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Developing a Mission Work into an Organized Congregation

GOVERNING COMMITMENTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MATURING REFORMED CONGREGATION

There is discussion in many church planting circles today about the need to be “culturally relevant” in worship and “where people are” in ministry in order to reach them. However, our modern, secularized culture bears striking similarities to the pagan culture of the first century. Now, as then, the secular culture that surrounds Christians is not friendly toward, or supportive of, the things we believe or value.

“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). As the history of the New Testament Church unfolds, it appears that for well over a decade after our Lord’s resurrection and return to heaven, His disciples were not identified with a special group name. Some spoke of this new faith in the Son of God simply as “the Name” (Acts 5:41). Saul (later Paul) identified the disciples he was persecuting as those “who belonged to the Way” (Acts 9:2).

Why did it take several years and a place far removed from Jerusalem for Jesus’ followers to be identified as “Christ’s ones”? The probable answer is that in Antioch the disciples were seen as different from the culture around them. In Jerusalem, most people had Jewishness and culture in common. It appears that in Antioch it was recognized for the first time that being a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ gives one a new set of values and puts him at odds with his culture.

The new Christians had seen the life-changing power of the gospel in their lives and recognized that they were now valuing different things than their old cultural norms encouraged. And they were anxious to share this life-changing message with others, so that the pagan culture around them would be transformed, one new Christian at a time.

The process of developing a mission work into a mature, organized congregation is one that takes time and requires careful evaluation along the way. New Testament church planting practice provides us with a number of observable governing commitments made by young churches in Asia Minor that can be of help in evaluating the developing maturity of our mission works today.

A commitment to godliness of conduct

Godliness of conduct was a characteristic of the young churches of the New Testament. Paul even addressed the errant Corinthians as “the holy ones” (1 Corinthians 1:2). And he spoke of how the people of the church in Thessalonica became examples to those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1:7). The church in Antioch knew how to translate its beliefs into actions, and though it shared little ethnic common ground with the people of Judea, it understood that some of those for whom their Savior had died were suffering, and it quickly came to their aid. Its teachers were committed to prayer and fasting for the work of the church. Now, as then, the godly lives of its people are a church’s main way of influencing the culture around it (Acts 11:19–30; 13:1–3). Newly planted churches should be focusing their efforts on building godliness into their people as the goal of all teaching and discipling, because growing in godliness is a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

A commitment to a covenant community emphasis

When Peter explained the gospel on the day of Pentecost and urged the crowd to repent, he went on to tell them, “The promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). When the Roman jailor in Philippi begged to know what to do to be saved, Paul told him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and “you will be saved—you and your household.” Later that same night, the jailor and his whole family were baptized (Acts 16:31–33). To the largely Gentile church established there in Philippi, Paul reminded the believers, “It is we who are the circumcision” (Philippians 3:3). And he reminded the Ephesians that at one time they were “excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise” (Ephesians 2:12).

God’s gathered people in the New Testament functioned together very much like His called-out people in the Old Testament. In theological terms, it may be said that they embraced covenant theology and functioned as covenant communities. But in many church planting circles today, the refinements that covenant theology has brought to the functioning of the

church have been largely set aside, and churches have become known more for what they do than for what they are.

The Reformed church ought to be a place where God's high view of the family is emphasized and fostered. Infant baptism is not only a means of grace, but also a tremendous teaching tool about God's covenant faithfulness from one generation to the next. And in this age of individual interests and values, newly planted churches have a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate that the local church is, itself, the family of God, because consistently functioning as a covenant community is a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

A commitment to God-centered worship

A church that is functioning as a covenant community has its focus clearly on the God of grace and holiness. When the covenant people of God gather for worship, it is He whom they seek to please. In many church planting circles today, worship has become another form of outreach ministry to meet the needs of people. But within a covenant community, the salutation draws the people of God out from among their guests and visitors to be the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, gathered for the high privilege of worship. Their gathering together becomes a foretaste of heaven, and their corporate worship becomes a meeting of God with His people. The benediction ends their active focus on corporate worship, and their ministry to each other and to those guests and visitors who have been watching continues. That is the implication of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:23–25 about what happens when unbelievers or those who are "uninformed" are present when the church gathers for worship. And such God-centered, covenant community worship is a powerful witness and testimony to the reality of Christ's indwelling presence in the lives of His people. Newly planted churches must focus their efforts on worship for God's sake, because such God-centered worship is a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

