

EPCEW Statement on Church Planting

From inception, the EPCEW has been committed to planting churches. The reality of that commitment is borne out by our current work and future plans no less than by our history. As we articulate some of the principles and practice of church planting, we are stating our existing direction more explicitly rather than setting a new one.

I. Principles

In the broadest sense, our church planting principles encompass the whole of Scripture and our subordinate standards. However, in order to provide a useful summary of what is most directly relevant, the main principles of church planting include:

1. The Mission of the Church is to Make Disciples
2. The Means are the Ordinary Means of Grace
3. The Mandate is to Plant Churches
4. The Measure is Faithfulness

1. The Mission of the Church is to Make Disciples

a) What is the mission of the church? Christ makes it perfectly clear in the Great Commission: ‘Go therefore and make disciples (μαθητεύσατε, imperative) of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28: 19-20). Very simply, the church’s mission is to *make disciples*. As a secondary effect, the culture as a whole will ordinarily benefit as the land is filled with believers (Prov. 11: 10-11). Individual believers will do many good works under the categories of vocation (Luke 3: 12-14), being salt and light (Matt. 5: 13-16) and loving our neighbours (Matt. 5: 43-48). The church, however, is called to the one thing that no other entity on earth can possibly do—making Christian disciples. For this reason, Satan has long sought to distract the church from her mission into other things.

b) The basis of this mission is *Christ’s authority*: ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore...’ (Matt. 28: 18-19). Christ has all authority. This begins with the exclusive right to tell the church what to do; any possibility of the church adopting an alternative mission for herself is utterly precluded. Beyond that, Christ infallibly ensures the accomplishment of this mission through unlimited spiritual power from heaven and comprehensive practical enablement on earth. Apart from this authority, the church’s mission is impossible; with it, it is inexorable. The ultimate success of this mission is therefore a foregone conclusion (Matt. 16: 18; Rev. 7: 9-10).

c) The mission is characterized by *going* (Matt. 28: 19). Representatives of the church are to go into ‘all the world’ with the gospel (Mark 16: 15), encompassing local, national and foreign efforts (Acts 1: 8). ‘Going’ also describes the local church’s posture to her own community; there should be an abiding concern to reach the lost, in imitation of the One who came ‘to seek and to save that which was lost’ (Luke 19: 10; cf. 15: 4).

d) The mission is intended to produce, and will ordinarily result in, *disciples*. The church pours herself into divinely sanctioned activities which can rightly be expected to result in the calling and building up of these disciples (Acts 2: 14-42). A disciple is one who has turned away from all other masters—the world, the flesh and the devil—to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 11: 21) and follow Him (Luke 14: 26-33; Matt. 6: 24). Disciples are baptized into Christ (Acts 19: 5), take on the name of Christ (Acts 11: 26), are part of the Body of Christ (Eph. 5: 23-32; Col. 1: 18) and are added to the visible church of Christ (Acts 2: 47). There can therefore be no ‘secret disciples’ who carry on unnoticed in false religions (Matt. 10: 33). The making of disciples includes nurturing covenant children in the faith as well as calling those from afar off (Acts 2: 39); we may not emphasize one to the neglect of the other.

2. The Means are the Ordinary Means of Grace

a) Christ did not leave us to decide how we should ‘make disciples’ but immediately directs us to the appointed means: ‘...*baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all things that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28: 19-20). The Word and sacraments—along with prayer that must accompany them—are the *ordinary means of grace* (WLC 154). The Apostles demonstrated their obedience to their commission by employing these means (Acts 2: 42) and none other. Christ’s promise ‘and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28: 20) applies to those who

go in like manner to make disciples using the specified means. Although God has the divine prerogative to work 'without, above and against' his ordinary means (*WCF* 5.3) the church is bound to them, and we are strictly forbidden from using or trusting in unlawful means (1 Sam. 28: 6-16; Luke 4: 1-12; *WLC* 105; *WLC* 154; *WSC* 88).

b) God calls people to Himself and builds them up by his *Word*. The Larger Catechism asks, 'How is the word made effectual to salvation? A. The spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners... of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation' (*WLC* 1.155). Therefore, we must place an ongoing emphasis on preaching; if we do nothing else, we must preach the Word (1 Cor. 9: 16; 2 Tim. 4: 2). More broadly, word ministry encompasses any situation designed for the intentional communication of the Word of God. These include one-on-one evangelism, evangelistic Bible studies, catechism classes, Sunday Schools and Bible clubs, prospective communicants' or members' classes, pastoral visitation and counselling, midweek Bible studies or lectures and the training of church officers.

