



10,000  
REASONS  
a ten-year vision



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The next ten years promise to be a period of change, challenge, and opportunity for churches in eastern North Carolina and beyond. Shifting cultural dynamics will require that churches like Covenant Church find new and exciting methods to present the timeless gospel message in a way that is relevant to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience with a worldview that is detached from a biblical foundation. From a pandemic to technological advancements, people have changed the way they connect with churches, creating tremendous growth opportunities. Moreover, the imminent schism in the United Methodist Church will likely result in displaced evangelicals and churches searching for a vibrant, new church home within the Global Methodist Church.

God has perfectly positioned and equipped Covenant Church to meet these opportunities through the Holy Spirit's guiding – from a team and resources to its collective passion to see hearts and lives changed – Covenant is primed for an exciting season of ministry! Over the next decade, Covenant will capitalize on its unique position by establishing 100 new types of church relationships. Each of these relationships may look different than our existing in-person campuses, but will maintain hallmarks of Covenant Church: faithfulness to scriptural authority, focus on spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and commitment to excellent, life-giving worship! The goal of each of these new church relationships will be to lead 100 people into a life-changing decision to follow Jesus Christ, resulting in 10,000 new decisions for Christ over the next ten years! This vision is both bold and audacious and can only be accomplished through the leading and power of the Holy Spirit.

## INTRODUCTION

George Whitefield was an Anglican cleric and evangelist, known for his eloquence and preaching abilities. Whitefield was so effective as an evangelist that as he was preaching to coal miners outdoors in Bristol, Connecticut – an unconventional practice at the time – as many as twenty thousand gathered and through his preaching, miners were converted by the hundreds! Meanwhile, Whitefield's friend, John Wesley, served as a faithful pastor with marginal results through his preaching ministry. Whitefield sent Wesley a note inviting him to join in what God was doing in Bristol. Wesley responded: "I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this way of sharing the Gospel, believing it strange and indecent. In the end though I joined Whitefield in Bristol. For if it brings men and women to Jesus and frees their souls from sin and death, I'm willing to preach anywhere and try any and every way of doing it!"<sup>1</sup> Embracing the unorthodox methods of Whitefield's preaching catalyzed a new religious movement led by John Wesley.

For almost 30 years, Covenant Church has never been afraid to try new and innovative methods to reach people and fulfill its mission. Always committed to discerning what God is doing, the people of Covenant have sought to join in God's work. The methods have been unique and even untried by others but every time, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, God has done remarkable things through Covenant Church!

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, journal entry, March 29, 1739



Now, as Covenant seeks God's vision for the next ten years, the spirit of John Wesley's ministry has never been more relevant. Reaching a new generation of people will not happen if the strategies of Covenant remain unchanged. Even if Covenant employs the same ministry strategies with the highest standard of excellence, the results are not likely to be all that different without a new and creative ministry strategy. This new strategy, galvanized by the ever-changing landscape within The United Methodist Church, is intended to lead Covenant into its next season of ministry.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In 1993, Covenant United Methodist Church was launched based on the dream of a few hopeful visionaries. Thousands of phone calls were made to invite people to a church that did not yet exist. The Christian men and women who employed the invitational phone strategy believed that God had called them to something new, and they wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves. The result was one of the most successful church planting experiments in North Carolina Conference history with 365 people showing up at its inaugural worship service!

As more and more connected to this new place and people, it became necessary to secure a permanent space, leading to the purchase of a cow pasture at the corner of Corey and Firetower Roads: barren but full of potential! Church leaders planned to erect a metal building for worship, an unconventional building for a traditional denomination. Covenant Church became known in the community as the "gospel warehouse," recognized as an innovative and exciting church in the area.

Covenant Church has continued with a spirit of innovation and a commitment to "whatever it takes" in order to reach people. Modular units were added and quickly followed by another building attached to the metal warehouse. Soon there was a master building plan for the east side of Corey Road. This new building would "make room for people we do not yet know." Since its construction, the mantra has become reality: hundreds of men, women, students, and children have entered the doors of Covenant's Building A and discovered their place and their people.

Continuing to embrace innovation and an unconventional approach to ministry, Covenant then planted two new campuses simultaneously in 2014: one in nearby Washington, North Carolina, and one on the campus of East Carolina University in Greenville. Dozens of people served on teams to pray, plan, and launch these two Covenant satellites with a commitment and desire to reach new people for Jesus.

