



**ECO**

A Covenant Order  
of Evangelical  
Presbyterians

# Church Planting Process and Policies

As ECO seeks to reach its larger kingdom vision of taking the best of our Presbyterian and Reformed heritage and saturating our broken and hurting world with the good news of Jesus Christ, we see the planting of churches and micro-expressions of church as integral to that larger kingdom impact. This document is for presbyteries, planters, potential planters, and churches who want to engage in church planting to understand the process of planting in ECO. ECO desires to have a process that is simple and easy to navigate, doesn't have undue friction in the process, and is robust enough to put appropriate evaluative and developmental points in place so there is the greatest potential for success for church plants and planters. For more information or to connect with church planting in ECO, e-mail [churchplanting@eco-pres.org](mailto:churchplanting@eco-pres.org).

## **CATEGORIZING GATHERINGS THAT HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED PLANTS**

Before a full explanation of each phase of the church planting process, it is helpful to identify four different models that had all been lumped together previously and considered church plants. It is important to categorize these different aspects appropriately, as in some cases they fit under a category separate from church planting.

### **a. Launch Large Model**

This is the traditional model of church planting. It assumes a planter is building a core group of a few dozen individuals who will begin having weekly public worship within 9 to 12 months. This core group may have come from an existing mother church or been built up from within an emerging community, or some mixture of the two. The planter is likely fully funded for the first year from another church, multiple churches, and/or individuals. This outside funding will decrease proportionally over a 3- to 4-year period as this new church is getting launched.

### **b. Entrepreneurial Model**

This is a co-vocational model where there may be funding from sponsoring churches, but income is also generated from those in the church plant as well as a business associated with the church plant.

### **c. Missional Communities**

The *ECO Polity* is unique compared to most reformed bodies in that we validate micro-expressions of church as valid expressions of church and thus allow the sacraments to be celebrated in these contexts. Missional communities allow for

great flexibility and a tremendous variety to engage in mission. This can also create confusion when we think of the relationship between missional communities and church plants. There are two basic ways that missional communities can be viewed (for more information about missional communities and church planting, see Appendix A):

- These missional communities can be an extension of a local church's ministry and thus under the authority of the session. In this case the missional community is a micro-expression of the mother church. Our polity gives tremendous freedom for a local church to engage in missional communities. Through the CLP1 program and the missional community training program, individuals have opportunities to prepare for leading missional communities. This approach to missional communities would not be under the umbrella of church planting, though at some point in the future there may be a desire for a missional community to be the foundation for a future church.
- These missional communities can be stand-alone churches but will be smaller and likely not seek incorporation or other formalities associated with a church. In this case, it is still helpful to have a sponsoring church to which this missional community is connected, but it is not under the umbrella of church planting.
- These missional communities can also be the foundations of a church plant. In this case the goal is to multiply several missional communities and form worship once there are 3 to 4 thriving missional communities. This approach to church planting, where missional communities are foundations of a church plant, will likely need to be a longer runway to self-sufficiency. If a person is planting in this missional model, he or she will need to go through the church planting process and also likely need to be bi-vocational for a significant period of time.

d. **Churches that break off from an existing church**

These have been previously called "s-plants," meaning that they have been viewed as plants that are developed from a split of an established church. This has often occurred when an established congregation was not able to leave a denomination with property, and so a small or large portion of the congregation left to establish a new church. We are now defaulting to classifying these congregations as "Churches in Re-Formation" and thus not connected to the church planting umbrella. If these congregations do want to officially be a church plant, they must go through a reorientation process so that they can

understand themselves as a church plant. The pastor must also go through the church planting assessment process.

## **PHASES IN CHURCH PLANTING**

The rest of this document outlines the phases in the church planting process. In some cases, individuals may be directed to deeper phases depending on their experience. For example, if a person has been interning at a church plant for a period of time and has significant experience, he or she might be directed to the assessment phase rather than starting out learning about church planting.

### **Phase 1 – Investigative**

This phase is for anyone who is potentially interested in church planting and wants to learn more about church planting, various models, and what life is like as a church planter. There is a several-week cohort experience to watch videos, read material, and have group interaction.

