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Overseeing a Mission Work

The Nature of a Mission Work

Young churches are different from mature ones, just as young children are different from adults. The Apostle Paul recognized that. To the young Galatian churches he addressed a simple and chiding message about the sufficiency of God’s grace in salvation. To the mature church at Rome he spoke of “the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God.”

Paul also had special ways of caring for young churches that he helped to start. He loved to visit them (Acts 15:36; 18:23). When he could not go himself, he sent trusted men to do the work of encouraging and directing (Acts 19:22; Titus 1:5). He would routinely receive reports about people and circumstances within those churches (1 Corinthians 1:11; Colossians 1:7). And his correspondence to seven different churches indicates that he was active in coaching and encouraging them in their work and development.

Consider these unique characteristics that set mission works apart from mature congregations:

The body is still maturing

There is a time in the life of a new church which corresponds to infancy. Paul spoke lovingly but chidingly to the people of the first churches he helped to plant in the Galatian region: “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you ...” (Galatians 4:19). Before Christ has been fully formed in them, in the early days of a new church, the people of a mission work often make poor decisions and lack wisdom and unity. They are more given to factionalism and open to doctrinal error. This is not necessarily to their shame. It may simply describe a maturing process within a newly formed church. But it helps to explain why the OPC Form of Government goes to great lengths to protect their rights as members of the church, but does not recognize the new mission work as a functioning body and does not make provision for them to choose their own officers or to make other kinds of corporate decisions. That must wait until they are organized as a new and separate church.

Leaders are still being identified

Paul warned Timothy that an overseer should not be a novice, lest, being puffed up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil (1 Timothy 3:6–7), and not to lay hands hastily on a man, presumably in an act of ordination as an elder (1 Timothy 5:22). New mission works are places of great need, which often have a vacuum of leadership. Those who help to start them are often unqualified or not yet ready to assume leadership in them. Additionally, those who want to lord it over others often gravitate to newly established churches. And even when mature, qualified men are part of the group, it takes time for the church to recognize them as such.

Resources are still being developed

The small size of the group and the fact that many have not yet been challenged with the blessing and importance of tithing often mean that finances are not sufficient to maintain the entire ministry of the church. In addition, many core group members have not been trained to teach or serve in even the most basic ministries of the church.

The Overseeing Session of a Mission Work

Moses instituted a formal structure of elder rule among the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 1:9–15). Elder rule was formalized in the Jewish synagogue system of the Old Testament, in which there was always a group or plurality of elders in charge. During the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, it was the chief priests and these "elders of the people" who opposed Him (Matthew 21:23; 26:3). But when it came time to structure the New Testament churches which had been planted in Asia Minor, the apostles understood that God had already given them direction about caring for the spiritual needs of His people. They appointed "elders" (Greek, *presbyteroi*) for them in each church (Acts 14:23). The work of these elders was further clarified when they were referred to as "overseers" (Greek, *episkopoi*) (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7), whose duty it was to "take care of the church of God" (1 Timothy 3:5). It is this concept of elder rule that forms the basis of Presbyterian church government.

Beginning a mission work with the right structure is very important. Young churches routinely face two difficulties that the right structure can help to overcome. First, because they are new to each other and usually small in number, the people who help to form new churches often lack

godly and mature leaders to help them solve problems and to provide wise counsel. Second, because they are in new neighborhoods or communities where the other churches are not of their “kind,” new congregations often feel isolated and face serious trouble when internal strife arises.

Paul took many traveling companions with him on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:1–5). It appears that they provided the initial elder structure while new churches were being formed. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church does the same thing. When a new mission work is established, the plans for

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the work always include how God’s newly gathered people will be cared for by an overseeing session. One individual pastor alone providing all the care, wisdom, and oversight is not God’s design for His church.

Experienced elders or even whole sessions from other congregations are “loaned” to new churches to provide the wise counsel and oversight as God’s care structure.

Selecting overseeing session members

Sometimes the entire session of a local church in another community is appointed by the presbytery to be the overseeing session of a mission work. Sometimes several members from the same session, together with their pastor, are appointed for that purpose. But more frequently individual elders and ministers from various congregations are appointed as a committee of the presbytery to serve as the overseeing session. In recommending to the presbytery ruling elders and ministers for appointment as borrowed elders for a mission work, there are four criteria that

the home missions committee can apply to each of those whose names may be suggested:

He has a heart for the extension of the church. He shows interest in the church planting efforts of the presbytery. He is involved in outreach and evangelism in his own congregation.

He has usually served as an elder in more than one congregation. He has had the experience of working with several pastors and sessions and has learned that there is more than one way to do something in the OPC.

He is able to think conceptually about the church. He has demonstrated within his session and presbytery that he is able to understand a situation or solve a problem within the church, even though he has not faced it in his own experience.

He has a servant's heart. Much time and energy will be required for this work. He will usually maintain oversight responsibilities in his own congregation and will take on even greater ones with the new mission work. Unless he has demonstrated a sacrificial servant attitude in his present oversight responsibilities, his service as a borrowed elder will usually not be effective.

