

**Covenant Congregational Pilgrimage**

Our One Priority is to start and strengthen congregational expressions to serve as vital and vibrant missional communities. As churches evaluate vitality and vibrancy, it’s important to consider where it falls within the congregational life cycle – as a congregational planting, potential thriving congregation, thriving congregation, potential rethriving congregation or an unthriving congregation. Each of these five life cycles are represented among CMBA churches.

An unthriving congregation can be easy to identify from the outside, and a little harder to admit to from within. There is a new opportunity for unthriving CMBA churches who desire to reclaim God’s vision for their future that also invites support from within the CMBA family of congregations. [Covenant Congregational Pilgrimage](https://www.columbiametro.org/unthriving-congregations-process/) (CCP) is best described as an ongoing relationship with congregations who are seeking to “spiritually discern and strategically determine their future during a stage of their congregational life when they are not currently thriving in a manner they would like, and do not have the resources to easily thrive once more.”

Recognizing the inherent value of every congregation, regardless of its age, size, membership makeup or determination to survive, Executive Director George Bullard resets the crucial focus to the individuals of that church that are created in the image of God. “We have to have this as a starting point, that we're nurturing people who have a great sense of their own personal self-worth, a sense of church life, of Christ in their heart and they are people who are worthy. And so we cannot start with any kind of transactional relationship where there is an adult to child kind of relationship. It is adult to adult, or even better, it is sisters and brothers together in a family relationship.”

This trust-relationship is organic and unique, in that what works for one congregation likely will not be an exact blueprint for what works in another trust-relationship. The idea is that an unthriving CMBA congregation would be embraced by a loving family of other CMBA congregations that provides prayer and other kinds of support including leadership as the unthriving congregation seeks God’s clarity for their next steps. The CMBA continues as an active supporter throughout the CCP process. Consider this hypothetical account as an example of how CCP might play out:

*“When a tree falls through the roof of the Joy Baptist Church sanctuary in October 2020, the 20 remaining members realize there is not enough money left in the church funds to fully repair the damage. The last decade has been painful as new businesses opened and closed in the surrounding community causing permanent change, eight life-long members died and their younger family members began attending nearby New Baptist Church when it built a preschool and family life center. Routine upkeep and repairs had ceased in recent years because of the financial strain, and unused parts of the building were kept closed and unconditioned. Before the tree fell, the remaining members had discussed future choices with their interim pastor and the association and agreed to meet with the pastor of Neighbor Fellowship, who expressed interest in using Joy Baptist’s children’s building for an after-school program the next spring.*

*When members of Neighbor Fellowship and nearby Care Church heard about the tree, volunteers quickly showed up to remove the debris and construction teams helped patch the roof and clean out the sanctuary. The two churches began to pray for Joy Baptist, its faithful remaining members and for God to reveal a new vision for His church in that place. Joy Baptist agreed to host the after-school program, and members of the three churches began gathering to prayer walk the Joy Baptist property the first Sunday afternoon of each month, praying for the children and families that would be reached through the ministry.*

*By early summer, three families from the community had joined Neighbor Fellowship because of the after-school program. A few Neighbor Fellowship families attended worship at Joy Baptist, and Joy’s members went to Neighbor Fellowship’s annual outdoor baptism service. Because Joy Baptist had continued meeting with the association, the members weren’t caught off guard when the pastor of Neighbor Fellowship approached them with a big idea. What would it look like for Neighbor Fellowship and Joy Baptist to enter into an adoption relationship for a new campus of Neighbor Fellowship to be based out of the Joy Baptist Church building?”*

While this brief scenario presents elements of the CCP process, know that the roles of divine intervention and vision will take each unthriving church on a true pilgrimage experience with no promise of a specific outcome. God has a unique vision and plan for every church. Some churches desire to continue ministry but with a new vision, some decide to explore legacy planning (meaning, how to permanently close the church and deal with assets), while others engage in various types of discussions with other congregations that may eventually break down.

“In recent years in the Midlands, Baptist congregations have been adopted by other congregations, have become local partners where other congregations meet in their building and have considered merging with one another. There are additional choices available that we gladly talk about with congregations,” says Bullard.

Relationships are foundational in the CCP to successfully reach unthriving congregations and help them move forward. Thriving congregations that commit to love, pray for, support and walk alongside of unthriving congregations bring in a kind of model component of discipleship. This completely voluntary covenant relationship also offers special spiritual support that affirms the church’s heritage while offering hope for the future. An unthriving congregation entering into the CCP relationship should expect the process to include prayer, learning, vision and intentionality, management, legacy planning, partnership and coaching.

“Our goal is to have a team of three people from within the association to meet regularly with leaders of churches engaged in a Covenant Congregational Pilgrimage to provide insight, support and to learn more about the people of the congregation and how we can support their long-term ministry. The process should never move faster than the participating congregation is spiritually and emotionally ready for it to move. Our goal is to help congregations listen for the voice of God speaking into their situation and then have the courage to action God’s leadership,” explains Bullard.

The CCP begins with a period of mutual dialogue and progresses to a written covenant. The congregation votes on the agreement, which is advised to be renewed annually as the relationship continues. Trust is foundational in any relationship and is an essential component of CCP.

For more online information about CCP, including a recorded [presentation](https://www.columbiametro.org/unthriving-congs-seasons-choices/) and related PowerPoint slides, visit [www.ColumbiaMetro.org](http://www.ColumbiaMetro.org). For specific questions or to inquire about beginning the CCP process, contact Bullard at georgebullard@columbiametro.org.