### **Phase 2 – Assessment and Development**

When a person desires to officially begin the process of church planting, he or she will talk to a member of the national church planting team to determine next steps. The assessment and development phase will vary, depending upon an individual's background and experience. For some, it will be helpful to have a basic, lower cost pre-assessment. A pre-assessment will help both the national team and the potential planter gain a baseline understanding of the skills and wiring needed for planting. The potential planter can then complete the appropriate developmental experiences that are needed for church planting. Other potential planters who have more experience might jump immediately into a robust assessment that will help determine the church planting context in which they will truly thrive. So, the process of assessment and development will differ according to the needs and desires of the individual and the recommendations of the church planting team.

### **Phase 3 – Plant Plan Development**

In this phase, the planter sends a church plant application to the National Office and develops a church plant plan that is in line with their attributes and skills. There is a consultation process with the National Office to refine and eventually approve the plan. Once this has been completed, the presbytery is free to approve the church plant. There is also a course that has been developed in partnership with Gordon-Conwell to help an individual understand the nuts and bolts of church planting and to develop a

church planting plan (See Appendix B for elements that need to be in place for church planting plans). If you are interested in the Flourish Online Seminary Course about church planting, go to [flourishmovement.org](http://flourishmovement.org). When the planter is ready to start Phase 3, he or she should email the ECO office at [office@eco-pres.org](mailto:office@eco-pres.org) to request an application. Formal church plants need a steering team that will provide a variety of purposes and functions (See Appendix C for more information about the guidelines for those steering teams).

#### **Phase 4 – Pre-Launch or Development Phase**

Once the plant is official, the planter will engage in the development of the core group that will eventually launch into public worship. This again may be designed as a quick process or a slow process. ECO has opportunities for continuing education during this phase and will provide or assist in paying for coaching for up to two years.

#### **Phase 5 – Post-Launch Phase**

At this point the individual has launched weekly public worship and is moving toward the established church process. We continue to provide coaching, additional resources, and, as funds are available, grants during this phase of church planting.

#### **Phase 6 – Chartered Church Phase**

When a church is at the point of being self-sustaining and potentially replicating, they move into becoming a chartered church. This process starts with a request for the National Office's help in the evaluation process. The request to become a chartered church then goes to the presbytery for approval.

### **PRESBYTERIES AND CHURCH PLANTING**

Due to the complex nature of church planting, it has been challenging for presbyteries to take on the role of assessing planters and the feasibility of plans. However, presbyteries still have important formal and informal roles in the support of church planters.

#### **a. Formal Roles**

- The presbytery has the responsibility to accept a church plant as a part of the presbytery. This is done only after the National Office has assessed the church plant plan in conjunction with assessing the planter. The National Office makes the recommendation to the presbytery based on these

assessments. It is, however, still the presbytery, likely through the Ministry Partnership Team, that officially recognizes the church plant.

- The presbytery has the responsibility to accept the planter as a part of the presbytery. In some cases, the individual will already be ordained in ECO and the presbytery receives him or her as a member. In other cases, the person will be qualified for ordination and the presbytery examines for ordination. In some cases, the person won't be ready for ordination but will need to be commissioned by the presbytery for the plant as he or she completes the ordination process.
- The presbytery is the entity that moves a church from plant status to an established church. The National Office will assess the plant and its readiness to become a chartered church. Once the church is approved for establishment, the presbytery, likely through the MPT, will act on the recommendation of the National Office.

**b. Informal Roles**

- The presbytery can promote church planting in its midst, continue to encourage churches to look for potential planters within their congregations, and help them become involved in a potential church plant.
- The presbytery can support planters individually by praying for them, letting them present at meetings, and encouraging other churches and individuals to support them.

## Appendix A

### *The Relationship between Missional Communities and Church Planting*

ECO's polity is different from many other Reformed denominations in America in that we affirm missional communities, often called micro-expressions, to be valid expressions of Christ's church. Thus, we allow the sacraments to be celebrated in these contexts. A natural question occurs as to whether the establishment of a missional community is considered a church plant. This document seeks to provide clarity on this subject.