c) Jesus commands that we teach '*all things* that I have commanded you' (Matt. 28: 20). The basic orientation of our preaching and teaching programme must be towards a comprehensive understanding of the entire Word of God. Paul can testify that he is 'innocent of the blood of all men' only on the basis that he has 'not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20: 27). Although we might be tempted to curtail or revise aspects of the truth that our hearers might find difficult, we are not permitted any such liberties. The fact that the cross of Christ is 'foolishness' to the world is not a problem to be solved but rather a deliberate design feature to safeguard God's glory (1 Cor. 1: 17-31).

d) People are joined to Christ's church in *baptism*. Our doctrine of the sacraments is outlined in the Westminster standards, but to the present purpose we are reminded that Baptism is the divinely instituted initiation into the Christian church. The Great Commission definition of making disciples necessarily involves baptism (Matt. 28: 19). Therefore, the withholding or concealing of legitimate baptism in the name of securing better opportunities for evangelism would be a contradiction.

e) Christ strengthens his church through the *Lord's Supper*. As the Larger Catechism aptly summarises, 'they that worthily communicate feed upon his [Christ's] body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace, [and] have their union and communion with him confirmed' (*WLC* 1.168). It should therefore be the goal of church plants to begin the administration of this sacrament as soon as possible, so as not to deprive believers of this great benefit. The idea of turning ordinary meals at evangelistic events into the Lord's Supper, however, is contrary to our instructions (1 Cor. 11: 22-34; *WCF* 29.3; *WLC* 168-177).

f) God uses the *prayer* of his people to accomplish all that he promises (Gen. 20: 7; Col. 4: 3 with Matt. 16: 18; Heb. 5: 7 with John 10: 18). In particular, prayer is of utmost importance in the work of building the church (Acts 4: 31; Eph. 6: 18-20; 2 Thess. 3: 1-2). For this reason, ministers are set aside from all temporal affairs to devote themselves '...to prayer and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6: 4 NKJ). In addition, every effort should be made to secure the ongoing, fervent prayer of God's people (Rom. 15: 30-32; Jas. 5: 16). Finally, fasting is a powerful aid to prayer and should not be neglected (Matt. 6: 16-18; *WCF* 21.5).

g) God has given us the *diaconate* to allow the eldership to focus on the ordinary means of grace. Caring for the material needs of the covenant community's poor, and particularly the widows, is among our most basic duties (Rom. 15: 25-27; Gal. 2: 10; 1 Tim. 5: 3-16). However, God demonstrates the supreme priority he places on the church's ministry of the ordinary means of grace by establishing the office of deacon for the express purpose that the Apostles (whose ministerial function is now carried out by the elders) should devote themselves to 'prayer and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6: 1-6) and by placing his mark of blessing on the church so ordered (Acts 6: 7).

3. The Mandate is to Plant Churches

a) Christ's great work in this present age is *to build his church* (Matt. 16: 18). Contrary to any notion that we can build the Kingdom apart from building the church, the Westminster Standards define Christ's Kingdom *as* the church: 'The visible Church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation' (*WCF* 25.2).

b) The building of Christ's church requires the proliferation of *local churches* throughout the world. Jesus assumes there will be a local church for his people to be a part of (Matt. 18: 17), and Peter's new converts were 'added to the church' because there was already a local church for them to join (Acts 2: 41-47). On the other hand, believers are forbidden from forsaking the regular assembling together of God's people (Heb 10:25); obedience to this command alone demands the establishment of local churches.

c) The planting of local churches entails the provision of *men sent to preach* (Rom. 10: 14-15) and, as soon as possible, *men to serve as ordained elders* (Titus 1: 5). It is into the hands of these men that God has committed the ministry of the ordinary means of grace for the good of the church (Acts 6: 4; Eph. 4: 11-16; WLC 63).

d) The churches we seek to proliferate are *Reformed and covenantal*. While it is God's prerogative to bring good out of situations that are contrary to his revealed will (Gen. 50: 20), our duty is to plant churches in the fullest conformity to it. Because we believe that the Reformed faith is the most faithful explication of inspired Scripture, we want to fill the earth with churches that proclaim this faith to the glory of God (Hab. 2: 14). Likewise, since we know that God's plan of redemption is administered in a multi-generational covenant (Gen. 17: 7, 19; Luke 1: 72; Acts 2: 39; Gal. 3: 17-18; WCF 7), the churches we plant must surely be covenantal in doctrine and practice.

