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Beginning a Mission Work

SOUND REASONS FOR BEGINNING A MISSION WORK

One of the most basic questions asked of anyone who is involved in church planting is, “Why are you starting a new church?” Implied is the question: “Aren’t there already enough churches here?” It is neither Biblically correct nor wise to answer, “Because these folks can’t get along with others in their present congregation,” or, “Because they just don’t like the other churches in town.” It is even hard to find Biblical justification for saying, “Since there is no Orthodox Presbyterian church here, we should start one.” There are, however, at least three examples of Biblical justification for starting new churches which can help to clarify and direct our church planting efforts.

There is a special opportunity to plant this church in this place at this time

The founding of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19–26) is an example of this reasoning. The rapid influx of a large number of believers into that city and their effective Gentile-reaching ministry made it obvious that the planting of a new church should be the result. In Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–10), on Paul’s second missionary journey, the circumstances were very different, but the reasoning was the same. The response to the gospel led to the planting of a new church of which Paul could later say, “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.... Your faith in God became known everywhere” (1 Thessalonians 1:7–8).

So when a large number of believers move into a distant community or when conversions begin to be the result of a Bible study sponsored by a local church in another town, there is Biblical reason for concluding that there might be a special need for this church in this place at this time.

This center of population and influence needs the ministry of the new church we will plant

Philippi was identified in the Scriptures as “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12). For some reason, the Holy Spirit made a specific point of commenting on the stature of a city in which the planting of a new church was about to take place. It is appropriate to conclude (1) that leading population centers are important places at which we should look as we lay plans to plant new churches, and (2) that the design of this kind of church planting is to bring the influence of the gospel to bear on the whole cultural framework of the area. The church in Philippi served as an important source of support for Paul’s church planting ministry (Philippians 4:15–16), and it was to that church that Paul could write from another leading city to tell them that he was chained as a prisoner for Christ and that the palace guard and everyone else in Rome knew of it.

It should be pointed out, however, that not every population center is automatically a church planting target. Paul preached a powerful message in Athens, but the Scriptures record no beginning of a church in that city through his ministry. Thus, we may deduce that there is nothing that makes the planting of a church in a center of population inherently advantageous, nor is the opportunity for growth or greater effectiveness of ministry enhanced by the size of the population of the community in which it is established. But where centers of population and influence exist throughout the United States and Canada, there is reason to conclude that such places might be where we should focus our church planting efforts.

These fellow believers need our help to carry on what Christ has begun among them

The churches in Corinth (Acts 18:2) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7) both had small groups of believers in place before Paul came to town. A single family (Aquila and Priscilla) became the nucleus for the founding of the church at Corinth. Twelve men (and presumably their families) who knew and followed only the teachings of John the Baptist formed the core group of what eventually became the strong and vital church at Ephesus, which would later be pastored by Timothy. Both of these churches seem to have been planted because wise elders recognized a compelling obligation to help fellow believers carry on what Christ had begun among them. Similar circumstances have presented themselves to us over the years, and a number of churches in the OPC today were planted when pastors and

presbyteries came to the aid of fellow believers in distant communities where Christ was obviously building His church.

GATHERING A CORE GROUP

The idea of using core groups as a method of starting new churches has fallen on hard times. It is argued that these groups have their own “agendas” and preferences, that they are made up of people who are out of sync with the unchurched around them, and that they slow the process of the development of the church. But Paul gathered such groups wherever he went, and by so doing he seems to be showing us a Biblical church planting methodology.

“As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2). The Apostle Paul made it a standard practice to start his ministry in a new place with a visit to the local Jewish synagogue, where God was worshiped and His Word was honored. Follow him through his first three missionary journeys (Acts 13–20) from Cyprus all the way around to Ephesus, and this standard method of operation may be observed in all of his church planting efforts.

But Paul was appointed to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Galatians 2:9). Why would the Holy Spirit make a special point of telling us that Paul’s methodology was to start by bringing his message to the Jews? It appears that the practice had to do with the Apostle’s understanding of the nature of the Church—that it is the covenant people of God gathered for worship, instruction, and fellowship.