In order to properly address this topic, we must first look at our ecclesiology regarding the nature of church. We understand "church" to exist in four different expressions:

- *The widest understanding of church is the universal church, the invisible church, or the catholic church.* This definition of church encompasses all believers in Jesus Christ regardless of denominational affiliation and geography as long as they hold to the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.
- *The second definition of church is a denomination or network.* Denominations and networks are collections of local congregations having a common connection that usually consists of some tighter agreement on theological distinctives as well as some level of oversight on aspects of credentialing clergy or congregations.
- *The third definition of church is the local congregation.* There are a few basic criteria of a local congregation. A local congregation is self-sustaining and perpetuating in that the finances to carry out the mission are generated within the congregation. A local congregation is also self-regulating in that it has elders of its own and is not overseen by an outside governing body.
- *The final definition of church is a missional community.* Jesus said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (NIV). This is to say that as a group of believers gathers together, Jesus is present and the group is an expression of the body of Christ. In ECO, we have therefore allowed the sacraments to be celebrated within these missional communities (micro-expressions) with oversight from an established congregation.

Is a missional community a church plant?

As described above, one expression of the church is a missional community. When ECO talks about church planting, it is talking about planting a local congregation. This

is not to say that the local congregation must own its own building or cannot have nontraditional elements associated with it. However, it does mean that the missional community is seeking to be a self-sustaining, self-perpetuating, and self-governing church.

In some instances, missional communities might fall into the realm of church planting in ECO. For example, when several missional communities plan to eventually gather for worship and to meet the above criteria for a local congregation, this would be considered a church plant.

In other instances, missional communities would not fall into the category of church planting. An example would be when a missional community is purely an extension of the local church and never seeks to have the characteristics associated with a separate church congregation.

In some cases, a missional community might form but its future is unclear. For example, a church might establish a missional community and then later decide that it should become an independent church plant.

The polity of ECO is designed to give great freedom and permission for established congregations to plant missional communities. The planting of a missional community doesn't require the church plant/planter assessment process. As a denomination, we have basic training available for the establishment of missional communities. If a missional community seeks to become a church plant, it must go through the church plant/planter assessment process.

## **Appendix B**

### *Elements of a Church Planting Plan*

As we plant churches, we want to maintain freedom and flexibility as the Lord leads and molds the church plants. However, we find that churches that have clear initial plans are better able to evaluate circumstances and make adaptations. They are also better able to communicate their expectations with funders and champions of church planting. We also find that planters who have clear and specific plans are usually more successful than those who do not.

Therefore, we are requiring the development of written church planting plans in order to help church planters succeed. The national office has a team of successful church planters who will evaluate church planting plans and guide planters in the process of refining their plans. The following are elements that must be included in a church planting plan:

- **Demographic and Cultural Study** – Excellent demographic information is available through our partner organization MissionInsite. Information about logging into the database is available on our website ([here](#)). In addition, those preparing to plant a church should determine the types of churches that already exist within the community.
- **Mission, Vision, and Strategy** – After collecting information on the demographics, culture, and spiritual landscape of the area, a church planter can begin to articulate the particular mission and vision to which it is called in this community. The mission and vision of the church plant will then inform the strategy for the church to accomplish its vision.
- **Timeline** – There should be a clear delineation of the working timeline that brings a church plant from the development phase to prelaunch to launch to establishment. The criteria for becoming an established church will vary depending on each situation. Essential criteria must include having a critical mass of people, being self-sustaining, and having a group of suitable elders.
- **Benchmarks** – Quarterly and annual benchmarks need to be established for internal giving and average attendance. Before launch, average attendance applies to the core group, and after launch it applies to worship attendance.
- **Oversight** – The plan for oversight must be clearly articulated. It needs to include who will have corporate oversight and who will have steering team oversight. It must also include a plan for how oversight will be shifted from external members to internal members, and a plan for how the core group will

evaluate their benchmarks. It needs to clearly state how decisions will be made to move the church plant forward toward establishment, to change the development model, or to abandon the plant.

- **Budget** – The church planting plan must include a budget that takes the church from its initial development through to its launch and establishment.

## **Appendix C**

### *Guidelines for Church Planting Steering Teams*

Church plants are different from established churches in that, according to *ECO Polity*, plants do not have a formalized group of elders with specified roles and responsibilities. However, it is vital that church plants have a group of people who serve as a steering team to offer encouragement, support, and accountability. In some cases, this team may also serve as the officers for the corporation.

Recognizing that each church plant is unique, this document seeks to give guidance to the formation, composition, and roles of the steering team.

#### **Composition of the Steering Team**

The steering team should be composed of people who are invested in encouraging the success of the church plant. The team should be made up of about five people, including at least one individual inside the plant and one individual outside the plant. In cases where a single church is planting the new church, then the primary makeup of the steering team would be people from the sending church who are committed to the success of the plant.