A commitment to constancy in prayer

"The church was earnestly praying to God for him" (Acts 12:5)—and Peter was released from prison. The New Testament makes it clear that churches are planted and run on prayer. God's work done in God's way is done through prayer.

While Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James,

and John, the other disciples faced a real problem. A man had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus for help (Mark 9:2–29). However, nothing the disciples tried seemed to help, even though they had been successful at casting out demons in the past (Mark 6:13). Finally, Jesus returned to the nine and healed the boy himself. In explanation of their failure, He said, “This kind can come out only by prayer” (Mark 9:29). They had forgotten to pray! Having experienced success in ministry in the past through the power and authority of Jesus, they had now begun to rely on their own abilities. The result was not only ministry failure; they also caused others to doubt the power and authority of their Lord.

The work of establishing a new church is from first to last the work of God in storming Satan’s stronghold and finding God’s chosen people. God works through our efforts, but He does the work. Prayer is more than simply words brought to God or time spent. It is a statement of our absolute reliance on God to do the work with us and through us and sometimes in spite of us. The church that is not built, operated, and sustained by this kind of praying is relying on its own abilities. And worse yet, its pride and failure may even raise doubts in some minds about the power of God.

It is folly for a new church to rely on the abilities of its pastor or people, or on certain ways of doing things, or on its denominational affiliation, or even on its doctrinal beliefs as sources of numerical growth or spiritual unity. Believing, expectant, submissive praying is a necessity for the newly planted church. Consider the value of such praying:

Prayer brings the young church together. One of the most difficult things for a newly planted church to attain is a sense of unity and love. Paul prays, “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a sense of unity among yourselves . . . so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5–6).

Prayer unites the young church against the forces of Satan. Paul reminds us that our struggle is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). To establish a new church is to take a stand against the devil’s schemes. It is a spiritual work of confrontation. That is why prayer is listed not as a piece of the armor of God, but as one of the primary activities of the Christian warrior (Ephesians 6:18). It is vital for the young church to sense the spiritual nature of its battle.

Prayer encourages hearts in the young church. Paul encouraged the Philippians, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6–7).

As the congregation prays, they understand that God does the work, an especially important reminder for the sometimes discouraging work of establishing a new church. That may be why Paul reminded the Philippians that “the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Newly planted churches must focus their attention on prayer, because constancy in prayer is a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

A commitment to changed lives

The church in Antioch knew that the end result of their ministry in that city was the changed lives of people (Acts 11:21). That “God had opened the door of faith” to people in Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium was what they rejoiced to hear from the report of Paul’s travels (Acts 14:27). It will not be enough for the people of a newly planted church simply to go about the duties of church life. They must have a commitment to seeing changed lives result from their ministry.

However, changed lives require ongoing ministry to people with significant needs. New believers need the milk of basic truths, and they need to be taught devotion to God, how to love their spouses, their children, and their parents, and a host of practices and beliefs that mature believers take for granted. Such training and discipleship take much time and energy. And mature Christians often find it difficult to sustain a diet of the basic milk of foundational principles of the Word and of the Christian life when they need the meat of the deeper truths of the Bible and Christian living. They want sound examples for their children and a challenge to greater godliness. But the worldly habits and attitudes of new believers and their exuberance over the discovery of simple spiritual truths provide just the opposite.

