

Introduction

WHY A MANUAL?

God has chosen to bless the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) with the establishment of many new congregations during each of the past several years. The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension (CHMCE), which has been charged with the task of overseeing and assisting in the process of getting them started, has stood in awe of the power and blessing of our covenant God. He has surpassed all the goals we established. He has supplied the resources to fund new churches when budgets had not planned for them and when giving forecasts had not expected that it could happen. He has both humbled us and increased our faith. The OPC is growing by the addition of new people coming from various traditions of Reformed and evangelical expression to serve as the core groups of our new mission works. They often come with unrealistic or inaccurate assumptions about their new denomination. And they are frequently pastored by young church planters who have much energy, knowledge, and zeal, but lack a clear idea of what the task of establishing a new Reformed church entails.

This outpouring of God's blessing of growth on the OPC is also occurring at a time when many methodologies for starting and sustaining new churches have become suspect. During the last three decades of the twentieth century, the Church Growth movement substantially impacted the ecclesiastical scene. An overemphasis on growth and numbers, coupled with what seems to be the advocacy of sociological rather than Biblical principles, has left the Reformed community in sharp disagreement with much of contemporary church practice. In addition, because the Church Growth movement identifies church planting as the most effective means of evangelism, the whole process of establishing new churches has become suspect within the Reformed community. Is church planting merely a means to an end? Is the establishment of new churches just another Church Growth methodology? Decidedly not! But what then are the cor-

rect principles and the appropriate methodologies for Orthodox Presbyterians to follow? This manual will attempt to answer these questions.

As the number of our new churches increases, it has become clear that a general knowledge among us of the skills, practices, and competencies required to establish a new Reformed congregation has been overestimated. Our home missions committees, our regional home missionaries, and CHMCE have expressed a common desire for a practical manual to put in the hands of those who are involved in doing the work. The request has come for a document which articulates sound ecclesiastical attitudes and practices and which reviews accepted and time-tested methods for establishing new congregations. So this manual is intended to tell you what you need to know and do as an organizing pastor, as an overseeing elder, or as a member of a presbytery home missions committee working to establish a congregation that will be committed to the standards of doctrine, government, discipline, and worship of the OPC.

THIS MANUAL WILL BE FOR ESTABLISHING PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED CHURCHES

In producing this manual, the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension has made a choice about its focus. Rather than serving as a general study of church planting, this manual will be about starting Orthodox Presbyterian (OP) churches. While that focus may appear to limit its audience, the Committee believes that Christ's Church is best served by one of its branches being very specific about the principles, policies, and procedures which govern its church planting activities.

Two terms which will be used throughout the following pages need careful clarification at the outset: *Presbyterian* and *Reformed*. In these pages, these terms do not refer to the historic and geographical identities of two ecclesiastical expressions of Calvinism, one from Scotland and the other from the European continent. Nor are they to be understood as synonyms for each other. Rather, the term *Presbyterian* will consistently refer to the governmental structure and the connective nature of a church, while the term *Reformed* will refer to a church's doctrinal commitments and its way of approaching the Scriptures and all of life.

This manual also makes several important underlying assumptions about the process of planting Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

The first assumption is that Presbyterian churches work differently from

other types of Protestant churches. They are ruled collectively by a group of elders, rather than by a single, visionary pastor/leader. That joint rule and oversight by a session also means that the congregation does not see itself as setting the agenda for its own ministry, nor does it necessarily follow the vision of a single leader. And the connectional nature of Presbyterian churches, with their graded systems of review and control, means that neither strong, assertive leaders nor outside “experts” will be able to make significant changes in the ministry of a congregation without the concurrence of a number of ministers and elders who mutually share responsibility for the well-being of that local church.

This means that those who are involved in establishing Presbyterian churches should be warned that the majority of church planting materials available today are written from a nonconnectional perspective. Such materials view each local church as an independent entity which chooses its own structure and purpose and is headed by a strong, natural leader. They advocate leadership models based on the assumption of a general lack of interest in, or importance of, the governmental structure of the church. If the principles and methods of such materials are followed indiscriminately while attempting to start a Presbyterian church, those involved will almost certainly find themselves in conflict with some of the basic Biblical foundations on which they are working to establish the church.

The second assumption this manual makes is that Reformed churches think differently from other Protestant churches. They hold to strong sets of confessional beliefs, which determine much of the outworking of their ministries. They also see themselves fitting within a long, rich history of the Church, rather than developing something new from scratch. Their Reformed commitments also demand a depth and fullness of ministry that touches all of life.

Those who are involved in establishing Reformed churches should be aware that most church planting materials available today are written with the assumption that a new church must, over time, create *de novo* its own statement of beliefs and commitments. Many such materials also assume that doctrinal beliefs do not play a significant role in the planting and development of a new church. And some of these materials go so far as to suggest that a congregation’s strong commitment to a set of doctrinal beliefs is an impediment to its growth and outreach as a church. If concepts and methodologies garnered from such materials are indiscriminately employed while attempting to plant a self-consciously Reformed church, those involved often become frustrated and angered. They discover that the meth-

odologies employed and the ministries that result often conflict with their system of belief and their ways of thinking about the Scriptures.

The third assumption this manual makes about the process of planting Presbyterian and Reformed churches is that the emphases with which a church is begun determine how it will believe and function in the future. If we want our new OP churches to be Presbyterian in structure and government, it is imperative that when we begin them, we provide them with a group of competent and caring elders who will take the time and have the energy to shepherd and oversee them. If we want them to be Reformed in their doctrinal commitments, it is important that means and methods are devised to ensure that they hear doctrinal preaching and confessional references from the pulpit and that such matters as catechetical instruction are a part of their ministries from the earliest days.

Finally, this manual will unfold around the assumption that the way in which God has seen fit to expand the OPC and increase the number of its congregations will be the normal method employed by us in our church planting efforts. For almost a decade, that method has been that a group of committed believers is raised up by the efforts of a regional home missionary, or by the efforts of a local pastor along with his session and his congregation, or even by divine intervention apart from the efforts of a local session or presbytery. By whatever means these groups come to us, they are embraced by sessions and presbyteries and assisted with the beginning of worship services and other ministries. They are provided with elders on loan (in some cases, with the entire session of an OP congregation) to be their shepherds and overseers. And as the young congregation develops over a period of between three and twelve months, an evangelist is found to be their organizing pastor. It is readily admitted that this is not the only way to begin a new Presbyterian and Reformed church. But it is the method God has used to expand the OPC and the one which will be assumed throughout the pages of this manual.

OTHER RESOURCES

This manual is intended as a companion to the explanation of the policies and procedures of CHMCE detailed in its *Manual for Presbytery/CHMCE Partnership*. Additional suggested resources, examples, and materials are available and regularly updated under the Home Missions menu on the OPC Web site, www.opc.org.