If the church plant is sponsored by a group of churches, then individuals on the steering team should be from the primary sponsoring churches. There may also be people on the team who are actively involved in the church plant itself. Those steering team members who are not part of the church plant should attend the church plant at least quarterly to obtain firsthand knowledge and to experience what is happening there.

#### **Steering Team Responsibilities**

##### *Supportive Responsibilities:*

The steering team exists to support the plant and planter as he or she seeks to fulfill the vision of the plant. The steering team should support the plant and the planter through:

- Praying for the church plant, the planter, the steering team, and the community that the church will serve

- Providing expertise needed in various areas that may not be among the planter's gifts, such as finances, marketing, or legal consultation
- Ensuring that the planter has what he or she needs as far as outside coaching, training, and support
- Serving as a sounding board for ideas, questions, and concerns
- Advocating for the plant with the presbytery in order to help smooth the process and gather various types of support, financial and otherwise

### ***Legal/Corporate/Fiduciary Responsibilities:***

The church plant will be either a separate 501(c)(3) corporation under ECO's umbrella or a ministry of the sponsoring church or churches. If the church is a separate 501(c)(3), then the steering team would likely be the corporate officers of the church. If the church plant is under the corporate identity of the sponsoring church or churches, then the elders or trustees of those congregations would be the de-facto corporate officers.

Whether or not the steering team serves as corporate officers, the steering team has some fiduciary responsibilities for the church plant. The team should ensure the following:

- That finances are being handled in an appropriate and responsible manner, including collecting and counting the offering and the reimbursement of expenses. There should be proper establishment of and adherence to a budget, along with quarterly financial statements;
- That best practices are in place for a children's ministry in order to protect their safety and security;
- That appropriate insurance is in place;
- That contracts for rental agreements are clear and appropriate; and
- That employment contracts are clear.

### ***Strategic Responsibilities:***

The steering team needs to ensure that a written church planting plan is in place. This plan should be evaluated by an ECO Church Planting Coordinator to determine feasibility. The plan will likely be changed or altered as the church moves forward, but it is important to have a defined starting point. The written plan should include the following:

- A description of the church plant's:
  - Mission
  - Vision
  - Values
  - Strategy
  - Target audience
  - Community demographics
- A timeline for sustainability and chartering as a congregation
- Quarterly benchmarks for appropriate metrics, such as:
  - Attendance
  - Multiplication of groups and leaders
  - Financial contributions from those inside the plant

The steering team should receive reports at least quarterly. These reports should include stories and narrative description as well as weekly attendance numbers and evaluation of the plant's progress compared to the benchmarks.

***Feasibility, Viability, and the Role of the Steering Team:***

As noted previously, church plant plans, approaches, strategy, and funding models can be very different depending on context. It is important in the beginning of the plant to articulate feasible benchmarks and expectations for funding and sustainability. It is also important to make appropriate adjustments along the way.

A typical plant funding strategy should include three years of outside funding, which would taper off each year. For example, in year one, the plant might have 25% of funding coming from those inside the plant and 75% coming from outside the plant. In year two, the funding would be split evenly between those inside and those outside. Then in year three, 75% of the money might be coming from those inside the plant and 25% from those outside.

This strategy can certainly vary. Some plants start by taking fifty people from a mother church and are able to be sustainable within two years. Other plants are slower, more organic, and missional in approach. These organic missional plants may need seven to eight years to afford a full-time pastor, or there may be a plan for the pastor to be permanently bi-vocational. In the case of the latter, the planter might start off being bi-vocational for thirty hours a week and receive minimal outside funding for a shorter time period.

In order to increase the likelihood of a successful plant, expectations should be clearly articulated to those financially supporting the plant. The steering team has a responsibility to the plant and planter to support them and help them succeed. They also have a responsibility to those who are contributing to the plant to ensure that broader expectations are being met. Therefore, the steering team may need to help the planter adjust when necessary. In some cases, a bi-vocational planter may multiply missional communities and need to give full-time effort to the plant. The steering team needs to help the planter secure the finances and support to be able to make that adjustment happen. In other cases, a planter might be missing benchmarks and be much further behind in being financially sustainable than expected. In this case, the planter might need to move to bi-vocational status.

If we are going to become a movement, then we must aggressively plant churches! We want to be bold and entrepreneurial in ECO. We must also be wise about how we support church plants in order to maximize success and help those who are supporting church plants make the best use of their resources.