4. The Measure is Faithfulness

a) The measure by which the Lord will hold us accountable is *faithfulness* (Matt. 25: 13-46; Luke 12: 35-48; Luke 16: 1-13; 1 Cor. 4: 2). In the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation, diligent efforts are commended (Rev. 2: 2-3, 19) whereas outcomes are never even mentioned. Christ's evaluation is made on the basis of doctrinal fidelity (Rev. 2: 2, 6, 14-16, 20; 3: 8), resisting worldly compromise (Rev. 2: 3, 9, 19, 21-23; 3: 2-3, 15-19) and the willingness to suffer and die for him (Rev. 2: 10, 13; 3: 8-10). These priorities are summarised in Christ's exhortation to Smyrna, 'Be faithful until death' (Rev. 2: 10). Therefore, while we must share our Lord's zeal for the house of God (John 2: 17), the desire to see results must never encroach upon the absolute requirement to remain faithful.

b) There is, however, a relationship between faithfulness and *fruitfulness*. Fruitfulness in terms of *quality* is the inevitable result of faithfulness: 'every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.... Therefore by their fruits you will know them' (Matt. 7: 17-20). On the other hand, fruitfulness in terms of *quantity* varies greatly. This variation is due to differing levels of gifting and resources God puts into our hands (Matt. 25: 19-23) as well as the differing degrees of blessing he supernaturally grants to our labours (Mark 4: 20). Beyond this, the true measure of our fruit may not be visible during our earthly lives (Matt. 26: 56; Acts 7: 58-8: 1).

c) Understanding that God is ultimately sovereign over the amount of fruit that might come from our ministries should be a check to our pride (1 Cor. 4: 7). However, this knowledge does not give us an excuse for negligence or laziness; rather, negligence and laziness are in themselves evidence of unfaithfulness (Matt. 25: 26; Luke 19: 22-23).

II. Practice

Beyond these principles from Scripture and the Westminster Standards, the EPCW's church planting practice is governed by the relevant provisions in our Book of Church Order. Each local session has the responsibility to 'promote missionary endeavour, including local church planting' (BCO 4.4.7; cf. 7.1). When this is not possible, the presbytery assumes the responsibility for 'church planting undertaken collectively' (BCO 4.5.7; cf. 7.1). Whether the local session of the planting church or a provisional session appointed by presbytery, it is for these elders to determine prayerfully the details of how best to proceed (BCO 7.3.1).

However, it may be useful to state briefly some of the basic elements of church planting practice that we consider consistent with our principles:

1. Pray for Open Doors
2. Find Men to Lead
3. Start a Bible Study
4. Begin Worship Services

1. Pray For Open Doors

a) *Prayer* is absolutely and irreducibly essential to the work of church planting. All of the factors that will ultimately make the difference between the life or death of a church plant depend entirely upon divine blessing through the Holy Spirit, and this blessing is to be secured only by prayer. Churches should begin by praying that the Lord would lay good intentions on their hearts (1 Chr. 29: 18-19), would give them wisdom how to proceed (Jas. 1: 5) and would blunt the attacks of the enemy (Eph. 6: 10-18) that church planting especially attracts.

b) Sessions and/or the presbytery must consider where the *needs* are greatest (Matt. 9: 36). Need is generally understood as the number of churches (weighted according to their relative faithfulness; *WCF* 25.5) relative to the population of a given area. Although we do not attach any special significance to the status of cities as opposed to rural areas, the Lord himself expressed a particular concern for the large number of souls who resided in the great city of Nineveh (Jonah 4: 11). There may be other elements to factor into need, such as significant student or immigrant populations. In all these things, we pray that the Lord direct our attention to fields that are 'white for harvest' (John 4: 35) and that we become rightly burdened for needy places (Acts 17: 16).

c) In addition to recognising needs, we pray and look for *open doors* to address them. Paul was, for instance, aware of many needs but lacked opportunity due to his imprisonment. He thus urged the Colossians to 'Continue earnestly in prayer... that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ' (Col. 4: 2-3). We must likewise explore and prayerfully evaluate every potential opportunity to plant churches, pursuing those that, in God's providence, seem to be open doors (Ps. 37: 23; Prov. 16: 9). Considerations might include current church members who commute from an area of need, known Christians in the area who have the potential to become a core group, other connections to the area, the presence of potential leadership in terms of a church planter and/or eldership and the potential for raising finance.

d) As we then make the decision when and if to proceed to the next step, we seek to be *good stewards* of the resources given to us (1 Peter 4: 10). However, our attitude should lean more in the direction of venturesome obedience (1 Sam. 14: 6-7; Luke 16: 1-12) than of timorous reticence (Matt. 25: 24-30). In all of this, we keep in mind that the Lord is sovereign and can overrule our plans (Jas. 4:15; *WLC* 190). Even when we make well-intentioned plans that are later thwarted, God may yet be directing our steps (Acts 16: 6-8; Ps. 37: 23).