So according to Paul’s custom he went first to those who would know of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He went to those who honored God’s Word, knew the character and joy of worship, and looked for the coming of the Christ. He proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and invited them to study the Scriptures with him. In the process, Paul showed us a time-honored church planting methodology: he formed core groups of believers who knew God and His Word in every town he visited. These core groups formed the worshiping and discipling nuclei for reaching the lost.

It is difficult to know the exact equivalent of “going first to the synagogue” as new churches are planted today. But it appears likely that it has to do with beginning them with groups of people who are grounded in God’s Word and who are ready to form new worshiping covenant communities.

Methods for gathering core groups

Forming a core group as a method of starting a new church is not the only way the task can be accomplished. But the presence of a group of believers who want to see a new church established and who are committed to helping with the process is compelling evidence of God's presence. If recent experience in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church continues, our presbyteries and our regional home missionaries will not be involved as much with gathering core groups as they will be with discovering them. What follows are some practical considerations for finding and gathering interested families and individuals into an informal collection of believers who are exploring the possibility that God may be calling them together to plant an Orthodox Presbyterian church.

Follow up contacts—The phone and e-mail at the CHMCE offices bring news almost daily of another family interested in seeing an Orthodox Presbyterian church established in their community. These contacts are promptly passed along to regional home missionaries and home missions committee chairmen around the country. Contacts also come to presbytery clerks and to local OP pastors. By whichever means they come, these “Macedonian calls” have been a humbling experience for us as we watch God choose the places and gather His people.

Conduct an information meeting—It has also been our experience to watch God supply contacts in a specific area who had not previously known each other. Additionally, groups of believers will make contact with us about the possibility of starting a new Orthodox Presbyterian church in their area. By whatever means the group of contacts is identified, it is important that they be given complete information about the OPC, usually by holding an informational meeting led by a representative of the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located. At such a meeting, the history and doctrinal distinctives of the Church are usually discussed in detail, along with a review of the procedures that are normally followed to establish a new mission work. The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension keeps on hand a ready supply of materials about the ministry and history of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and about procedures for receiving and developing mission works for distribution without cost at such meetings.

Lead a Bible study—Usually the next step in solidifying a number of contacts from the same area into a core group is to conduct a home Bible study. Led by a representative of the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located, the study allows the group of believ-

ers to become familiar with each other and to learn together about the OPC and its approach to ministry. The study is usually held on a week-night and runs for a duration of between four weeks and three months. It generally encompasses examples of the exegetical and theological approaches of the OPC and significant issues facing the Church, often focusing on Paul's letter to the Ephesians or Peter's first general epistle.

Hold a seminar—The presbytery's sponsorship of one or more seminars to introduce the group to a subject of Reformed doctrine (such as the covenant or the authority of the Bible) or an aspect of the work of the church (such as catechetical instruction or Biblical worship) is also becoming more frequently employed in the work of solidifying the commitment of a core group. Such seminars have the advantages of being in-depth treatments of a specific subject and of providing a public venue which may be advertised and to which visitors may be invited.

Conduct evening worship services—These services are usually sponsored and conducted by the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located after a clear indication is received that the group is unifying around the purpose of becoming an OP mission work. They give core group members the opportunity to sample the kind of preaching and worship they would experience as part of the OPC, and they also allow family members and friends to be invited to hear the preaching of God's Word and to sing His praises on the Lord's Day.

Procedures when working with core groups

A core group, which is an informal collection of believers exploring the possibility that God may be calling them together to plant an Orthodox Presbyterian church, has no membership, and usually few or none are members of the OPC. And some who are part of it, though knowledgeable about the Bible and the Reformed faith, may not even be members of an organized church of the Lord Jesus Christ. So care must be taken by presbytery representatives who work with such groups. They must neither expect nor promise too much. But they must also be aware that God may be very much at work in the lives of this group that He has brought together. So they must serve as wise and gentle shepherds. Here are some procedures to follow when working with core groups:

Present the whole church to them—At some point in their information gathering, the group will need to know more than just the basics of the history and testimony of the OPC. In order to make an intelligent decision about whether they want to petition their local presbytery to receive them as a

mission work, they should be provided with a full picture of their potential church family. On the one hand, they will need to know about how the church functions. Telling them about our foreign missions structure and the functioning of Worldwide Outreach and the expectation of their participation in it will be important. Describing how a session, a presbytery, and the general assembly function in the OPC will also be important. On the other hand, they will need to know about the diversity of views and opinions in the OPC. They will need a review of the controversies of the past few decades. And they will need a personal explanation of how unity within the OPC continues to thrive in the midst of this diversity.

Arrange for them to meet with others—It will also be important to expose them to more than just one or two ministers and elders from the OPC before they make their decision to seek affiliation. If possible, encourage them to visit other OP churches, and bring in a diversity of Orthodox Presbyterian pastors and elders to minister to them. It may even be appropriate to put them in contact with other Reformed churches, so that their choice will be informed and satisfying.

Propose an oversight structure for them—It is assumed that an explanation has been given to them about the fact that an OP presbytery routinely assigns an oversight structure for each of its mission works. But before they become a mission work, they should be given a clear picture of who those elders will be, what care and oversight those elders will provide, and what will be expected of them as a mission work.

Set the “agenda” for them—Many core groups approach the OPC with a preconceived notion of what she is and how she works, learned mostly from reading historical accounts and listening to selected personal experiences. Some groups found each other by first working together on the promotion of such causes as a home schooling network or the opposition to abortion. It is important for representatives of the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located to state clearly that the OPC is a church and not a cause, and, among other things, that ministries of outreach and evangelism are assumed and expected, and that acceptance into the group must be based on one’s credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not on his political party affiliation or his views concerning the education of his children.

Let them decide—From the earliest days of a presbytery’s work with them, the group must know that there will be no coercion to join the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The work of church planting is a spiritual undertaking, and the presbyteries of the OPC believe that God determines those

with whom they work. As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, representatives of the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located can freely and in good conscience give themselves to assist an emerging group, even if that group later chooses not to become part of the OPC.

FORMING A GROUP INTO A MISSION WORK

In its *Manual for Presbytery/CHMCE Partnership*, the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension explains the governmental process by which the Orthodox Presbyterian Church takes an unorganized group of believers, organizes them at their request into a mission work, provides them with the oversight and supervision of borrowed elders and the temporary services of an evangelist to serve as their organizing pastor, makes it possible for them to develop and mature as a church, and finally organizes them into a new and separate congregation.

Assessing the group

Thus far in this chapter, the process of finding, forming, and working with an unorganized core group of believers has been detailed. But in order to actually begin the work of establishing a new Orthodox Presbyterian church, the group must willingly commit itself to the process of being formed into a mission work. By OP definition, a mission work is a group of believers meeting regularly for worship on the Lord's Day under the jurisdiction of a session or presbytery and not yet organized as a separate congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. But how does a presbytery decide whether a group is ready to become a mission work? Here are some diagnostic questions to consider:

Is the group ready to work together? Every group of believers has members with strong opinions. Some want to replicate a previous church ministry from which they have benefited. Others are more concerned to avoid abuses which they have observed in past church experiences. Still others have been shut out of leadership roles in their previous church. These and other circumstances make it difficult for some groups to make mutual decisions and to defer to one another. But other groups quickly find joy in working together and form strong bonds of fellowship.

Is the group willing to follow elders? At its beginning, a mission work must be what it will become. If it is to become an Orthodox Presbyterian church,

the core group cannot have a problem submitting to elders with whom it does not agree on every aspect of theology and practice. It is important that this attitude be observed in practice among the members of the group.

Is the group sacrificially working to establish a new church? Starting a mission work requires much energy and sacrificial labor. It is the people of the core group who must roll up their sleeves and do the work if the new church is to be established. And it must be undertaken by a group of people who are sufficiently gifted by the Holy Spirit to be capable of doing the work that is required.

