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Organizing a Mission Work as a New Congregation

DISCERNING A MISSION WORK'S READINESS FOR ORGANIZATION

Organizing a mission work as a new congregation is the culmination of a long process. From the time the first believers met each other in a Bible study and determined to become an Orthodox Presbyterian church, through the reception of their group as a mission work by the presbytery, and all during the process of the development of their ministry with the assistance of the organizing pastor and the overseeing session, they have been growing and maturing as a body of Christ. And this is a process that takes time. It takes time for people to get to know each other well. It takes time for them to learn to trust each other and their leaders. And it takes time for them to grow together in their knowledge and love of Christ and the work of the church. It must also be remembered that this maturing process is a spiritual work done by God. The efforts of the presbytery, the overseeing session, and the organizing pastor allow the building of Christ's Church to be laid and built on a firm foundation. But Christ himself does the building, and no manner of effort, however well intentioned, can make a group into a church without His presence and power.

In this discussion of organizing a mission work into a new congregation, it must be understood that the word *organize* does not in any way imply that the church has been disorganized, poorly structured, or in some way deficient. Rather, the words *organizing a mission work as a new congregation* serve as shorthand for the long process that takes two to four years. (See the diagram on page 80.) But those words also describe the activities at the conclusion of the organizing process, during which the presbytery gains sufficient confidence that the hand of God has produced both a group of mature believers and a unified congregation that can vow, "In reliance

upon God for strength ... [we] promise to walk together as a church of Jesus Christ according to the Word of God and the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church” (Form of Government XXIX, A, 3, d).

Criteria for judging a mission work’s readiness to be organized

“Until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19) is the basic concept that is at issue in determining a mission work’s readiness to be organized. The presbytery and its home missions committee, along with the overseeing session and the members of the mission work themselves, all need to be asking honest and loving questions concerning their readiness. Do the members of the mission work love, respect, and defer to one another? If they do not, it will be difficult for them to stand together as an organized congregation in future years. Do they respect, submit to, and obey their temporary, presbytery-appointed leaders? Are they simply waiting to be organized so as to get out from under the intrusion and interference of outsiders? If such attitudes are prevalent, the patterns are not yet set for them to embrace and follow leaders whom they have chosen and whom God has called and appointed. Does their worship of God as a congregation unify them and encourage their hearts? If they hold strong differences of opinion about the elements of worship and are simply tolerating the present order and practice of worship, they may not yet be ready to walk together as a unified body of Christ. Are they growing in spiritual maturity as a result of the ministry of the church? Are they reaching out to their neighbors, relatives, and friends, and is God using their efforts to gather more of His elect into the church? Are they demonstrating a concern for the needs of those in their community, and are they involved in ministries of mercy? It is vital that positive answers to these questions be forthcoming from the members of the mission work about the ministry of the church that God is building there. Otherwise, those who are involved in its establishment are little more than participants in a theological club or a political interest group. Do they understand what the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is? Do they share the OPC’s interests and concerns? Are they actively involved in praying for, and financially supporting, her ministries of home and foreign missions and Christian education? Are they appreciative of the work of their presbytery on their behalf? Criteria such as these are used by all concerned to make a judgment about a mission work’s basic readiness to be organized as a new and separate congregation of the OPC.

Evaluative questions for the overseeing session and presbytery committee to ask

The kinds of evaluative questions asked by presbytery representatives in their attempts to discern a mission work's readiness for organization differ widely because of the makeup of the mission work itself, the place in which it is planted, and the gifts and strengths of those who have been charged to make the evaluation. So, instead of providing a list of evaluative questions, the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension has provided this manual for review with the mission work throughout its development and especially at the time when a decision is to be made about organizing it as a new and separate congregation. Those involved in the process are therefore especially urged to review Chapter 5 and to draw wise and objective conclusions about the maturity of the congregation. Are the governing commitments observable in a maturing Reformed congregation, listed in Chapter 5, present in the mission work? Are ministries of spiritual growth, evangelism, and mercy in place and effective? And are sound and Biblical administrative practices and procedures being followed?

THE TRAINING OF OFFICE-BEARERS

According to Presbyterian polity and the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a mission work is not ready to be organized as a new congregation until the elders are trained and ready to take up their responsibilities. But the role of the organizing pastor and the overseeing session is to do far more than identify and train elders for election by the congregation. Too often, the training of officers is seen as the most urgent work performed by the organizing pastor, and the plan is to get the church organized as quickly as possible. However, the church is much more than its elders. A word of caution is therefore issued in this discussion of the training of office-bearers, that their roles and responsibilities must be kept in proper perspective within the overall process of organizing the mission work into a new congregation.

