

Midsouth Conference Superintendent Report

April 17, 2021

“Not Ashamed...”

The Birthday of the Midsouth Conference is April 21, 2001. On that date the Midsouth Conference became a full-member regional conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. If there is a passage of Scripture that captures what God has done in and through the Midsouth Conference of the ECC in the past 20 years it could be Romans 1:16-17. *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed - a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17).*

“Not Ashamed...” is our theme for this special 2021 Midsouth Reunion/Annual Meeting. As we celebrate what God has done, is doing and will do, in and through the Midsouth Conference, let’s take a look at ***Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow...***

Yesterday: In some ways the beginning of the Midsouth Conference can be traced back to the early 1900’s as a group of Swedish immigrants settled a small town named Stockholm, TX in the Rio Grande Valley. Two churches were started in that little farming town, a Lutheran Church and a Swedish Covenant Church. Stockholm, TX eventually disbanded and is now a bona fide “Ghost Town.” Most of the town, including the churches, relocated a few miles to Lyford, TX. In 1950, the immigrant Lyford Swedish Covenant Church helped start a mission congregation for immigrant Latino farm workers in the town of La Villa, TX. Though the Lyford Swedish Covenant Church eventually disbanded, Iglesia Evangelica Misionera del Pacto in La Villa, TX continues its ministry today as the oldest ECC church in the Midsouth Conference.

So...how did that humble beginning lead to what we now call the Midsouth Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church? Over the 50 years following the start of La Villa church, there were a few ECC church starts and stops in the five-state region of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico. These church plants were outliers and basically on their own to grow their ministries as the ECC grew into a flourishing small denomination in the mid 20th Century. In the 1980’s, ECC leadership realized that the Midsouth region of the country was growing and this region was the only area in North America without a regional conference to help expand the mission of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Dr. Bob Larson, Dr. Jim Persson, and Rev. Gary Walter were three key leaders who developed missional strategies to “start a conference” in the Midsouth region. After more than a decade of church planting activity in the Midsouth, the ECC Annual Meeting voted to begin the process of bringing the five-state Midsouth region into the larger mission and ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church. In 2000, Dr. Garth Bolinder, Lead Pastor of Hillcrest Covenant Church in Kansas, was called as the “Conference Developer.” In April 21, 2001 at Redeemer Covenant Church in Tulsa, OK, 15 churches from OK and TX signed

the charter of the newly formed Midsouth Conference of the ECC. I had the privilege of being elected the Superintendent of this youngest ECC regional conference. As “Mission Friends,” from the beginning, our simple mission has been to *“partner with the Evangelical Covenant Church to obey the Great Commandment and the Great Commission of Jesus Christ by starting, strengthening and networking healthy missional Covenant churches in the five-state region of OK, TX, AR, LA, NM.”* In these past 20 years there have been victories, defeats, accomplishments, disappointments, and many highlights as we have embraced our shared Midsouth mission. Here are a few of those highlights:

- In 2000, the newly formed Midsouth Region had the smallest aggregate weekly worship attendance (5,389) of any regional conference in the ECC. Furthermore, in our start-up years several Midsouth churches concluded their ministries within a few years after signing the charter. This added to the challenge of starting a new conference. However, in 2019 the Midsouth Conference recorded the largest aggregate weekly worship attendance in the ECC (85, 916). To God be the glory!
- In 2001, there were only ECC churches in Texas and Oklahoma. Today there are now ECC churches in all five states in our Midsouth region.
- Two of the fifteen churches that signed the Midsouth Conference charter in 2001 were Latino. The rest were Anglo. In 2020, all Midsouth Covenant congregations were multi-ethnic and multi-ethnic pastors lead 50% of Midsouth churches. Our Midsouth Camp is the most multi-ethnic camp in the ECC. God is growing an amazingly beautiful mosaic of churches in the Midsouth Conference. It’s one of our greatest gifts...and responsibilities. It really is a joyful “preview of Heaven.”
- Up until the early 1990’s, nobody had a vision of having ECC churches in Midsouth cities like Oklahoma City, OK or New Orleans, LA. People wondered if ECC churches could “fit” in such cities. In 2020, however, these two cities (among many other Midsouth cities) had many flourishing ECC churches reaching their cities and beyond. With 26 campuses throughout our five-state region, Life.Church, has pioneered the mission strategy of “one church/many locations” to reach thousands of people with the Gospel. The YouVersion Bible App developed by Life has been installed on a half billion (as in “b”) devices around the world. Pretty amazing for an ECC church in OKC. Or what about New Orleans? The ECC churches in NOLA are leading by example through multi-ethnic partnerships and innovative Gospel restoration ministries throughout their city and beyond.
- A defining characteristic of Midsouth Covenant churches has been the commitment of our pastors and churches to the proclamation of the Gospel. Literally thousands of people have made first-time decisions to follow Jesus Christ as a result of the Gospel witness and welcome of Midsouth Covenant churches. This Gospel witness and welcome is giving ongoing confidence and encouragement to pastors and churches throughout the ECC and beyond. Midsouth pastors and churches are “not ashamed...”