Covenant Church continues to reach people with the spirit of the apostle Paul: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."<sup>2</sup> Innovation and unconventional ministry continue through the advancement and reliance upon technology. Long before the great "shutdown" of 2020, Covenant reached people using technology: from live streaming the worship services to the Covenant Church app, the weekly podcast, sermon archives, and two primary platforms of social media, technology has advanced the ministry of Covenant Church in unconventional ways. The possibilities are endless as to the number of people Covenant Church can reach through technology!



## A SEASON OF 'NEW'

Since its inception, Covenant Church has had an unwavering commitment to its mission, even as the strategies for execution have adapted and must continue to adapt to the context for maximum impact. Jesus told his followers: "No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."<sup>3</sup> New opportunities require new methods and new strategies to reach new people. Entering the third decade of the twenty-first century, three new developments are emerging:

1. *The need for new approaches to presenting the timeless Christian gospel message.* The church in North America must prepare for a future where the Christian faith will no longer be the majority worldview. Orthodox, Wesleyan and evangelical churches like Covenant will need to lead the way in re-presenting Jesus to an increasingly secular culture. This renewed expression of Christianity would need to train new converts in living and loving like Jesus, retrain believers who have become complacent to those who profess and proclaim their faith, and refocus Christianity from exclusively societal issues to the quintessential life offered through faith in Jesus Christ.
2. *New ways of connecting people to Jesus and the Church.* The COVID-19 pandemic forced churches to consider different ways to practice *ekklesia*, the gathering of Christians. Online worship skyrocketed during a time when social distancing and restrictions limited opportunities to gather in-person. For some, online continues to be the preferable means of worship because of its convenience and accessibility. While the preeminence of online worship advanced ministry throughout the pandemic, many experts who study leadership and culture<sup>4</sup> believe that online worship engagement is untenable. People seeking relationships and belonging will return to traditional settings for worship, Christian education, service opportunities and community. In short, people will be searching for a place and a people with which to connect.

At the same time, Covenant Church has to recognize that habits, behaviors, and patterns have changed for people in nearly every aspect of life, including those related to church. In many instances, people are rethinking their former patterns of worship attendance revealing a preference for smaller home groups, gathering at different times based on new rhythms or schedules, and even attending churches that are not in their local communities. Each week Covenant continues to see a broadening audience of people who do not reside in either Pitt or Beaufort counties. With a greater emphasis on an "online church campus," Covenant could reach an exponential number of people and connect them to Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV

<sup>3</sup> Mark 2:22

<sup>4</sup> cf. The Barna Group, The Unstuck Group, Carey Nieuwhof, et. al.



3. *A new evangelical movement.* With the imminent and formal schism in The United Methodist Church into two different denominations, Covenant will have the unique opportunity to come alongside many churches in eastern North Carolina to assist and resource them. Among the 789 United Methodist Churches in the North Carolina Annual Conference, Covenant Church is the largest and most influential, as well as the leading church for the *Wesleyan Covenant Association*.<sup>5</sup> During this looming split, pastors may be displaced, and many smaller churches will be without a pastor because of the theological disparity between congregations and pastoral leadership. It is conceivable that a new Global Methodist Church could be planted in every county in eastern North Carolina, where no other evangelical expression of Methodism currently exists. As a result of this transition, there will inevitably be churches who desire to become satellite campuses of Covenant Church while others may want to become strategic partners with Covenant for teaching and leadership resources. Covenant can lead the way in a new evangelical movement in eastern North Carolina and beyond!

While these new developments may seem futuristic, Covenant has embraced these opportunities. While Covenant has already been broadcasting to a wide and diverse group of people on weekends, streaming to satellite campuses, and connecting a new generation of people to Jesus, now it must become more intentional and make these new wineskins the primary focus of its ministry.

## **A TEN-YEAR VISION**

Understanding the opportunities that lie ahead, Covenant is determined to make the next decade the greatest and most effective ten-year period in its history! By the grace of God and leading of the Holy Spirit, Covenant is in a position to lead a movement for Jesus Christ! Over the next ten years:

- Covenant will establish 100 new types of church relationships. These new relationships may constitute new campuses, network and partner churches, as well as house churches or local community gatherings (microchurches).
- Covenant will equip each of these new church relationships to be effective in impacting their local communities through service, evangelism, and embodying the core values of historic Christianity and Covenant Church. The result will yield both social change and spiritual vitality in each community.
- The objective of each of these new church relationships is to lead at least 10 people into life-changing decisions to follow Jesus per year. Over ten years, Covenant would foster a movement where more than 10,000 professions of faith in Jesus Christ could be made!

