship as a Congregationalist* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1972), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Steven A. Peay has written a few articles, quoted throughout the project, which underscore an ecclesiology built upon covenant. Yet, it seems, his voice is a lonely cry in the wilderness.

heart of covenant community is worship—proclaiming and ritualizing. The community hears and experiences the relationship bond. The essence of fellowship lies in being together and truly accepting one another. Covenant reminds people of the importance of intentional practice of hearing each other and loving one another. Covenant must be taught in all contexts of the community's life. Sharing the good news of the gospel of Christ (i.e., evangelism) inculcates people into the fellowship of the community. Covenant relationships transform the community's ministry as it focuses its efforts on utilizing people's gifts and strengths. Since relationships need communication, reflection is a vital task for the community. This process is a combination of being still and in dialogue with one another and God.

The application chapter also offers a section on the personal reflections of a congregational minister and how the concept of intentional covenanted community has impacted his thinking about ministry. Perceptions of vocation, relationships, accountability, commitment, and shepherding are transformed in light of covenant.

The use of covenant within the church community has dwindled. There is not a universally clear sense of how to use covenant, or what it means to live intentionally in covenanted community. The community lacks books on the exclusive subject of the application of church covenant. Thus, Congregational communities of faith must rediscover the use of covenant in community by doing four things: (1) return to the founders' vision, (2) differentiate between the covenant relationship and statement, (3) adapt in transformational change, and (4) address issues of intimacy. These issues will be recounted here in full detail.

### Returning to the Founders' Vision

A small resurgence of an emphasis on covenant relationship is making its way into the discussions of some contemporary Congregationalists.<sup>18</sup> Yet, there will need to be much nurture for this emphasis to become a movement within the Congregational Church. Such a “return to the founders” is a tricky venture. John English recognizes how the story, or myth, of a community can change over time. He writes,

Myth is not fiction but an imaginative explanation that carries with it a truth that is larger than individual events. As the years pass by new experiences colour our old experiences and further meaning is given. Recognizing the presence of its myth is part of the communal spiritual consolation that a community is seeking as it reflects and plans and seeks confirmation for its decisions. When the Second Vatican Council urged religious communities of women and men to return to the spirit of their founders, members were encouraged to tell the history of their community so as to get in touch with its basic myth, vision, dreams, hopes, and desires.<sup>19</sup>

The Congregational church needs to explore its roots and return to its founding principles as it forges into the transformation ahead. Note that it is not a return in totality, to the seventeenth century way of life, but rather a re-discovery of the driving, Spirit-led zeal infiltrating the contemporary understanding of whom and what church is and shall be. The idea is not to become seventeenth century pilgrims. The community should not use the covenant because as a Puritan ideal, but rather as a biblical ideal. God calls the community to the tradition of covenant as the means of doing church—not to a tradition for the sake of the tradition itself.

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<sup>18</sup> See Steven Peay, “Getting the NA Out of the Box,” *Congregationalist*, no. 3 [2008]: 10.

<sup>19</sup> English, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 63.

### Differentiating Relationships and Statements

The data presented in this project show that a covenant can be stated or implied; the language of covenant is not always explicit, written or otherwise. Yet, implicit covenants may not carry the force or weight of explicit ones. The community will do well to specify the covenant relationship in a written statement, but it must always be remembered that the covenant is the relationship, not the statement. As Hooker states, “[I]t seems that covenants were originally the basis of Congregational church organizations, and that with regard to the *substance*, and not the words of them.”<sup>20</sup>

Covenant statements have the same potential danger as creeds in binding a community together externally. Steven Peay states, “[T]he Church is seen as primarily a communal, and consequently a relational, reality.” The cohesive power of the relational bond is what gives strength to the covenant. Abercrombie addresses this ongoing tension between explicit or implicit covenants:

Different degrees of explicitness in the church covenant do not affect the being of the church, or the duties and responsibilities of its members. . . . However explicit the covenant may be, it can rightfully express nothing more than a mutual agreement to observe all Christ’s laws and ordinances as one church of Christ, and however informal the agreement, it can mean nothing less.<sup>21</sup>

The covenant statement serves as a tool to remind the community of the dynamic cohesive agent that holds the community together. The covenant statement expresses the covenant relationship in a common language agreed upon by the parties of the community. The

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<sup>20</sup> Preston Cummings, *Preston. A Dictionary of Congregational Usages and Principles According to Ancient and Modern Authors: To Which Are Added Brief Notices of Some of the Principal Writers, Assemblies, and Treatises Referred to in the Compilation* (Boston, MA: S. K. Whipple and Co, 1857),130.

