

EPC Revitalization Task Force (RTF)

Report to NOC/CDC/RCDC

April 2013 building on March 2012 & October 2012 Reports

Mission of the Church

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church spells out specifically the first duty of the Church. Our Book of Government reads, "The first duty of the Church is to evangelize by extending the Gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." It makes clear that "good works" are not the Gospel, but the fruit of the gospel. The statement concludes, "... The Church must never confuse its primary task of evangelism (the Gospel) with the fruit of faith (good works)." This affirmation settles for us a dispute that has caused much division in our day when churches have become preoccupied with social change to the neglect of true spiritual change.

NOC Charter: To coordinate, encourage and provide resources for the church development efforts of presbyteries and churches, including church planting, evangelism and revitalization.

RTF Assignment: To address the revitalization needs and opportunities throughout the EPC:

1. The profound number of pastors, congregations and church groups from other denominations inquiring into the EPC
2. The strong need for revitalization among existing churches within the EPC

Note: Inquiring pastors are the domain of presbytery ministerial committees and therefore are not in view in this report.

The Foundational and Aspirational Identity of the EPC

The EPC presents itself as Evangelical, Presbyterian, Reformed and Missional and has positioned itself well in evaluating commitments to being Evangelical, Presbyterian and Reformed. There is built-in accountability to these three in the credentialing of ministers, the training and examining of elders, and the explicit language of the EPC Essentials and the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. However, an identity crisis looms in regard to a true commitment to being Missional.

QUESTION 1: TO WHAT DEGREE IS THE EPC TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING MISSIONAL?

The RTF concludes that a close companion to a church's being missional is that church's being healthy – or “vital” in the chosen terminology of the RTF. The RTF observes that many churches coming into the EPC and many churches already established in the EPC are not healthy – or Vital.

QUESTION 2: TO WHAT DEGREE IS THE EPC TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING VITAL?

QUESTION 3: IF THE EPC IS TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING MISSIONAL AND VITAL, WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN AT THE CHURCH, PRESBYTERY AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY LEVEL?

EPC Statement of Identity

We affirm and adopt the EPC "Essentials of Our Faith" without exception.

We receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.

Therefore, we commit ourselves to being a congregation that is:

Evangelical

We commit to the authority of the Word of God and that Word proclaimed as the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian

We commit to active involvement in connectional ministry relationship and elder-led representative governance.

Reformed

We commit to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and attendant Catechisms, that preserves our allegiance to the historic tenets of the Reformed faith.

Missional

We commit to the mission of Jesus Christ to seek and to save the lost in our neighboring communities and beyond by expanding the kingdom of God through the multiplication of disciples, leaders and churches.

NOTE: The RTF also believes that a fifth descriptor should be added as follows:

Vital

We commit to a vital and healthy congregational life that is prayer-filled and spiritually alive, that is engaged in purposeful ministry and is growing by conversion, and that is organizationally and financially viable.

To assist in the evaluation of inquirers regarding commitments to being Missional and to being Vital, the RTF offers the following questions to be asked of inquirers:

Missional Questions:

1. What ministries has your church intentionally designed and implemented to reach lost people in your local neighboring communities? What results have you seen from those ministries?
2. In terms of expanding the kingdom of God, what hope or dream do you have for your church? What have you done, or what could you do, to move that hope or dream toward reality?
3. How do you develop and deploy disciples into meaningful ministry in your church?
4. How do you identify, recruit and equip potential leaders in your church? In what ways could you see your church becoming involved in church planting?

Vitality Questions:

1. What is the role and ministry of personal and corporate prayer in your church?
2. In what ways is your church spiritually alive? Tell a story . . .
3. Will you give 2-3 examples of ministry provided by your church that intentionally fulfills your church's vision?
4. In what ways has the basic Gospel message been presented throughout your church's ministry and what results have you seen?
5. In what ways does the organization of your church promote church health and missional ministry?
6. How do your tithes and offerings enable you to provide missional ministry beyond your own congregation?

Six Transitional Landmines

Landmine #1: “The Edifice Complex”

Strong ties to buildings and property are being leveraged to paralyze transitional churches from moving forward, creating lengthy time delays and fueling fear, stress and conflict. A solution is to view existing buildings and property as optional spaces for conducting ministry to be measured against other optional spaces that are free from political and financial entanglements that hold ministry decision-making hostage.

Landmine #2: “Heart Attacks”

There is much conflict that surrounds both transitional churches and transitional groups as they investigate and perhaps ultimately take action steps to make the transition into the EPC. These conflicts often manifest in personal attacks, leading to strained or broken relationships. A solution is to be found in prayer and reconciliation driven by forgiveness, encouragement and unity. The temptation is to return evil for evil in which case no one wins but Satan.