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<sup>5</sup> The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) connects Spirit-filled, orthodox churches, clergy, and laity who hold to Wesleyan theology. It is an association of individuals and congregations who share a common understanding of our Wesleyan doctrine and a desire to become a vibrant, faithful, growing 21st century church. The WCA is one of several evangelical organizations working to launch the Global Methodist Church.



- Covenant will budget, staff, equip, train, and focus its people to work toward this vision in order to establish relevant and contagious communities of Christian people in eastern North Carolina.
- In each of these new relationships, Covenant will continue its commitment to scriptural authority and spreading the timeless message of the Gospel.

## **A NEW MOVEMENT**

This ten-year vision of Covenant Church is more than just a strategy for church growth – it will become a movement that reaches thousands of people! This new vision would establish a Kingdom worldview over the next ten years that transcends one community and one group of people. The scope of this vision would impact so many people, towns, cities and communities in North Carolina for Jesus Christ that there would be an identifiable and recognizable transformation as a result!

A bold vision such as this would not detract from either of the two existing Covenant campuses. Instead, the enthusiasm generated by execution of this vision would energize, motivate, and fuel the momentum of its existing ministry both in Greenville and Washington. The hope is that such a movement will naturally cause its current campuses to grow by activating the gifts and passions of its people and unleashing them in their current communities, which are projected for rapid growth in the next decade.

The crux of this vision is to create both new faith communities that do not currently exist and to resurrect vitality in network and partner churches. The mantra, like the one established years ago, will be: “Creating places and spaces for people we do not yet know.” This will require intentionally planting new campuses, satellites, and gatherings that will reach people with the Good News of Jesus. These new places and people will be attractational, evangelical, and transformational.

In addition, this vision will reinvigorate established churches. With the establishment of the new Global Methodist Church and the potential void of sufficient pastoral leadership, there will be churches that would benefit from a partnership with Covenant Church. A ‘partnership’ or ‘network’ church would have access to weekly teachings, leadership resources, and pastoral coaching to enable pastors and church leadership to more effectively serve their congregation. This vision is dynamic, promoting both creation and revitalization of churches!

Resourcing this movement will require commitment from all of Covenant’s ministries. Covenant will need to continue growing, equipping, and developing worship leaders for future campuses while deploying staff and key players throughout the region to revitalize music program ministries to inspire new generations of worshippers! The resources of Covenant KIDS and Covenant Students will provide engaging curricula and content that will infuse life and spirit into ministry programs for the next generation! Statistics reveal a startling trend related to younger generations: six out of ten Millennials who grew up going to church abandon their roots in the church and never return.<sup>6</sup> Revitalizing ministry to children and students in churches can reverse this trend. The resources of Covenant Life will benefit many smaller congregations, providing ideas and opportunities to help people grow in their faith when discipleship efforts have previously stalled due to insufficient resources or unfruitful methods.



This ten-year vision will rely on the continued commitment of Covenant Church to innovate and continue unconventional means to reach people. Covenant will need to transition from the use of existing in-person and online strategies to new and spirited ways of connecting with people and introducing them to Jesus. Simply being open and available to the Holy Spirit in advance, one of the hallmarks of its growth to this point, will enable this vision to become a movement resulting in 100 new types of church relationships and, ultimately, to 10,000 people whose hearts and lives have been changed by Jesus Christ!

## **BOLD & AUDACIOUS**

This ten-year vision of Covenant Church is a new expression of an older idea: "...to spread scriptural holiness across the land."<sup>7</sup> In a season when new ways of presenting the gospel are needed and a new evangelical movement is developing, God has planted a vision for Covenant Church to develop new followers of Jesus Christ. To ordinary people, the vision is daunting and impossible to accomplish for an ordinary church like Covenant; however, throughout the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, God makes seemingly impossible dreams a reality. Jesus reminds his followers then (and today): "What is impossible with man is possible with God."<sup>8</sup>

In the same way John Wesley responded to an invitation by George Whitefield in the eighteen-century – a response that gave rise to an evangelical movement – this bold and audacious vision by God is an invitation to Covenant Church today... an invitation to lead a new movement in eastern North Carolina and beyond!

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<sup>6</sup> Barna Group. "The Priorities, Challenges, Trends in Youth Ministry," 6 April 2016.  
<https://www.barna.com/research/the-priorities-challenges-and-trends-in-youth-ministry/>

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, The Larger Minutes, The Methodist Conference, 1780.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 18:27