Faced with this difficult problem, it is argued in many church planting circles today that newly planted churches must decide whether their ministry is to provide discipleship for the changed lives of previously lost people or to provide pastoral care and oversight to mature believers. But a church that functions as a covenant community sees itself as an enlarged family of those who rejoice together in God’s grace which is at work in their lives, regardless of how old or young they are in the Lord. In fact, a Reformed, covenant community emphasis gives a newly planted church the hope and expectation that God has established their presence in their town to call some of His own out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). It

is because of the vast differences in maturity levels and cultural backgrounds of believers whom God has gathered together into local congregations that the writer of Hebrews encourages the churches to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” and “not give up meeting together ... but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25). The abilities to disciple people of all ages and maturity levels and to exercise loving discipline when they err are strengths of a covenant community focus. Newly planted Reformed churches will naturally give much attention to the deep, doctrinal truths which are their confessional foundation. But they must also focus their attention and their prayers on the changed lives of previously unsaved people, because a commitment to changed lives is a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

A commitment to a world vision

It appears from the record of the Book of Acts that it was the church in Antioch, not Jerusalem, that was the model of ministry that God used to take the gospel to the world. From Antioch, unfettered by religious pride and assumption, they were sent. And to Antioch they returned with encouraging words and stories of God’s power at work (Acts 13:3; 14:27). The task of Christ’s Church in implementing the Great Commission today is the same two-pronged task that faced the first-century Church (Matthew 28:19; Galatians 2:9; Romans 1:16). First, it is to proclaim Jesus as Lord to their own children, to those within their evangelical and Reformed circles, and to those within the tradition-bound and liberal churches of their culture. Second, it is to proclaim Jesus as Savior and King to those without that knowledge, wherever in the world they may be. New churches should be planted with a built-in vision that what God has done among them, He will do elsewhere. They should, themselves, be planning to plant other churches. And their vision for reaching a lost world should mean that they are enthusiastically and intimately involved in the work of foreign missions.

Newly planted Reformed churches should, by their nature, have a vision for the world which their theology tells them God has made and into which He sent His Son to be the Savior of His elect. Deep concern for the spiritual well-being of the people of other geographies, along with earnest prayer and bold plans to reach them, should characterize a congregation that has made a commitment to a world vision because such an attitude is

a governing commitment that characterizes a maturing Reformed congregation today.

SOME PRACTICAL PRELIMINARIES

The purpose of this chapter is to review the characteristics of a maturing mission work and what it takes to develop a group of people into an organized congregation. Having first looked from a Biblical perspective at some of the specific commitments made by young churches in the New Testament which signaled their developing maturity, it is necessary to deal with the practical matters of what must be done, who is to do it, and how it is to be accomplished.

Who does this work?

It is necessary to understand that developing a mission work into an organized congregation is a process. It is not a series of formal steps, and there is not a simple list of things to do that makes it easy to accomplish. The training up of a child into an adult is probably the best analogy to use in describing the process. Some things need to be taught. Other things need to be modeled and observed. But no amount of training can make an infant into an adult without the necessary passage of time to allow the child to mature. It will usually take between two and four years (depending on the composition of the group) for a sufficient number of things to be accomplished and a sufficient amount of maturity to develop in order to convince a group of ministers and elders from the presbytery that the mission work is ready to stand on its own. The goal of the process is not the organization of the church, but a functioning, mature body of Christ which is able to take its place among the other churches of its presbytery.

Who does this work? Much of it falls to the church planter, whose organizational skills are assumed. Some of the work is undertaken by the overseeing session. But the people of the mission work are intimately involved in a huge set of tasks, many of them fulfilling a number of roles as the mission work develops its ministries of spiritual growth, outreach, mercy, and administration.

Working with groups, committees, and sessions

There is a management saying that is helpful to understand in light of the many tasks and ministry responsibilities required in the process of

developing a mission work into an organized congregation: “Boards authorize, committees evaluate, people implement.” The overseeing session of the mission work, as the “board,” makes the determination concerning when and how it is wise to undertake an aspect of ministry and authorizes it to be done. The usual scenario that follows is that the task is delegated to a committee composed of members of the mission work for them to implement. But unless the committee is exceptionally well organized and motivated, not much will happen because it is people who implement. Another management saying that bears on this is “Committees for conference, but individuals for action.” Spurgeon is quoted as saying, “The best committee is composed of three members with one sick and one absent.” All of this is to indicate the wisdom of careful delegation by the overseeing session and the organizing pastor to individual members of the mission work to carry out assigned aspects of ministry and report regularly on their work as an established means of accountability.