Identifying potentially qualified men

The qualifications for an officer-bearer found in 1 Timothy 3 deal almost entirely with the matter of godly character. Paul's use of such words as "blameless," "temperate," "sober-minded," "hospitable," and "rever-

ent,” along with his prohibitions against being violent, quarrelsome, covetous, or greedy, indicate the kind of godly character that the church is to look for in the men whom God is calling out to be its servant-leaders. Being able to teach is only one of many character traits of an overseer, but it is often given undue prominence in the training and qualification of men who serve as ruling elders. A balanced approach to training in all areas of Reformed life and doctrine is important, especially for the church’s first set of indigenous office-bearers. But even among those who appear otherwise qualified, it is often the case that God is not calling them to such service as office-bearers. It quickly becomes apparent that the men whom God is calling fit the profile of the acronym FAT—they are faithful, available, and teachable. They are men who, over time, have demonstrated that they are faithful to the church’s ministry and stated services, who accept responsibilities willingly, and who give generously. They are available to help, to grow, to train, and to meet when the busy lives and priorities of other men keep them from such availability. And they are teachable, open to instruction and study, imitating godly examples and practices.

Teaching the congregation about church office and officers

It is important that the congregation be taught about church officers and their qualifications from the earliest days of the mission work’s public ministry. That teaching should be organized and presented around Biblical principles and practices. Too often such information is conveyed only as a necessity for the organization of the church and only as a matter that has to do with the church’s form of government. It is vital that the people of the mission work have a proper Biblical expectation that God will provide the congregation with the men whom He has called to be their servant-leaders, and that when He does so, the people of the congregation are fully prepared to submit to their authority and to follow their lead.

Demonstrating worthiness for office

The first officers of a mission work need to recognize that they must show themselves worthy and qualified for office if they are to be identified and chosen by the people. They must in certain respects “run for office” by demonstrating godly character, hospitality, and effective service to the church. They must be recognized as those within the congregation who are encouragers and trustworthy counselors, holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. The necessity of demonstrating worthiness

for office even extends to the organizing pastor, if he senses God's call to remain on after the mission work is organized as the pastor of the people he has grown to love. The Biblical principle that officers are chosen by the people can never be short-circuited as the church nears the time of its organization.

Some methods of training

Candidates for the offices of ruling elder and deacon, regardless of their past ordination and experience, should undergo a period of training and preparation prior to their election and installation as the first officers of a newly organized congregation. Decisions about the nature and duration of that training are properly left to the overseeing session of the mission work. The particular training materials and methods used are matters for overseeing sessions to decide, but there are some specific considerations which need to be discussed when training officers in preparation for the organization of a mission work as a new congregation:

Duration—The training should be long enough to allow ample time for covering a wide range of material, but short enough so that the progress of the men being trained can be observed by the people of the mission work and so that the length of the preparation time does not cause undue concern for the progress of the organizational process. A duration of six to nine months is usually sufficient.

Intensity—The training of the church's first officers serves a dual purpose. First, it is to equip the men with all that is necessary for them to serve as effective elders and deacons. Second, it is to set a high standard for office-bearers, so that the newly organized church will be able to maintain a strong Biblical leadership standard for its officers in the years to come. Decisions must be made with regard to the intensity of the requirement to be apt to teach and what it means to be of good report. But whatever method or materials are used, it is important that all officer trainees be equipped with sufficient training so that they may in good conscience hold fast the faithful Word and so that they will be able to evaluate problems

There are a number of standard training courses which have been developed over the past several years by OP pastors and sessions and which may be reviewed and accessed at this location in the electronic version of the manual on the OPC Web site.

and situations which arise at the congregation and presbytery level. In addition, they should be exposed to all areas of ecclesiastical ministry, including theology, church history, polity, and the rudiments of Christian counseling.

On-the-job training—It is vital that the gifts and effectiveness in ministry of officer trainees be tested and demonstrated within the life of the congregation. It is also necessary that they be given close and personal access to the ministries of the organizing pastor and the overseeing session during the time of their training. Their first visits in the homes of the members of the congregation they will serve should be made long before they are elected and ordained. And the overseeing session should at some point in their training incorporate officer trainees into regular meetings of the session for the sake of both exposure to meeting protocol and continuity with past actions and decisions.

DEVELOPING CONGREGATIONAL DOCUMENTS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

A congregation's constitution and bylaws are seldom referred to and are rarely needed in the ongoing life of the church until a problem arises. Then those documents which were carefully crafted long ago and stored for safekeeping are located and meticulously exegeted. It is usually as the mission work nears completion of the process of becoming an organized congregation that they write those necessary documents which describe how the governmental standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church interface with the particular work of the local church. This work of carefully wording the church's constitution and bylaws (if it chooses to have both) becomes an important exercise, not just for the organization of the church, but for the future of its ministry.