Does the group want to be an Orthodox Presbyterian church? The group should have enough information to make a decision about its potential new church affiliation if the suggestions above about providing clear and complete information have been followed. But desire is also an important factor. Some groups are less interested in being part of the OPC than in separating from some other organization. Others are willing to tolerate affiliation, but do not desire it.

Assisting the group

Determining whether a group of believers should petition the presbytery to be received as a mission work is a decision which should be reached mutually by the members of the core group and the representatives of the presbytery in whose bounds the potential new church would be located. But once that decision is made and the group is received as a mission work, its presbytery takes on the important role of assisting it through all the steps necessary to receive members and form a congregation, train church officers, prepare the necessary documents which relate the mission work to the OPC, and satisfy the presbytery that it has reached the ecclesiastical maturity necessary to conduct its own ministry, choose its own church officers, call its own pastor, and affiliate with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

In its role of assisting the new mission work, the presbytery helps the emerging church to develop into a mature congregation which can stand on its own and be able to take its place and shoulder its load in the ministry of the Regional Church. There are four kinds of temporary assistance provided to a mission work to help it develop and mature:

Borrowed elders—Since the young church is just developing and not enough time has elapsed to identify, choose, and train godly men as elders, the presbytery provides some of its own ruling elders and ministers to serve on a temporary basis as an overseeing session. In that way, the emerging con-

gregation can function as a Presbyterian church right from the start, and that temporary session can protect and guide them until they are able to choose their own elders from within their own membership.

An organizing pastor—Churches have pastors who preach and teach the Word to them and who visit, counsel, comfort, guide, organize, and lead their congregations as their special calling from God. But a new, developing church has not had the time, nor does it usually have the resources, to call its own pastor. So in order to provide the skills and services of a pastor right away, the presbytery provides its mission works with temporary organizing pastors until the emerging congregation is ready to choose its own elders and call its own pastor.

Financial and prayer support—A new mission work is usually small in size and limited in resources. But in Biblical fashion, congregations of God's people can pool and share their financial resources to send the help where it is needed for the support of a new mission work (Philippians 4:15–16). And in a similar way, a broad base of prayer support can be mustered for a newly planted church (Acts 14:27). This kind of outside support can last only for a time, but while it does, the new, young church is able to function as if it had many more families than it actually has, in order to be able to pay its organizing pastor and allow its ministries of discipleship and evangelism to develop and mature.

Advice and evaluation—The Apostle Paul provided special supervision and support systems for the young churches he helped to start. They enjoyed the advice, visits, and financial assistance of believers in other parts of the world. And, as Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians indicate, he spoke the truth in love to them. In a similar way, our new mission works receive visits from wise and experienced ministers and elders from their presbytery and from the staff of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, who are able to bring godly wisdom into difficult and rapidly changing circumstances. In addition, by participating in CHMCE's monthly reporting system, our mission works are provided with the accountability of knowing that someone is caring and watching.

FINDING AN ORGANIZING PASTOR

Providing a new mission work with the services of a competent organizing pastor is one of the most important things a presbytery does to assist with its development as an emerging church. An entire chapter of

this manual (Chapter 4) will be devoted to the unique work of this specially called man of God, who is gripped so intensely with the significance of the doctrine of the church that, at the bidding of his presbytery, he is willing to move to a place where he is needed and to love and serve a group of people temporarily as God builds them into a mature body of Christ, and who is then able to consider his work completed if they determine to call another man to be their pastor. But to find such a man requires much prayer and a reliance on the hand of God working through the efforts of His people.

What makes a good church planter?

The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension believes that a good church planter need not specialize in that work, nor must he have extensive special training to serve as an organizing pastor. However, a combination of the following five ministry strengths seems to be present in the men who most effectively serve as church planters in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church:

He is a caring pastor. He is a mature man of God who loves his people. He spends time with them. He encourages and instructs them from house to house. But his love for them is not sentimental; it is based on the deeper love of the Good Shepherd. So he is also willing to confront them and to spur them on to a renewed obedience to God.