<sup>21</sup> Vaughan A. Abercrombie, *How to Gather and Order a Congregational Christian Church* (Milwaukee, WI: Abercrombie, 1966), 5-6.

shared language thus defines the community; it becomes an expression of the hopes, dreams, goals, and values of the community. It defines the relationship in its ideal form. The community agrees upon the expression and attempts to live out the reality of the agreement. The covenanted community must work at being genuine and authentic to their expression of the covenant and to the relationship itself.

Having a covenant statement, or even regularly reciting it, does not make it true. There can be a real difference between the proclaimed covenant of the community and its actual practice. The tension between the proclaimed covenant of the community and the actual practices of the community can inhibit the community in everything from attracting new members to keeping the ones it has. Some level claims of hypocrisy against Christian communities, and unwritten codes of behavior or unmentioned issues may lurk therein.

The community occasionally may find itself professing one thing and living another, or only partially attending to what it claims and strives to be. Yet this struggle is worth having. The community occasionally may fall short of its claims because it is a striving community—reaching for its transformation in Christ. It has not arrived at its destination and, therefore, remains an imperfect community; as Christ continues to minister and work within the community it forever changes. On the one hand, the community is dying to itself, and on the other, it is being quickened (to use an old biblical phrase)—awakened and enlivened to the reality of Christ.

Thus, simply saying the covenant statement, while important, is insufficient. It must be lived, reviewed, remembered, and renewed. It must be “written on the door posts and talked about while lying down and rising up” (Deut. 6). The community should follow the Israelite

practice of re-reading the covenant often as a means to enhance the reality of the covenant. The Israelites kept the covenant before themselves day and night, reciting it often, talking about it at all times. The covenanted community should do likewise—using the covenant statement to summon the vision of who the community is and who the community is becoming.

### Adapting to Transformational Change

Intentional covenanting requires adaptation to change and transformation. Küng writes, “If the Church wants to remain true to its nature, it cannot simply preserve its past. As an historical Church it must be prepared to change in order to fulfill its essential mission in a world which is constantly changing, which always lives in the present, not the past.”<sup>22</sup> Hadaway reminds his readers, “All organizations are in a state of constant evolution, as members and leaders grow older, move out, move in, and as the group necessarily adjusts to a changing context. . . . All organizations are in the process of becoming something different—new social incarnations—even as they try to hold on to their most cherished traditions.”<sup>23</sup> Covenant relationship begets transformed community. Bolsinger states, “Real godly change—real sanctification—requires people to live together in covenantal relationships.”<sup>24</sup>

Personal egos often inhibit the transformation of community. All come to the table with their own visions of community. All have a sense of what they think the community is and should be (whether stated or unstated). There can be a clashing of visions, so to speak, as people negotiate the covenant community in reality. The community can cling to both the aspirational

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<sup>22</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church*, Translated by Ray Ockenden and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 24.

<sup>23</sup> Hadaway, *Behold*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Bolsinger, *Takes a Church*, 22.



values and the actual values of the community (and the individuals in the community). Yet, as Hawkins states, “Without clear norms and a compelling vision, a group drifts aimlessly.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, to overcome these clashes requires intentional sharing of personal visions and dialogue that helps the constant redefinition of the community. “Shared visions emerge from personal visions. Groups that are intent on building shared vision continually encourage members to share their personal visions for self and the group. They work to make the group’s current stated or unstated goals explicit.”<sup>26</sup>

The process of transformation is difficult. People resist the painful process of change. Robinson says, “Transformation often begins with provocation, disorientation, loss of control, and emptying.”<sup>27</sup> People sense a loss of control with change, as things cease to be comfortable or “the way they were.” The community will do well to recognize this process and be ready for it. There is no set program of how the Holy Spirit will transform the community—thus there is no real preparing for it. Simple awareness of coming change and a willingness to embrace, rather than resist it, is all the community can do. Research and group discussion on the principles of change and transformation may help the community reduce some of the stress related to the process. The practice of love and acceptance, however, will strengthen the community as it becomes intentional about being covenanted with one another.