A word about “programs”

It has become fashionable in Reformed circles to be opposed to the use of “programs” in the church. It is thought by some that ministry programs are modern Church Growth techniques and that the church does not need programs in order to be and to do all that God expects. While this manual makes no attempt to advocate a program-oriented ministry for mission works of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, neither does it succumb to the temptation to deny the appropriate use of programs to carry out Biblically mandated ministries in a local church. Any organized implementation of the development of a ministry is in fact a program. And for a mission work to develop into an organized congregation, it is vital that ministries of spiritual growth, outreach, mercy, and administration be well planned and implemented.

DEVELOP MEANS TO PROMOTE THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is the foundation of all that is done in the life and ministry of a Reformed church. Developing a mission work into an organized congregation implies that rich and robust God-centered worship, which includes the preaching of the Word of God, is leading the way in the development of every aspect of the new church. The development of ministries of spiri-

tual growth, outreach, mercy, and administration all flow from the mission work's commitment to the practice of God-centered worship. And because Reformed worship is regulated and prescribed by God, it has a specific function to fulfill in the lives of the believers He is gathering into His church. In order for them to effectively worship as maturing saints, they need to be given training and opportunity to serve their God. And the end result of God-centered worship is that the children of God are happily about their father's business. So all that will now be discussed points to and flows from Biblical and effective God-centered worship.

Sunday school

Informational Bible training is essential for people of all ages. Without the foundation of Bible knowledge, much that goes on in Reformed worship will not make sense to them. And without that foundational Bible knowledge, parents and children will not be able to appropriate the printed materials and the verbal instructions they need for sound Christian living in the home. Whether it is called Sunday school, church school, Christian education, or something else, it is vital that training by the church for the church take place at a separate time from worship. Many families and individuals who are new to the Reformed faith require basic and sustained doses of information in order to live godly lives and be good church members. The whole church must be involved in their training and discipleship if effective worship and ministry is to be sustained. And a conscientious overseeing session will often conclude that a robust Sunday school ministry is one of the best ways to care for the whole flock.

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, information may be found concerning well-thought-out Sunday school programs developed by organized congregations and mission works, as well as links to ideas provided by the OPC's Committee on Christian Education and by Great Commission Publications.

Catechetical training

Doctrinal training is also a central part of promoting the spiritual growth of God's people and providing an undergirding foundation for their understanding of, and participation in, congregational worship. Catechetical training is a time-honored form for infusing that information into the

minds and the lives of the church's people. Whether it is structured in a formal program or conducted family to family and house to house, the memorization and use of a catechism for children and the Westminster Shorter Catechism play a significant role in the establishment of a Reformed church. And though such catechetical training is usually understood to be for the children of the church, teenagers and adults who come from other theological backgrounds also need this kind of information lovingly and patiently provided to them.

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, information from various churches and individuals may be found concerning how to set up a catechetical program in a local church.

Bible study

People need to know how to learn from the Bible. They need to observe how the Scriptures are used and applied personally in real-life situations. They require this kind of information because without it, personal and family worship will not be very effective and their participation in public worship will be limited. Nothing outside of the preached Word is as effective as a well-led and carefully prepared inductive Bible study in the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry.

Gathering for prayer

Since a commitment to constancy in prayer is one of the indications of a maturing congregation, time should be scheduled or some provision regularly made for the church to be in prayer about its needs and about God's work in the world. Whether this is accomplished on the Lord's Day or on another day of the week, whether it is with the whole church gathered together or groups of families and individuals gathered for the purpose, some specific venue must be structured for consistent, regular praying for the sound establishment and ongoing ministry of the church.