- One of the 2020 Directional Goals established by the Midsouth Board was the establishment of a Covenant Living community in the Midsouth Conference. Covenant retirement communities are significant ministries that serve senior adults. Covenant Living communities are an important dimension of the larger ministry of the ECC. Until a few years ago every ECC conference had at least one Covenant Living community...except the Midsouth Conference. In the past few years, however, the Lord has provided two excellent Covenant Living Communities for the Midsouth Conference. Covenant Living of Bixby is an innovative rental retirement model. Covenant Living at Inverness Village is an investment retirement model. Both communities offer a continuum of care and are defined by their Christ-centered commitment and community. We're grateful for our partnership with Covenant Living and for these wonderful new Covenant Living communities in the Midsouth Conference.
- In the past 20 years, significant leadership has emerged in the Midsouth Conference that is not only making an impact in our Midsouth churches, but also providing leadership in the ECC and beyond. I could fill a page with names, accomplishments, and influence of Midsouth leaders who are transforming their cities, our conference, our denomination and churches around the world. In 2001, few people envisioned the caliber of leadership that would grow in Midsouth Covenant churches. God saw it, however, and was preparing the way for the leadership community that has emerged in the Midsouth Conference. This leadership was especially tested in the past year.

Today: 2020 presented challenges and opportunities that we had not seen before. The global pandemic combined with racial unrest, political disruptions, and what some would call “big tech” intrusion in our country created a social and spiritual context that was unprecedented, at least in our lifetime. Though there are many lenses to view and understand the past year, I want to look at the heroic leadership of our Midsouth Covenant churches and pastors. When the reality of the pandemic began to emerge and things began to shutdown in March 2020, Midsouth pastors and churches responded with courage, compassion, and innovation. Here are some remarkable examples:

- Within weeks after the shutdowns, all Midsouth pastors and churches figured out how “to do” online worship, fellowship, and teaching on the internet. Life.Church, one of the churches in the Midsouth Conference that had been utilizing “church online” for several years, providentially upgraded their Church Online platform just a few weeks before the pandemic caused a global shutdown. As Brandon Donaldson said, “God allowed us to build the ark just before the flood started.” Church Online experienced unprecedented growth in the weeks following the pandemic shutdown. All Midsouth churches maintained ministry vitality and even expanded mission outreach utilizing online technology. Innovation was everywhere among Midsouth churches. As one of our pastors said, “We can try anything during the pandemic.”

- If pastors were innovative, church leaders and members were amazingly faithful during the pandemic. This faithfulness was especially seen in ministry care for one another, for neighbors, for friends in need, and for those experiencing financial hardship. This generosity and stewardship included giving to the shared mission of the Midsouth Conference and the ECE, as well as many other ministries supported by Midsouth Covenant churches.
- If “necessity is the mother of invention,” then the pandemic brought something wonderful to our Midsouth pastoral community. Out of a need to stay connected and see each other, we started a weekly Midsouth Pastors ZOOM meeting. Every Tuesday @ 11:00 am there are 15-25 Midsouth pastors gathering on ZOOM to check-in, have fellowship, learn together, and pray. Our weekly Midsouth Pastors ZOOM has become a highlight for many of us. It was a necessity caused by the pandemic, but it will far outlive the pandemic. *“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2)*. The challenges of the past year and the heroic response and leadership of our Midsouth pastors demonstrated once again that our Midsouth pastoral community is exceptional. I am forever grateful for the privilege of serving with them.
- Several churches were in the middle of major projects when the pandemic hit. Westmoore Community Church in OKC was not just doing a building addition; they had started building an entirely new church facility! To the glory of God, WCC not only persevered with the building project, they also moved into the new building and had their first worship gathering on March 14, 2021. The Life.Church Rogers campus was constructed during the pandemic. That congregation moved into their building before Easter 2021.
- What happened to Hope Community Covenant Church during the pandemic needs special recognition. Hope is the “Mother Church” of the Midsouth Conference. Started in 1985, Hope has helped start five other churches in the Midsouth and helped launch our Midsouth Camp. Always seeking to help another church or ministry, Hope had also given away almost everything...to the point of questioning their own sustainability as a church. During the shutdown, Pastor Doug Stevens met with our Hope Covenant friends for weekly Bible study and prayer. During that weekly gathering, a renewed vision began to emerge from Hope leaders, a vision of using their building as a “gathering center” for many churches. Following the example of Kingdom City, where a dozen churches share one building, the vision of **Hope Center** was born. Hope Covenant Church committed their building to be a ministry center presently utilized by four churches. It is another example of “Many Churches/One Location.” There could be more in the future. The Midsouth Conference was able to help fund the renovation of Hope Center. Pastor Allan Serrano and Pastor John Parks gave leadership to the renovation project. Hope is rising again at Hope Center in Houston.
- Church planting is not for the faint-hearted. Church planting is hard work in any context at anytime. Church planting during a pandemic seems almost impossible,