The purpose and importance of official documents

The official documents of an organized congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, usually identified as its constitution and bylaws, are the statements which relate the local church to its denominational affiliation and identify the governmental documents that will be used to order the church's ecclesiastical life. These documents define the responsibilities of the congregation, how the church chooses its officers, how it makes decisions, and how it handles jointly owned property. As was stated earlier,

the documents serve most often during a time of crisis or in order to carry out duties and responsibilities which are not regular occurrences. So it is wise to plan the details of these documents carefully and ensure that every member knows that they exist and that they will be used when needed.

Some methods and procedures for constructing official documents

There are two methods or philosophies of structuring a church's by-laws or operational rules. The first favors the production of a brief, official document which refers most issues and matters of controversy to the standards of doctrine, government, discipline, and worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and regulates only those matters left to the congregation to decide. These are few in number and may be found in a sample document in the *Manual for Presbytery/CHMCE Partnership*, published by the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension. The second method or philosophy favors the production of an extensive document which describes in detail the responsibilities and obligations of the members of the congregation and how delinquencies in doctrine or life on the part of members will be dealt with by the session and the congregation. Most mission works prefer the shorter and more simplified construction of their initial official documents and leave open the possibility that more details may be added later.

Policies and procedures to consider

Every congregation of the OPC must have some kind of official document that includes a clause relating it to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and identifying the OPC's *Book of Church Order* as that to which it will adhere. Each congregation determines the method by which office-bearers are nominated and elected and identifies whether they are to be elected for terms of service or for lifetime service. The congregation also sets the number of elders and deacons which serve at any one time and identifies which officers and members may be chosen to the corporation's board of trustees (if there is a corporation). The date of an annual meeting must be selected, and the quorum for meetings of the congregation must be chosen. Most congregations also choose to describe the process of how a pulpit committee is formed and how a pastor is chosen. More recently, some congregations have included procedures about how finances will be handled or stipulations regarding members who work with children.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE PRESBYTERY

The presbytery of the Regional Church is a wonderful friend and helper in the process of organizing a mission work as a new congregation. The organizing pastor and the overseeing session should work hard to ensure that the mission work understands the process and sees the benefit of having a collection of wise ministers and elders available to review what God has done in growing and maturing them into a congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understanding organization as a process

The actual organization of a mission work into a new and separate congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a brief, formal process that takes between two and six months to complete. It is important for the congregation to understand that, in this last phase, “organization” is something that is done to and for them by the presbytery in response to their request that it be done. There are three aspects to that organizational procedure. First, the presbytery determines the readiness of the mission work to be organized as a new congregation. This usually involves a meeting or a series of meetings to discuss the views and desires of the people, to review the wording of their official documents, and to evaluate the readiness of the men who have been trained to serve as the church’s first elders and deacons. Second, the presbytery sponsors, supervises, or in some other way ensures that appropriate meetings are held for the church to elect its elders and deacons, to adopt its official documents, and to call a pastor. Third, after all these details are acted upon and reported to the presbytery, it authorizes and conducts an actual service of reception, at which the church is acknowledged and organized as a congregation of the OPC, and during which its officers and pastor are installed.

Utilizing the objectivity of the presbytery

The very presence of the presbytery and its responsibility and authority can be helpful in the organizing process. Sometimes there is a desire to write the church’s documents hurriedly, in order to complete the organizational process. Sometimes there is a hope that a well-loved, but minimally qualified or poorly trained man might be elected as a church officer. Sometimes it would be wiser if the one ruling elder candidate available to be trained and elected were augmented on the newly organized session by one or two seasoned elders appointed by the presbytery. With a competent

and authoritative presbytery in place, there is usually a willingness on the part of the people of the mission work to take the time necessary to maintain high standards and listen to wise counsel throughout the organizing process. But in order for the presbytery's authority to be accepted by the people of the mission work, it is important that they become acquainted with the functions, the work, and the men of the presbytery from the very start of the mission work.

Preparing petitions and calls

In the life of a mission work, there are three times when official communications from the emerging congregation to their presbytery are anticipated and expected.

A petition to be received as a mission work is sent to the presbytery at the very beginning of their official relationship to the presbytery. This is usually a letter signed by the individuals who comprise the group and to which the presbytery responds by receiving the group as a mission work and assigning an overseeing session for their care.

A petition to be organized as a new and separate congregation is a formal document that comes to the presbytery near the end of the development process. This is usually a letter signed by the members of the mission work, asking that they now be allowed to choose their own officers and call their own pastor.

The call to a pastor is a formal document that is acted on at the organizational meeting of the congregation in which the man of their choosing (most often the organizing pastor) is formally and officially called by them to be installed as their first pastor.

Samples of these three documents are available upon request from the offices of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