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<sup>25</sup> T. R. Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Robinson, *Theology*, 172.

### Addressing Issues of Intimacy

Intentional covenanted community brings about an intimacy that may not be experienced elsewhere. English states,

People seek intimacy in a faith context to counteract the isolation, ostracism and insignificance they experience as they try to live more fully the Christian life. . . . [P]eople seek a forum and mode for expressing intimately the meaning of their Christian faith and concerns that arise in their lives. People desire a context of trust where they can risk vulnerability and self-revelation, a context that permits critical evaluation of personal and communal life. People want a context in which they can fulfill their desire to live a real faith before humanity and where their critical reflection will find positive support.<sup>28</sup>

Intimacy is one of the great blessings of covenanted community. The fellowship and sharing which transpires as people “do life” together feeds and nurtures the core of the human self. The *Polity and Unity Report* recognizes that covenant can “give the opportunity for a profound shared experience in Christian fellowship and activity.”<sup>29</sup> However, with this great blessing comes an awesome responsibility as people share each other’s lives. The vulnerability that one longs for at the same time poses a great threat to the well-being of the individual. The covenanted community must be vigilantly conscious of this factor and take measures not to abuse members of the community. Risk is involved; pain will likely come. When one opens the self to “other,” loss and hurt may result. As the community lives with one another they will not always be patient or always giving—the selfishness of “my way” and “my wants” will surface. Yet the commitment to be together—intentionally and mutually—must be held over these desires lest they become insurmountable bumps in the road or landmines.

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<sup>28</sup> English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall Jr. *Congregationalism: The Church, Local and Universal, the 1954 Polity and Unity Report* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 2001), 63.

D. Elizabeth Audette explains in her dissertation about confidentiality that communities today view the church as a professional setting rather than a covenanted community.<sup>30</sup> The need to respect the individual's personhood and privacy is paramount. As life is shared, the community must acknowledge people's rights to privacy. The intimate knowledge of a shared life is to be held with the greatest of care.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion of the Application**

Intentional application and use of covenant in the community of faith impacts all areas of church life and ministry. The relationships of members with one another and with God when viewed through the lens of covenant are freed from confusion and conflicting ideas about the community's identity. Unfortunately, the Spirit-led movement which the founders of the Congregational Way emphasized so clearly, and clung to so dearly, has all but faded as *The Way* to be church. Yet the concept of being an intentional covenanted community can be re-founded if the community will examine and put into practice the biblical, historical, theological and Congregational data presented in this project. Review of this material will awaken a clear sense of identity as a Congregational church. The community will begin to recognize its calling to be an intentional, covenanted community. As English states, "Belonging to a Christian community gives the members a new sense of personal identity, and Christian community is dependent on the members having a communal identity. This sense of identity is in the members and in the

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<sup>30</sup> D. Elizabeth Audette, *Confidentiality, Congregationalism, and Covenant: A Survey Uncovering Assumptions about Confidentiality in Congregational Churches* (D.Min diss., Princeton, NJ, 1997 UMI Number 9820381), 93.

<sup>31</sup> Audette observes that entering into covenant limits personal autonomy but guarantees a degree of liberty in mutuality. The implication is that the well-being of the community is more important than the freedom of an individual; the relationships that the covenanted community establishes become the definition of what is good for the individual. *Ibid.*, 95.

group as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> This identity calls forth a sense of unity and responsibility to each other and to the Holy Spirit’s activity within and beyond the boundaries of a church. Lacking this identity, the church community will fail to be what it is supposed to be and function as another social organization without its God-given purpose of being a community of faith.