but our Midsouth church planters persevered and kept going during the pandemic. I want to give a special shout out to Pastor Henry & Olga Burbano planting Esperanza Covenant Church in Houston, Pastor Darrick & Tonia Gutting planting High Point Church in Leesville, LA (near Ft. Polk Army Base), Pastor Denise & Gary McKinney planting The Well Covenant Church in Tulsa, OK, and Pastor Steve & Jackie Maglio planting High Point Church in Harker Heights, TX (near Ft. Hood Army Base). They have led well during the past year, demonstrating in word and deed that they “are not ashamed of the Gospel.”

- Since our last Midsouth Reunion in 2020, we have had several important pastoral transitions in the Midsouth Conference. Rev. Mike & Shelley Poindexter concluded their ministry at Sonoma Springs Covenant Church in Las Cruces, NM. We thank the Lord for their faithful ministry. We also thank the Lord for the provision and call of Rev. Chuck and Jan Wahlstrom as the new pastor for SSCC.
- Rev. Bill & Laurie Clark concluded their second season of ministry at Redeemer Covenant Church in Tulsa. Bill and Laurie were pioneer church planters in the Midsouth before we were even a conference. Bill’s leadership legacy is not only evidenced in the ongoing missional vitality of Redeemer Church; it’s also evident in the missional vitality of the Midsouth Conference. We are forever grateful for Bill & Laurie’s gifted persevering leadership that contributed to the establishment and flourishing of the Midsouth Conference. We thank the Lord for the healthy succession of Pastor Adam & Andrea Barnett from Associate Pastor to Lead Pastor at Redeemer.
- Since we are talking about “Today” I want to express deep gratitude for our Midsouth Staff who have provided wisdom, good cheer, and hard work during this past pandemic season. Kim Kelley (Midsouth Administrator), Dr. Willie Peterson (Assistant to the Superintendent), Rev. Allan Serrano (Latino Ministry Director and Hope Center Exec. Director), and Rev. Dale & Sara Lusk (Midsouth Camp Director) have served above and beyond the call of duty during the pandemic. Special thanks goes to Rev. Rodney & Nancy Sawyer for their eight years overseeing our Midsouth ministry in the Rio Grande Valley. Rodney and Nancy concluded their service in May 2020. Thanks, as well, to Rev. Dave & Shelley Olson for Dave’s leadership in our church planting ministries.
- I also want to express great thanks to our Midsouth Board for their wise, supportive and sustaining leadership during this pandemic season. The Midsouth Board meets for prayer every Monday evening throughout the year. This is a strategic and essential ministry of your Midsouth Board. During the pandemic, this weekly prayer ZOOM became a lifeline. This year, several Midsouth Board members conclude their present terms. Words are inadequate to express my personal and our shared gratitude to Phil Mallory, Ron Alfson, and Ron Persson for their sacrificial servant leadership. They are all living examples of 1 Corinthians 15:58. The Midsouth Board is “not ashamed of the Gospel.” We are fortunate to have them as leaders.