He is committed to Biblical preaching. He believes it is the primary way in which Christ builds His church. Regardless of which Reformed homiletical method he employs, it is always Christ who is preeminent in his preaching. Because he is convinced that God speaks to His people and builds His church primarily through the preaching of the Word, he works hard to make his sermons both clear and meaty. And he is a good preacher. However, his reliance on the efficacy of preaching does not have to do with his skills of preparation and delivery, but with the Holy Spirit who speaks the Word through him.

He has a mature grasp of doctrine. He recognizes that neither he nor his people can approach the Bible without it. He carries the system of doctrine with him in his mind and is deeply committed to, and appreciative of, the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Catechisms. His mind is not quickly captured by new theological or methodological proposals. He genuinely believes that nothing is more practical than sound theology. And his grasp of doctrine permeates his preaching and his pastoral leadership.

He is a man of faith. He is able to see the Church in the small core group

of people who have helped to begin its ministry. He finds it easy to trust God for his and the congregation's needs. The depth of his commitment to Christ is evident in every aspect of his ministry. And he has an unshakable and contagious confidence that Christ is building His church among the people he is serving.

He is a leader of people. He understands the tasks of the ministry of a church planter and the needs of people to whom he ministers and is able to enlist and delegate with confidence and tenderness. People are drawn to his leadership and follow him because of his godly character and loving heart. He is a self-starter who initiates proposals and accepts responsibility. But his leadership is always characterized by a servant's heart, and he takes the lead to shepherd, guide, and protect without lording it over those who have been entrusted to his care.

Considerations when searching for a church planter

Finding a skilled and competent church planter is not easy, and the task is complicated by the number of people who are involved in the selection process. Because only organized congregations of the OPC may call their own pastors, the mission work must rely on its presbytery to find and call a qualified and gifted minister to be an evangelist, laboring with the mission work as its organizing pastor. Because the fielding of a church planter usually requires significant funding from outside the mission work, which comes from the presbytery and the denominational Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, representatives of those bodies need to be involved in the process of selecting the man. In this regard, it is best to keep in mind that CHMCE has a policy that it should be involved in the selection process of the evangelist when it is anticipated that denominational financial aid will be requested for his support. And because every mission work has its own unique character and interests, it is vital that the people of the developing new church have a say in who is called to be their initial shepherd and leader. So this special calling process must be balanced by two governing commitments which can appear to be in conflict with each other:

The presbytery will not call an organizing pastor without the concurrence of the mission work. It is vital that the people of the mission work not merely acquiesce in, but enthusiastically endorse, their presbytery's call of the man who will be their organizing pastor. They must have confidence in him. They must be able to receive the Word of truth from his mouth, they must have confidence in his leadership and his abilities, and they must be able

to enthusiastically introduce him to their neighbors and family members. If the members of the mission work cannot conscientiously do these things, then the presbytery will continue its search until it finds a suitable man in whom the group has confidence.

The mission work will recognize its limitations and will trust the presbytery to recommend for call as its organizing pastor only men it believes will serve them well. The nature of a mission work is that its people are new to each other and to the work of church planting. Many are new to the OPC and some are even new to the Reformed faith. They must acknowledge to each other that they may not always make good decisions about the development of their work or the choice of their organizing pastor. They must admit to each other that it will be easy for them to find weaknesses in the men the presbytery recommends. And they must acknowledge that the presbytery and others who are assisting with the suggestion of a carefully selected list of men to be their potential organizing pastor are in a better position than they to know what they need.

Procedures for calling and employing a church planter

In the process of calling and employing a church planter, it is the home missions committee of the presbytery which is usually the committee assigned to supervise the development of the mission work and the call and employment of a church planter. First, the committee identifies a candidate which it believes is qualified to serve as an evangelist of the presbytery to labor in the mission work until it is organized and is able to call its own pastor. Then, after seeking the concurrence of the members of the mission work, the committee determines whether or not to draw up a call to the candidate. Finally, if it decides to call him and the candidate indicates his willingness to accept, the committee draws up a formal call to the man, which is then presented to the presbytery for its action, along with supporting budget recommendations to cover the cost of his salary and benefits.