2. Find Men to Lead

a) Next to the blessing of heaven, the most important resource needed to plant new churches is men who are qualified to lead them, both ministers and ruling elders (Rom. 10: 15; Phil. 2: 19-30; Titus 1: 5). This does not discount the hugely important contributions of other Christian people (eg, Acts 16: 14-15), but rather points to that without which the work cannot proceed.

b) To this end, every church should seek to produce disciples with characters that would qualify some among them to eventually serve as elders (1 Tim. 3: 1-11; Titus 1: 5-9). Those who possess some degree of external and internal calling to the eldership should be afforded opportunities to try their gifts and to be mentored accordingly (*BCO* 5 *passim*). Potential ministers should be encouraged to proceed with the evaluation and training process outlined in *BCO* 5.1. In all of this, the two possibilities of serving an existing congregation or of planting a new church should be portrayed as equally praiseworthy (1 Tim. 3: 1).

c) The EPCEW would ideally produce from within its own ranks a sufficient number of qualified men for new works as well as for existing churches. However, we need not hesitate to recruit externally when this is not the case (*BCO* 5.2.3). In particular, we have a longstanding and fruitful partnership with Mission to the World through which we can recruit and fund church planters, as governed by our EPCEW-MTW Partnership Agreement. Although the use of foreign-supported missionaries to plant churches carries with it significant travel and reporting obligations to the supporting churches, it also brings the great privilege of ongoing access to the prayers of these churches.

d) From these or other sources, the planting session should identify the man or men who will carry out the work of church planting. Neither Scripture nor our *BCO* identifies any special qualifications for those who serve as church planters *beyond* those established for elders generally. On the other hand, the standards for church planters are not *less* than those serving an established church (1 Tim. 3: 1-11; Titus 1: 5-9); church planting should thus not be considered an alternative for men who could not otherwise find a call. Beyond these

universal standards, careful consideration should be given to the compatibility between the circumstances of a particular man and the circumstances of a particular work (*BCO* 5.2.1). This consideration includes the willingness to adapt to the local situation, not in terms of the doctrine he preaches but in the manner of his personal behaviour (Acts 16: 3; 18: 18; Rom. 14: 1-15: 3 *passim*; 1 Cor. 8: 7-13; 9: 19-23).

e) The man or men called to a church planting work will require funding. God's ordinary plan is that the church support financially those who labour in the Word of God (1 Cor. 9: 14). Paul says 'Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine...The labourer is worthy of his wages' (1 Tim. 5: 17-18) even though the immediate context is the church being unnecessarily burdened by those who have other legitimate means of support (1 Tim. 5: 16). Although none of our church plants have begun with all the finance supplied in advance, God has shown us that he is able to supply our needs, whether from our own congregations or from abroad. However, we do admit the possibility of 'tent-making' in specific situations warranted by Scripture (1 Cor. 9: 1-23; 2 Cor. 11: 7-12).

3. Start a Bible Study

a) An exploratory or pre-church planting Bible study has several good purposes. If nothing else, it can be a ministry to those in a spiritually needy area who would not otherwise be fed. Primarily, however, the purpose is to clarify the needs and opportunities that are actually present on the ground and to gauge the extent to which there may be divine affirmation behind the project. Specifically, we are looking to see the makings of a potentially viable core group. If this does not develop over a reasonable amount of time, there is little justification to continue; if it does develop, however, there is great encouragement to proceed (Acts 11: 21).

b) A Bible study is also an opportunity to set forth what the potential church plant will be about. Clarity in this regard is important, because church planting works sometimes attract disaffected people who harbour unsound or idiosyncratic expectations for what the new church should be. Indeed, everyone in the potential core group will carry expectations of some kind, and it is important to temper and shape them in a unified, orthodox direction (Eph. 4: 12-13).

c) Not only should the Bible study set forth the basic parameters of the church—that, for instance, the church will be Reformed rather than Pentecostal—but it should also provide a representation of the *quality* of ministry to be expected. The teaching should therefore be powerful as well as sound (1 Cor. 2: 1-5; 2 Tim. 1: 13), the prayer fervent as well as faithful (Jas. 1: 6; 5: 16), and the fellowship loving as well as edifying (John 13: 35; Acts 2: 42).