Fellowship activities

In some church planting circles, the concept of fellowship is identified as a separate ministry activity. However, it seems more appropriate to identify fellowship activities as one of the means to promote spiritual growth among the people of the mission work. The people whom God has drawn together to form a new church need to know each other and enjoy the

sweet fellowship of the saints in order to grow and serve effectively. It is not sufficient to assume that such gatherings will take place automatically or spontaneously. Fellowship gatherings need to be structured, planned, and intentional; if they are not, the mission work will run the risk of allowing factions to develop along the lines of friendship or age.

Ministry to and for young people

By their teenage years, covenant children have developed unique needs and require special care and attention. If they are to marry in the Lord, they need to become familiar with others who share their faith. If they are to minister as members of the body of Christ, that ministry is often most effectively developed in their teenage years. And as they seek their place of work and occupation in God's world, they need discipleship and counseling that is directed toward their specific questions and concerns. Since Christ has built His church generation after generation by calling young men to the ministry and young women to be the wives of pastors and missionaries, young people need to be given special opportunities to minister and to test their gifts for a future of service in the kingdom of God. For these reasons, it is important for the mission work to structure specific ministries to and for its young people to promote their spiritual growth and development.

Other possible means and methods

Means to promote the spiritual growth of the people of the mission work are far more numerous than those listed above. The sponsoring of groups to study specific subjects or theological concepts, the planning of Bible and theological conferences, and Reformation Day celebrations are examples of additional methods of promoting the spiritual growth of the church's people.

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, a list may be found of current means and methods used in a number of OP churches and mission works around the country to promote the spiritual growth of their people.

DEVELOP MINISTRIES OF OUTREACH AND EVANGELISM

A new mission work is usually small in size and needs to grow in order to provide care for its pastor and its people. But a pragmatic need for numerical growth should not be a motivating factor in the church's outreach and evangelistic efforts. Such efforts flow, rather, from a commitment to being faithful to the Word of God and to the work of Christ's Church.

Governing definitions

In this manual, a distinction is made between the concept of outreach and the practice of evangelism. For purposes of discussing the development of ministries of outreach and evangelism in a mission work, the following definitions will be used:

Outreach is any gospel activity or ministry which brings the work of the church before the people of the community in which the congregation ministers.

Evangelism is any gospel activity or ministry which brings the righteous requirements of God and His plan for the salvation of His elect before the people of the community in which the congregation ministers.

Biblical Evangelism Today—

Following a time-honored precedent

In 1954 the Committee on Christian Education of the OPC published a challenging study on the work of outreach and evangelism from a Reformed perspective, entitled *Biblical Evangelism Today*. This marvelous document is valuable for two reasons. First, it provides a careful and studied theological discussion of the gospel. Second, written as it was before the rise of the Church Growth movement by contributors including Calvin Knox Cummings and John Murray, the arguments move seamlessly between a discussion of the theological nature of the gospel and the practical methods and means of communicating that gospel to a lost world. Chapter headings include "The Evangelistic Meeting," "Extensive Survey Work," "Group Evangelism," and "Radio Evangelism." One of the values of this docu-

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, the text of *Biblical Evangelism Today* now out of print, may be accessed and downloaded.

ment is that it demonstrates that a zeal for evangelism rightly conceived is intimately connected to means and methods of communicating the gospel. So what follows is a brief discussion of means and methods for gospel communication for churches conducting their ministries in the twenty-first century.

Outreach ministries

Outreach ministries have to do with making the church and its work known. They include the following:

Advertising comprises the various forms of outreach that have to do with letting people know about the church, its location, times of services, ministry emphases, and other pertinent facts and details that will allow them to know they are welcome to visit and will inform them about how to do that. Such outreach can take the form of newspaper advertisements, listings in the yellow pages, flyers, brochures, or Web pages. The purpose of advertising is to get people to visit the church's services of worship, where they will be exposed to the preaching of God's Word. Therefore, such advertising must be factual and easily and quickly read.