### **A Final Exhortation**

Veiling cautions, “Practical theology as its name suggests, is less a thing to be defined than it is an activity to be done;”<sup>33</sup> thus ultimately, covenant must not only be talked about, but lived in community. Much more than a philosophical quest like Socrates’ “know thy self,” this project begins a journey to aid the First Congregational Church of Mukwonago, Wisconsin in fulfilling its God given calling to be intentional about living in covenant with God and with each other. “Finding oneself is not something one does alone—the quest for personal growth and self-fulfillment is supposed to lead one into relationships with others.”<sup>34</sup> Identity is found in covenant relationship.

The community must be intentional about being a covenant community. “Woody Allen once quipped that 90 percent of humanity simply ‘shows up.’ We go about our lives almost in stunned resignation, hardly giving it a thought. . . . [T]o truly live [*sic*] a full and worthwhile life is to attend to life, to be fully involved and immersed in life’s great project.”<sup>35</sup> McClendon writes, “If membership in the church is intentional, then the church becomes a live circuit for the

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<sup>32</sup> English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 15-16.

<sup>33</sup> Terry A. Velting, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 85.

<sup>35</sup> Velting, *Practical Theology*, 11.

power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> Intentional use of the covenant is the foundation upon which the faith community must build all that it does so as to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists. Such fulfillment and empowerment of the Holy Spirit will come with understanding of the data surveyed and, more importantly, with the implementation of the ideas discovered in the praxis of covenant community.

Mao Zedong is reported to have said, “If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself. . . . All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.”<sup>37</sup> If the community of faith seeks to know covenant community, it must join in covenant relationships with one another; people must commit themselves to God and each other to walk together in God’s ways as God is revealed. The Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, “Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” (Jer. 6:16). After quoting the prophet, J. I. Packer comments, “As we study the Puritan idea of communion with God [and here, “covenant” can be added], may it be that God is speaking in similar terms to us? These are “old paths,” paths, indeed, as old as the Bible, and paths which our Puritan forefathers found to be in truth “the good way.” We do well to ask ourselves whether we have yet learned to walk in them, and if not, to humble ourselves and seek for grace to begin now. “And ye shall find rest for your souls.”<sup>38</sup> May the grace of God permit the Church to rediscover the intentional use of the church covenant as the basis for its self-identity as a Congregational Church community.

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<sup>36</sup>J. W. McClendon Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 371.

<sup>37</sup> Mao Zedong, reference: unknown. Website: Said What? Quotations (2007). [http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/favourite/mao\\_zedong/you\\_want\\_to\\_know\\_the\\_taste\\_10746](http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/favourite/mao_zedong/you_want_to_know_the_taste_10746) (accessed December 18, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> J. I. Packer, “The Puritan Idea of Communion with God,” *Puritan Papers Volume 2 1960-1962*. ed J. I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 118.

<sup>40</sup> **Suggestions for Further Research:**

The limitations in the already space-taxed project prohibited the exploration of numerous related problems, issues, and topics. They are suggested here with the hope and expectation that further research will be done in these areas. This section of the chapter will introduce further application of the covenant in community, covenanted communities in covenant with other communities, and unexplored theological issues.

**Further Application of the Covenant in Community**

*Writing Covenants:* Many books cover the writing of mission and vision statements, but no current publications address writing a covenant. The church needs a single resource that offers examples, the components, and the process of creating covenant statements. Most importantly, however, such a work should address the subject of entering into covenant relationship with one another. The praxis of covenant relationship (living, loving, adapting, and caring) needs to be published for the community to learn, reflect, and discuss.

*Re-writing Covenants:* Many communities have covenant statements that fail to represent the current relationships in which they live. How a community addresses re-writing a document extant in the church—especially, one with a long tenure—demands examination. Often the existing covenant is outdated in language and applicability. The community may resist the change required for updating the covenant statement. An exploration of how to ease this process will be a valuable contribution to the subject of covenant community.