Landmine #3: “Eye Off the Ball”

Churches and groups seeking transition into the EPC from the PCUSA have been entangled in a denomination that has lost sight of its biblical moorings and purpose. The denomination has strayed from Scripture, from Reformed theology, and from God. The scriptural “main thing,” i.e. authority/purpose, has given way to disastrous preoccupation with unbiblical, ungodly false doctrine. A solution is to get back to making the main thing the main thing, majoring on God’s biblical majors. God’s glory and honor come first as the transitioning church or group seeks His vision and strategy, a biblically and theologically informed “Who – Where – When – How – and – Why?”

Landmine #4: “Fear of the Unknown – Fear of the Known”

Transitional churches and groups fear staying with what they know to be wrong and yet fear the uncertainty of what lies ahead. Status quo might be undesirable but it’s known and understood and human nature tends to want to stay in the negative rather than endure the risk associated with change. A solution can be found in a strong commitment to prayer, to the Word and to the strength of Koinonia, rooted in faith and spurred on by encouragement.

Landmine #5: “The Biggest Loser”

When there is change there is loss and when there is loss there is grief, and the greater the change, the greater the sense of loss, and the greater the sense of loss, the greater the grief. Most people are resistant to change, fearful of loss, and prone to be overcome by grief. A solution comes in understanding that grief is not necessarily a sign of resistance. There is, in fact, a *good grief*, a grief that is simply part of the change process. Therefore, grief should not be seen as a sign of resistance to something new but as a necessary part of the journey that leads to and through transition.

Landmine #6: “Identity Crisis”

When a church leaves its denomination, when a church leaves its property and buildings, when a group of people leave its church and its denomination, there might be excitement or even exhilaration, but there is also a loss of identity. It’s common for the emerging identity to be built upon the negative. The transitional church or group knows what it’s NOT, but might be uncertain as to what it is. A solution in the EPC context is the EPC Statement of Identity that clearly identifies the denomination and provides a transitional church or group with a positive grid to measure and perhaps establish its new identity.

Inquiring Churches & Groups

Inquirer Perspective: "Is the EPC the right place for our church or core group?"

EPC Perspective: "Is this the right church or core group for the EPC?"

The Transitional Bottom Line

1. Transitional churches and core groups are in crisis and need a timely yet comprehensive response from the presbyteries of the EPC.
2. A comprehensive response requires administrative and strategic protocols.
3. Though many testimonies and complaints regarding presbytery workloads are reverberating throughout the EPC, in one way or another presbyteries are handling the load.
4. Identity is a major concern, i.e. affinity/fit with the EPC.
5. To deal with the issue of identity, strategic protocols should include the three elements of assessment, training and coaching. The challenge is design and delivery systems.
6. Transitional leadership is significant:

Leadership Buy-In	Resourced by Assessment
Leadership Skill	Resourced by Training
Leadership Support	Resourced by Coaching (Third Party)

The Established Church Bottom Line

1. A large number of EPC churches are in need of revitalization.
2. Training is available to resource such churches, as well as resources for assessment or coaching.

QUESTION 4: WHAT CAN/SHOULD BE PROVIDED AT THE PRESBYTERY LEVEL?
WHAT CAN/SHOULD BE PROVIDED AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL?

RTF Recommendations & Action Plan

1. The RTF will continue its work by pursuing answers to the four questions included in this report:

QUESTION 1: TO WHAT DEGREE IS THE EPC TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING MISSIONAL?

QUESTION 2: TO WHAT DEGREE IS THE EPC TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING VITAL?

QUESTION 3: IF THE EPC IS TRULY COMMITTED TO BEING MISSIONAL AND VITAL, WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN AT THE CHURCH, PRESBYTERY AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY LEVEL (Transitional Churches)?

QUESTION 4: WHAT CAN/SHOULD BE PROVIDED AT THE PRESBYTERY LEVEL? WHAT CAN/SHOULD BE PROVIDED AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL (Established Churches)?

2. The RTF will expand its participants by adding any CDC Chairmen or RDCDs that will commit.
3. The RTF will consult with each NOC member, CDC Chairman and RCDC (1) to discover who will join the work of the RTF and (2) to discover the respective needs and perspectives that exist throughout the EPC and its presbyteries.
4. The RTF desires to lead training and workshops in church vitality at the 2014 General Assembly.
5. The RTF desires to provide regional training in church vitality in partnership with the NOC and/or the CDCs of our respective presbyteries.