Newsletters are forms of outreach that allow people who have already had some contact with the ministry of a church to learn more about it and its beliefs and particular ministries, so that, if and when the Holy Spirit quickens their hearts, they will know how and where to avail themselves of that ministry. This kind of outreach requires regularity and consistency and allows many believers to use their gifts and skills on a regular basis to reach out.

Public meetings, seminars, and conferences are forms of outreach which, when announced and promoted properly, convey a church's interests and concerns and offer to people outside the church the opportunity to sample its ministry at times other than the stated services on the Lord's Day. This kind of outreach includes studies of specific Biblical subjects, the invitation of noted or otherwise well-qualified speakers to address subjects of concern or interest, and the viewing of films or video series. Such outreach requires meticulous planning, careful and timely advertising and promotion, and a system by which the names and addresses of contacts may be captured for follow-up.

Radio and television preaching and teaching opportunities are forms of outreach that allow the teaching and preaching skills of a church's pastor to be shared with those outside the church, so that they may hear the gospel and sample the teaching and preaching ministry of the congregation. This

kind of outreach requires careful organization and constant hard work to maintain quality and consistency.

Evangelism ministries

Evangelism ministries are any kind of direct gospel communication that have to do with making the righteous requirements of God and His plan for the salvation of His elect known to people outside the church. They differ from outreach ministries in that their focus is not

pointed toward drawing people to the organizational ministries within the church, but toward presenting the gospel “in the marketplace” in such a way that God’s elect may respond and the reprobate are left without excuse. Such evangelism ministries may take many forms and may be divided into at least the following three categories:

Gospel dialogue is a form of evangelism which allows trained believers to interact directly with unbelievers about the Word of God. It may take the form of personal conversations with friends and neighbors, door-to-door calling, neighborhood Bible studies, or manning a booth at a street fair or a flea market. The goal of this form of evangelism is to present clearly the righteous requirements of God and His plan for the salvation of His elect to those to whom He gives the opportunity to speak. Such evangelism requires careful training, faithful commitment to the task, prayer support, literature for distribution, and a system by which the names and addresses of interested persons may be captured for follow-up.

Literature distribution is a less intensive form of evangelism, by which well-written and carefully selected books, pamphlets, and tracts, along with Bibles and Bible portions, are made available for free distribution at public venues such as street fairs, flea markets, and shopping centers, and by personal distribution to contacts when the opportunity arises. The goal of this kind of evangelism is to allow the literature itself to present the gospel. Therefore, such literature must be carefully selected, and those who distribute it must be intimately familiar with its content and purpose. For this to be effective as an evangelism ministry, the materials must be marked or stamped with information about the church sponsoring the distribution.

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, samples of print advertising and lists and descriptions of public meetings and radio and television outreach programs used by various OP churches and mission works around the country may be found.

Street or public forum preaching is the most direct form of gospel communication, using the proclamation of the Word to convey the righteous requirements of God and His plan for the salvation of His elect. It is done routinely and effectively by those who are gifted and called to it. But it also requires the assistance, support, and prayers of many others who labor with and for the evangelistic preacher. The goal of such public forum preaching is to present the gospel powerfully, succinctly, and cogently, so that hearers have a clear understanding of what is required of them and offered to them. For this form of evangelism to be most effective, the one who speaks and those who assist in prayer and support must be ready to dialogue with those who have heard the message, must be familiar with appropriate literature that may be distributed, and must have a method for capturing the names and addresses of those who have shown interest, so as to allow for follow-up at a later time.

DEVELOP MINISTRIES OF MERCY AND CONCERN

“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). With these words of the King in the parable of the sheep and the goats, our Lord Jesus set the standard of compassion for His Church to follow. Are there those who are hungry or thirsty or sick? Are there those who are in prison or without clothes? As we serve them, we lovingly and willingly serve our King.

The New Testament Church modeled this kind of compassion with a spirit of generosity and a variety of ministries of mercy. When food for widows was not properly distributed, the church sprang into action (Acts 6:1–6). When the church in Antioch learned that their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem would soon suffer from a famine, they immediately took up a collection for them (Acts 11:29). As Paul recounted his early experience with the other apostles, he noted that they especially requested him to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10).