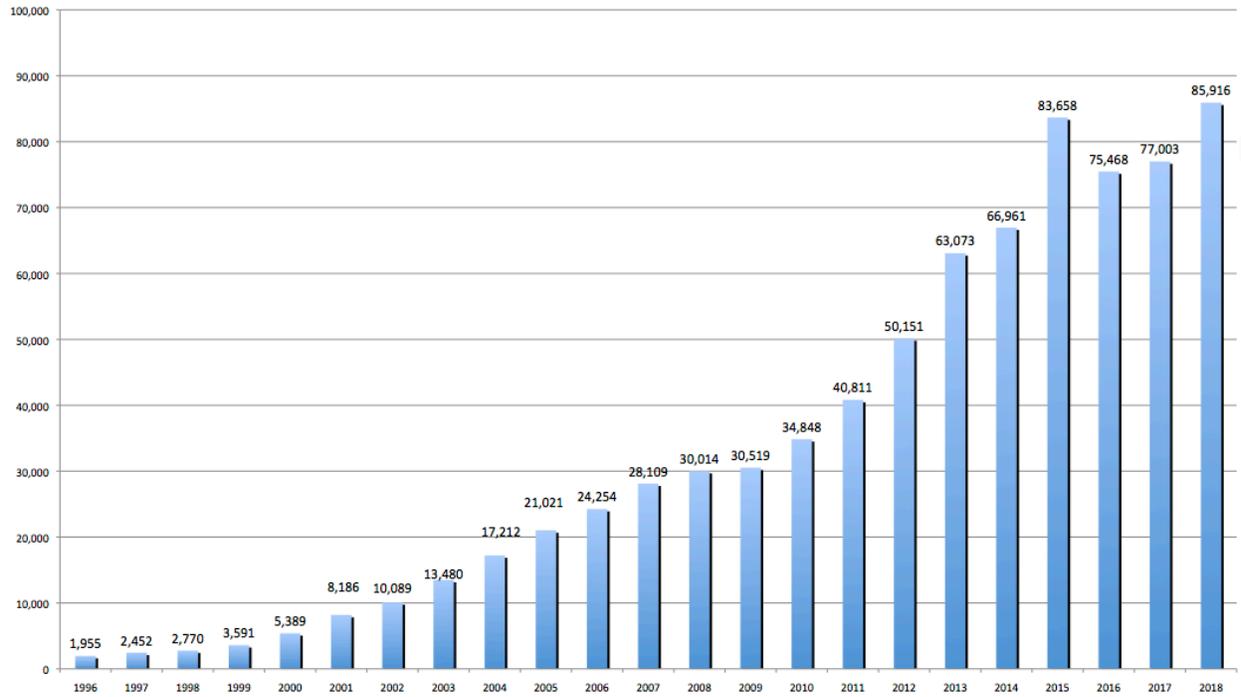
Tomorrow: As the Midsouth Conference begins its next decade, here's what we can anticipate in the next few years:

- In partnership with the Evangelical Covenant Church, we will continue our commitment to and alignment with our shared mission *“to obey the Great Commandment and the Great Commission of Jesus by starting, strengthening and networking healthy missional churches in our five-state region.”* We will be alert to where God is already at work and join Him in the work already begun. There will be blessings and maybe surprises in the process.
- As has been our practice since the start of the Midsouth, we will continue to utilize a “minimal administrative structure” as we focus on our shared Midsouth mission. The Midsouth has one of the smaller, if not the smallest, administrative overhead in the ECC. We all benefit from this stewardship.
- We will continue to develop the new ministry initiatives that were “paused” during the pandemic, including our military base church planting initiatives, the development of present and possible new “many churches/one location” models, and the use of innovative technologies to help improve communication and connection.
- We will continue to “not be ashamed of the Gospel,” as we reach our mission field and lead by example in the larger ECC.
- If I am elected by the 2021 Midsouth Annual Meeting to another term as your superintendent, it will be my last term. My assignment has been to help establish the Midsouth Conference of the ECC. God has done more than we could ask or imagine in these past 20 years. My commitment for this last term is to finish well, to help the Midsouth continue to flourish, and to help prepare our conference for a healthy leadership succession and a good “baton pass” to the next Midsouth superintendent.
- Finally, words are inadequate express gratitude and honor for my wife Dixie. I am more than fortunate and blessed to be her husband and the father and grandfather of our children and grandchildren.

It is a privilege to serve with you all...“not ashamed...”

In Christ,
Garth

Midsouth Conference Annual Attendance



Local Church Giving to the Midsouth