Structuring an overseeing session

A new mission work, even with all the things it lacks, is an infant congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its members are members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Its needs are those of any body of Christ, however youthful or immature. So the elders who have been assigned to provide oversight have a twofold responsibility. First, they are to care for all the members and their families individually. Second, they are to care for the emerging body as a new corporate organism. The new group's small size

and lack of organization do not make it any less a church, nor should the care provided by the overseeing session be any less formal or intensive. In fact, because the new church needs much help to develop the right patterns and practices, it usually takes more time and energy to provide care for a mission work than it does for an organized congregation. Here are three guidelines to keep in mind when organizing the work of the overseeing session of a new mission work:

It should meet regularly and separately. A theme of this manual is that good patterns should be set for the new church from its earliest days. But one of the tendencies of those who have been assigned the spiritual oversight of a new mission work is to approach that responsibility informally, making occasional visits to the work and holding occasional meetings when something needs to be decided. Members of a mission work are justified when they ask their borrowed elders, “Is that how your session works?” The session of a mission work should organize itself into a formal

At this location in the online manual, a checklist for clerks of overseeing sessions may be found, along with suggestions for keeping minutes and for establishing and maintaining church membership rolls.

structure, with a moderator and a clerk; and it should hold regular, stated, announced meetings on the site of the new church. There is much

work to do, which will be discussed below, and Biblical patterns of review and control must be established and a good system of record keeping must be set in place.

It should know the flock. One of the main difficulties faced by the borrowed elders in the early days of their care for a mission work is that they do not know the people well. It is vital that a system be established early

on of regular, intentional visits by the members of the overseeing session. Some of these can be on the Lord's Day, but it is also important for them to be with the individual members of the mission work at times other than the occasion of the stated services of the church. The plan should include how individual elders can be in the homes of the member families of the mission work to become acquainted with them, to learn of their abilities and their needs, and to encourage them.

It should constantly remember its unique, temporary task. The overseeing session of a mission work has a delicate task. It is working itself out of a job even as the need of the mission work for wise oversight increases. The elders are keenly aware that they are providing spiritual guidance and direction to believers who have not chosen them or called them to that task. The work of this session is different. It involves setting patterns, developing maturity, and identifying leaders. And it is temporary, lasting only until the new body of Christ reaches sufficient maturity to be able to choose its own officers wisely and Biblically.

The Work of an Overseeing Session

The borrowed elders who have responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the members of a mission work must recognize that the mission work is a church itself. It is developing a separate identity as a body of Christ. They must also be aware that their work may or may not involve the responsibility for supervising the development of the mission work into an organized congregation. That job is sometimes retained by the home missions committee of the presbytery. So the remainder of this chapter will deal

with the specific shepherding responsibilities of an overseeing session in regard to the spiritual care of the members of a mission work and the care and encouragement it provides to the organizing pastor. Along the way, it will be noted how these responsibilities differ slightly from those of the session of an organized congregation. Appendix 3 of this manual provides an overview of this important work.

Receiving members

The overseeing session prepares prospective new members, examines their credible professions of faith, and receives them into membership in the same way it does in an organized congregation. Technically, their membership may be either in an established “mother” church or on the roll of the Regional Church itself. But the overseeing session must keep accurate records of those who are members of the mission work for the purposes of spiritual nurture, congregational decision making, presbytery record keeping, and the eventual organization of the mission work as a new congregation.

Providing spiritual care and nurture

Designated members of the overseeing session should attend the meetings of the mission work often enough to know the members and be accepted as elders by them. Those elders should also visit in the homes of the members and friends of the mission work along with the organizing pastor and should seek to build a good working relationship of mutual respect and appreciation between the mission work and the presbytery or between the mother and daughter congregations (depending on the oversight arrangements).

Filling the pulpit

The overseeing session must exercise care in providing sound pulpit supply, both before the call of an organizing pastor and in his absence. Just as in an organized congregation, it is the session which gives or denies permission to preach in the pulpit, and that responsibility should not be delegated for the sake of convenience to those in the mission work.

Developing sound and acceptable worship

At the outset of its ministry with the mission work, the overseeing session must develop sound, Biblical, and acceptable guidelines for worship, and regularly review and refine them with the people. Matters such as the type of music, the order of service, decorum, special music, the Scripture version, the observance of special days and seasons, the kinds of communion elements to be used, and the length and time of services should be dealt with early in the church's life, while still giving the organizing pastor as much latitude in these matters as possible after his arrival.

Administering the sacraments

The overseeing session determines the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, the proper fencing of the Table, and the kinds of elements to be used. It should also provide one of its members to serve along with an officiating minister for the proper administration of the Supper. The overseeing session determines the occasion of baptisms of covenant children and professing adult believers not yet baptized and should provide one of its members at the time of baptism as a proper witness and testimony to the session. It should be noted that the sacraments are

especially valuable as instruction to the members of the mission work and should be offered regularly at the location of the mission work.

Exercising church discipline

The overseeing session should anticipate that problems of a disciplinary nature will arise as the mission work develops and matures, and should be prepared to take the time required to instruct and correct effectively. It must make clear to people upon their reception as members that it, as the session which guarantees the full rights of members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, also has full responsibility and authority to exercise discipline and correction.

Making congregational decisions

The overseeing session should recognize that congregational decision making in the life of a mission work is often a difficult matter. In the early days of its life, the mission work may often become polarized if asked to make decisions about secondary issues such as a change of name or meeting location. And even on primary issues, such as the selection of an organizing pastor or the purchase of land, the group often has not yet formed sufficiently deep relationships with one another in order to make mutual decisions. It is for this reason that the OPC Form of Government does not make provision for a mission work to decide these matters formally. So the overseeing session needs to make provision for informal discussions of important matters between themselves and the members of the mission work.

But as time passes and the mission work matures as a body of Christ, they can and should be expected to make some of these decisions. As

they near readiness to become an organized congregation, it is important that the members of the mission work convene as a congregation to allow them to begin to mature in their own decision making. The overseeing session would do well to make provision for these matters before problems arise.