Such genuine concern for people and their needs has always been a characteristic of God’s people. Paul summed it up in Galatians 6:10—“Do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” But when new churches are planted, there is often so much emphasis placed on reaching people and organizing the work that ministries of mercy are overlooked or placed on hold until later. That is a serious mistake for a mission work that is maturing into an organized congre-

gation. Churches practice ministries of mercy in at least three ways:

Hospitality

It is not just pastors and elders who are to be hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2; Hebrews 13:1–3, 7). They serve as examples to the whole church of what it means to be hospitable. Without Lydia's hospitality to Paul and his traveling companions, the church in Philippi would have been much more difficult to plant (Acts 16:15). With today's cultural emphasis on privacy and individual happiness, newly planted churches need to demonstrate that kindness, coupled with a warm welcome to the family dinner table and an open home in the name of the Savior, is still practiced by Christians.

Compassion

With our Savior's example of compassion for the physical needs of men (Matthew 9:35–36), coupled with the concern that the Galatians had for Paul (Galatians 4:15) and the challenge to do deeds of mercy in James 2:14–17, we need little more information to know what God expects of us. However, the emphasis of the liberal social gospel throughout the decades of the twentieth century has led Bible-believing Christians to react by stressing only the spiritual implications of Christ's love. But the self-centeredness of today's secularized culture presents tremendous opportunities for the newly planted church to demonstrate what Christ's compassion looks like when it identifies community needs, such as homelessness, child abuse, broken marriages, and care of the elderly.

Giving

The Philippians' gift for Paul's work (Philippians 4:14–16) is an example of yet a third kind of mercy ministry: generosity. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Too often, giving is linked only to duty, obedience, and tithing. But giving, coupled with care and concern, takes on a deeper dimension. The budget of a newly planted church can be structured to encourage generosity as a pattern of giving. It can make provision for a deacons fund for the care of the poor and needy to be administered by the overseeing session until deacons are chosen by the people. It can make provision for giving to the causes of home and foreign missions from the start of the new church. It can make provision for special giving to approved ministry causes. And special giving to meet special needs should be encouraged long before deacons are in place to help with that work.

DEVELOP SOUND ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES

A new mission work needs to develop sound administrative practices from the start of its ministry. But often, such administrative practices and procedures are not given a high priority because of the spiritual nature of the task involved in ordering worship and developing ministries to and for people. Developing a mission work into an organized congregation necessitates that great attention be paid to things that are often thought to be business oriented. While a Reformed church should never be thought of or administered as a business, the same careful attention needs to be paid to the establishment of its administrative practices and procedures as is paid to the development of every other part of the ministry of a mission work. What follows are descriptions of several necessary aspects of administrative practices and procedures.

Handling offerings

The handling of church offerings is one of the most obvious and public displays of the administrative organization of a mission work. Clearly identifiable offering plates, bags, or baskets should be obtained and used right from the start of public worship services. A consistent procedure needs to be followed in rented or borrowed facilities for handling the collection and temporary storage of offerings. A plan should be in place to ensure that offerings are never counted in an informal manner or in a public location, and that they are always counted and recorded by more than one person. It is also important to have a clear procedure in place for how offerings are deposited and how and where records of offerings and contributions are kept, including a schedule detailing specific persons responsible for those tasks.

Managing finances

The person who writes the checks for the financial obligations of the church should never be the person who handles or deposits the offerings. A system of safeguards needs to be set in place, so that the role of the financial secretary or church treasurer is known among the members of the church. Many new mission works today have begun to operate with an appointed financial secretary, rather than a treasurer. The responsibilities of the financial secretary are more clearly understood as being those of carrying out the policies and instructions of the session, under specific

guidelines established for that purpose and made available to anyone who asks. The work of such a financial secretary should be reviewed regularly, and the books of that person should be examined or audited quarterly for the first year, semiannually for the second year, and never less than annually thereafter.