*Dealing with a Sordid Past:* The project has argued for the importance of retelling the past in the process of anamnesis. However, not all faith communities have a glorious past to be share; some quite the contrary. Thus, the question must be addressed as to “what happens when the past is better forgotten than re-lived?” Certainly, both Israel’s and the Church’s history can provide models for this question. Yet it is a good question to be considered further. The community must have tools to deal with its mistakes and sins.

**Covenant Communities in Covenant with Other Communities**

*Congregational Associations:* Models for Congregationalism say that associations of churches are covenanted communities in association with other covenanted communities. Writers quoted throughout the project hint at or directly discuss these issues; however, discussion about the association of churches falls outside the parameters of this project. Nevertheless, inter-church relationships are as important as the individual churches’ intra-church relationships. Attention to these relationships will ultimately strengthen intra-church covenant relationships.

*Contributions to the Ecumenical Dialogue:* Likewise the Congregational Way of covenant offers a great gift to the ecumenical community. It offers a means to cooperate with each other without necessitating agreement on fine points of theology or polity. The Polity and Unity Report states, “The expression of the covenant relation can bridge existing barriers of polity and tradition, and can objectify the fact which is so frequently overlooked, the fact of an already existing spiritual unity between our denominations.” “[T]he focal point of the organized life of our churches is founded in the church covenant. There is only one test by which a person is permitted to enter or is prohibited from entering into a covenant relation—his acknowledgement or denial of a personal committed relation to Christ, in which devotion is given to Him and to His way. The covenant relation encompasses the widest differences of experience and practice within the limits of our devotion to Christ, and it offers the possibility of bringing together in shared fellowship believers of varying traditions and practices.” Exploration of covenant as a model for ecumenical dialogue deserves attention in the twenty-first century milieu.

**Unexplored Theological Issues**

*Suzerain-Hittite Treaties:* Chapter 3 explained that the research of the Suzerain-Hittite treaties, done by Mendenhall and others, was intentionally omitted because it relates to information unknown to the Reformers, Pilgrims, and Puritans. The historic Congregational Way was founded on a view of the biblical covenants without the broad knowledge of the cultural influence of the communities surrounding Israel. Although deliberately omitted from this paper, the potential yield of engaging this material as it relates to covenant community seems most fruitful.

*Trinitarian Models for Church:* Theologians, such as Grenz and Volf, write about the community of the Trinity and its relevance to the church which the project has not addressed due to space limitations. Treasures regarding covenant community are bound to be found when the subject is mined.

*Boundaries of Visible Saints and Covenant:* The Puritan practice of only admitting “visible saints” into the covenant needs to be examined. Two issues were addressed in the chapter on Congregational data (chapter six): visible sainthood and covenant, but only covenant has been emphasized in this project. Rohrer in his book demonstrates the limitations placed on the gathering of an early frontier church. He recounts an instance where a hundred folks came to the church but only twelve were admitted into full communion. The church was gathered around a covenant, but they were far too concerned about the purity of the church members. Thus, the covenant became a divisive tool rather than one which unified and bound people together. Such anecdotes raise questions of calling, salvation, sainthood, and boundaries of the community. Towns and Stetzer use a parable of a “perimeter of light” in which Christ stands as a fire in the darkness to discuss the practice of ministry. The illustration emphasizes that people walk in various degrees of darkness and light. Drawing hard and fixed boundaries is an exclusive practice defining who is in and who is out of the community. Yet the place to be educated about the Christian faith and covenant community is within the fellowship and discipleship of the covenant community. What better place for the unregenerate to hear the gospel and learn about the community of Christ than in church? Granted, some may “sneak in” and be unregenerate members within the covenant community (but then Jesus spoke of the wheat and the tares). If the covenant is at its core a commitment to seek God together (i.e., walk together in all God’s ways) then it is a “converting ordinance” practice. Hard and fast boundaries beg the question if a full knowledge of God’s ways is given prior to admission to the Kingdom; or if it is a process of growth. At what point should a person be admitted into the covenant? The earliest Congregationalists stressed visible sainthood (with the evidence of God at work in one’s personal life) on the same plain as covenant. This project has argued for the rediscovery of the covenant. The question remains if visible sainthood is as equally important to the Congregational Way.

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