APPENDIX 1: General Issues for Transitional Churches & Core Groups

Transitional Churches:

Arriving in Distress
Changing Identity
Pastoral Leadership Issues
Legal and property Issues
Financial
Fresh Start
Fresh Vision/Missional
Grief/Loss
Belonging
Theological Defining
Sin in the Camp: power, ego, agendas

Transitional Core Groups:

Conflict Resolution
Arriving in Distress
Confused Identity
Defining Worship Style
Space/Building Challenges
Financial Challenges
Leadership Challenges
Organizational Challenges
Compliance Challenges (Protocols)
Ministry Design Priorities
Feeling Needed/Mobilization
Grief/Loss
Belonging
Theological Defining
Sin in the Camp

APPENDIX 2: **Testimony/Case Study:** Waterbrook EPC (a Transitional Core Group) – Rev. Tom Clymer - Issues & Insights for Transitional Churches and Transitional Core Groups

1. Encouragement

'Sing to the Lord a new song!' Transitional churches and groups need great encouragement from churches individually and from the Presbytery that they really can have a wonderful new life.

2. Conflict

'Do not return evil for evil, but return evil with good. When reviled; bless. When cursed; bless. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Transitional churches and groups need to be admonished strongly to obey the Lord in this matter. God will bless them in their obedience here.

3. Vision

Don't look back! Lot's wife became pretty 'salty' when she did and so will they. Their grief will be normal but they can't live forward looking back'. God has a completely new ministry for them and they need to define it to some extent. Isaiah 43:18, 19 really helped us out here. If they obey Him here, God will create roadways and streams that they never thought possible.

4. Unity

Take time to become a united people. Being in an exodus together doesn't necessarily unify them. Don't rush to get a building and property. Start small and work together for a while. This will make them 'a people'. They have to be a people before they can become a nation.

5. Defined Worship

Clearly define their worship style. What worked in a prior church probably won't work in a new plant. When they sing a new song to God, what will the beat be? If it is not at least blended then success is severely diminished. They have to consider the people they are trying to reach (a consideration long since abandoned by many established churches). This is truth, music is the window through which the world views your church'.

6. Prayer

My House shall be called a house of prayer. Don't take this for granted! Pray about everything from priorities to people to paper clips. Nothing is too big or too small for prayer. When they worship, someone should be in another room praying. Prayer must be structured in at the beginning and consistently reinforced.

7. Faithfulness in Small Things

Be a Mustard Seed. Do your first best things well. Don't try to be everything to everyone. The smallest thing prayed for, conceived and done is greater in God's sight than the greatest thing conceived of and left undone. Look for ways into ministry rather than out but do them well.

8. Financial Transparency

Be financially transparent from the beginning. Use accounting software that is simple to use and will produce basic reports. They can always upgrade later.

9. Optional Spaces

If God can make tents into a tabernacle, He can make any structure a church building. Many unchurched people are turned off by traditional church facilities. Don't be afraid to consider a shopping center or other 'non- churchy' place to worship. The Holy Spirit will make it holy. Just be certain to consecrate it to the Lord.

10. Presbytery Organization

The Jethro Principle: (this is for our presbytery and denomination)

Our denominational infra-structure is insufficient to handle our present growth and long-term congregational health for many of our congregations. Each Presbytery should have a minimum of two full-time staff 1) Stated Clerk to assist on the multiple polity matters involved and 2) a person whose sole responsibility is to visit, encourage, help train and build relationships with the Pastors, Sessions and congregations within our Presbyteries. Maintaining these personal relationships is crucial already and will be even more crucial almost immediately over and well beyond the next several years. The weariness that I see in key leaders is a prime indicator of infrastructure weakness rather than any personal inadequacy. If we do it God's way, He always sent them out in two's. The investment will return volumes to our churches. (We are blessed to have Ken Priddy on board. He could easily assist in training those added Presbytery personnel and bring them together for coaching and encouragement.) That's how the Jethro principal works.

APPENDIX 3: Common Threads Concerning Transitional Core Groups
(Rev. Bill Rasch compiler)

1. No permanent structure is needed. Structure must serve the mission and not *vice versa*.
2. The church is not a building or an institution; it's an embodied mission community of Christ followers.
3. Forgive the hurts done to you as you go, remembering that your departure also caused hurt and heartbreak. Bless, do not curse. Pray for those whom you've left behind.
4. Don't respond to the slings and arrows tossed your way, even when you lose folks while not responding. You are modeling a Christ-like response for the larger community.
5. Understand the meaning of "koinonia," missional partnerships. The partners will not always stay the same as the mission changes through time.
6. Pray for and seek the heart and mind of God as you reboot your mission.
(Who – Where – When – How)
7. Embed the Word of God in everything you do.
8. Always remember that your calling is to honor God and reflect Jesus Christ in your service.
9. Obedience to the Lord is its own reward.
10. Don't major in minors. What is the main thing for your new faith community? Hold the big vision in sight always.