Budgeting

In order for a mission work to develop into a mature congregation, it needs to operate within the well-constructed guidelines of a budget from its earliest days. The initial budget of a mission work should be constructed by its overseeing session in consultation with the members and should then be reviewed regularly and publicly. It is best to describe the budgeting process of a church as a challenge to giving and a guideline for spending. The budget should include both income and expense projections.

On the income side, the offerings of the people of the mission work, the financial assistance from the presbytery and the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, and other sources of support should be listed separately and then totaled. On the expense side, the pastor's salary and remuneration allowances (such as housing and medical insurance) should be kept separate from ministry expenses. Ministry expenses such as facilities rental, materials purchases, equipment operations, and advertising may be broken into separate categories, but they should all be clearly identified as the work of the ministry. In addition, many churches now provide for their pastor's travel and automobile operation costs as ministry expense items. A final section on the expense side of the budget should be for benevolences and other forms of missions giving. Once the budget is constructed, it is important that it be reviewed by the overseeing session and the people of the mission work on a regular basis and that it be used as the operational basis for the church's financial commitments.

Benevolent giving

As a part of the budget mentioned above, the mission work from its earliest days should be involved in benevolent and missions giving. Such giving is not superfluous and should not wait until the church can meet all its financial obligations without outside assistance. It is anticipated that God is building into the life of the new mission work a growing understanding of stewardship and a greater maturity in the area of shouldering its responsibilities to care for the work of the kingdom outside the confines of its own needs and local concerns. Many mission works today have be-

gun with the ambitious goal of channeling ten percent of local tithes and offerings to the benevolent causes of their presbytery and denomination, which are paid “off the top” on a monthly or quarterly basis. However benevolent giving is handled, the maturing mission work needs to demonstrate an ever-increasing love for the work of the church outside its local ministry and a correspondingly increased level of giving to those ministries and causes.

Establishing sound legal safeguards

A mission work must see itself as an employer of at least a pastor and perhaps a number of others who receive some remuneration for their services from church-generated funds. As such, it needs to apply for an employer identification number (EIN) from the Internal Revenue Service. As part of its obligation to handle the gifts and offerings of its people and to appropriately receipt them, it needs to understand and articulate its status as a 501(c)(3) organization under separate Internal Revenue Service rulings and documents. In order to appropriately care for its people and their guests as they gather for worship and for other church ministries and functions, and in order to protect its people from individual liability in case of an accident, adequate liability/property insurance should be obtained from the earliest days of the church’s public ministry. These and a number of other financial and administrative details are described in documents maintained, updated, and distributed to OP mission works when they begin receiving financial assistance from the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension.

At this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site, information may be found concerning various issues of a legal nature which affect churches, as well as a financial setup checklist for a new mission work.

Establishing good member care practices

Members and regular attenders of a mission work should be able to expect that administrative practices and procedures will be set in place to keep them informed about such things as changes in meeting location or time of services, opportunities for ministry, prayer needs of the people of the church, and a number of other needs which require timely communication. In addition, the absence of regular attenders from services on the

Lord's Day should be noted with the mailing of a church bulletin and acknowledgments of concern by other church members. Plans should also be in place for how to care for the families and friends of the church in time of sickness, disaster, or death. And policies and procedures need to be in place for the creation of a church directory and a mailing list of members and attenders in order to establish and maintain good communication within the church.

Making good property and investment decisions

God often favors a mission work with special gifts. Some of these may be designated for the purchase of property or buildings. Others are for the general assistance of the church's ministry. The handling of gifts over and above the regular tithes and offerings of the people are an important aspect of good administrative procedure. The overseeing session of a mission work should give attention to procedures for what would happen if such gifts were given. Should the moneys be invested? If so, what investment instruments should be approved, and who is authorized to make those investments? Should property be purchased? If so, what location should be chosen, given the current temporary location of the mission work? While it serves no useful purpose to have detailed plans and procedures in place for every possible eventuality, it is wise to establish general guidelines for such situations early in the church's public ministry.