d) As the group develops, special attention should be given to individual discipleship. If there were already good Reformed and covenantal churches in the area for these people to go to, we would not be planting a church there; we should not therefore be surprised when many of the sheep who come to us are malnourished and diseased. A faithful shepherd will not drive them away on this account but will take care to bind them up and feed them (Isa. 42: 3; Ezek. 34: 16). Those who seek to spread false teaching, however, should be rebuked (Titus 1: 13-14).

e) From the beginning, there should be a strong element of evangelical concern. At the least, this would include a concern to invite unbelievers to the study—which for this reason should always be taught at a level comprehensible to them (1 Cor. 14: 1-25)—as well as praying for their conversion. As a secondary benefit, the presence of unbelievers to evangelize and/or new believers to disciple in the basics of the faith will also instil a right sense of common purpose to the core group.

f) If possible, the core group should be encouraged to attend the parent church or the otherwise closest EPCEW church. Even when the study is too far from the parent church for regular attendance, it might still be possible for some to come occasionally. Such visits are important in order to show them more fully what they are committing themselves to and to impart an anticipation at the prospect of such a church being established in their community.

g) The leadership of the work should establish contact with any existing evangelical churches in the area, with the aim of affirming fellowship between Christians, dispelling misunderstandings, and establishing functional relationships for the future (Luke 9: 49-50).

4. Start Worship Services

a) When there are sufficient people with a sufficient level of commitment to the work—and this is more a matter for the Spirit-imparted wisdom (Eph. 1: 17) of the elders than of set guidelines—plans should be made to begin worship services. A date should be set with sufficient notice to allow for serious prayer as well as widespread publicity. A suitable meeting place should also be located at this time, along with any logistic items required. Appropriate electronic media, particularly a website, should be initiated. Financial (transparent procedures to process giving and to account for spending) and any governmental (eg, Charity Commission) matters should be considered. Men who show potential as future deacons should be given as many of these practical responsibilities as possible (Acts 6: 4).

b) If possible, both morning and evening services should be started together. In addition to being most consistent with the Reformed understanding of the Sabbath (*WLC* 117), this will also maximize opportunity for involvement—those who have no other church home will naturally want a morning service, and those who are transitioning from another church may begin with the evening service only. The administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper should commence if an ordained minister is on hand. If one has not already been started, strong consideration should be given to a midweek prayer meeting (Acts 4: 23-31; 12: 12). Likewise, pastoral visitation should be initiated (Acts 20: 20).

c) Once again, there should be an emphasis on evangelism right from the start. Church plants that do not themselves carry out the Great Commission should not expect any of the blessings that come with obedience (*WCF* 19.6). Evangelism culminates in the public worship service on the Lord's Day, as the gospel is preached and converts are added to the church. However, various other manifestations and implications of evangelism are worked out throughout the week.

However, the various implications are worked out throughout the week. The church plant should consider a spectrum of outreach instruments, ranging from invitation and literature distribution, evangelistic book tables, online resources, evangelistic Bible studies and evangelistic preaching. Above all, members should be confident that when they invite people to worship services on the Lord's Day, they will hear the gospel preached (1 Cor. 9: 16).

d) The intentional discipleship begun during the Bible study should also be sustained. Here, the immediate focus will be to bring those in attendance to the level of understanding that will enable them to become members of the new church (*BCO* 3.1; 4.4.3). Beyond that, the fledgling church will need officers; those men who demonstrate some possibility of calling to the eldership or diaconate should be mentored accordingly (2 Tim. 2: 2). The church will not flourish as it should until a functioning diaconate frees the eldership to focus on the ministry of prayer and the Word (Acts 6: 1-7).

e) The new church plant should be characterised by Christian love. One of the most important factors in the success of churches is simply the presence of loving Christian hospitality (1 Tim. 3: 2; Titus 1: 8). This is perhaps one reason why evangelistic Bible studies which include a shared meal in a member's home have proven so useful. Whatever the specifics, we cannot forget that the most basic attraction any church possesses is love: 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13: 35). Since the main enemy of love is disunity, every effort should be made to build up doctrinal unity (Eph. 4: 1-16), correct those in sin (1 Cor. 5: 1-13; 2 Cor. 2: 1-11), and reconcile those who might otherwise be estranged (Phil. 4: 2).

f) Finally, no sooner than the church is established, the process should begin again with the new church giving prayerful consideration to the possibility of church planting work. Not every church will, in the providence of God, be in a position to take the lead on such a work. In such cases, churches should join together with others in whatever ways they can, beginning with prayer and financial support (Rom. 15: 14-33). May it please the Lord to bless the prayerful, expectant hearts of His people (Ps. 62: 5-8).