

OPC Ecumenicity

The Church is One Body

In the New Testament the teaching of the unity of God's people is sustained (see Ephesians 2:11-22 and 4:1-16). Yet the situation is different. The people of God are no longer circumscribed by ethnic, political, or geographical boundaries. All nations are to be disciples. This unity includes the people of God in past ages and also looks to the future and includes all people who have yet to believe on his name (John 17:20-21).

The gospel proclaimed by the apostles as the foundation of the church resulted in establishing churches as covenant communities in various locations, churches which were ruled by elders. These churches and their elders were not independent, but were one body united by Christ their head, by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and by the covenant promise of God. The elders at Antioch and Jerusalem resolve a problem, under God, and their decision is binding on the churches (see Acts 15, 16:4).

OPC Sister Church of the Week

Evangelical Reformed Church Westminster Confession (EKRWB), Austria and Switzerland

The Evangelical Reformed Church Westminster Confession (Evangelisch Reformierte Kirche Westminster Bekenntnis - ERKWB) is somewhat unique in the sense that it is spread over two German speaking countries with quite different cultural and religious backgrounds, Austria and Switzerland.

Austria is mainly dominated by Roman Catholicism which has a strong influence on family structures and on politics. There is a Reformed Church of Austria which enjoys some support from the state, but has become quite liberal (comparable to the PCUSA).

In Switzerland, the religious landscape is - at least where our congregations are placed - more characterized by a very liberal state church with a consequent non-confessional attitude, and a big range of broader evangelical denominations and independent churches or groups. The ERKWB is the only confessionally Reformed (Presbyterian) denomination in both countries, with three congregations in Austria and two in Switzerland.

The first congregation of the ERKWB started as a bible study group in Neuhausen (NE Austria) in the late 1980s by Reinhold Widter, an Austrian former pastor of the Reformed Church in Austria. He left the Reformed Church in Austria because of its liberal attitude. The second congregation followed in 1998 in Rankweil (Western Austria), to which were added congregations in 2005 in Winterthur, Switzerland, and then in 2008 in Basel, Switzerland and Vienna, Austria.



The ERKWB had a strong missionary orientation from the start, and similarly to the OPC the ERKWB pursues missionary church planting. Most of the congregations began services with just a handful of people. Currently the EKRWB are pursuing two new plants in Austria, of which the first began this month with a freshly called missionary/pastor in Innsbruck, central Austria.

The challenges the EKRWB faces are different in the two countries. In Austria there is the strong Roman Catholic influence that is still partly present even in families of its congregants, where in some cases only one spouse or family member belongs to the ERKWB, the others being still Roman Catholic. The established state churches don't like our presence, the Austrian

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Reformed Church even sued the EKRWB twice over the word 'Reformed' in their name.

In Switzerland liberalism is widespread. Not only the state church, but also many of the free evangelical churches are getting more and more liberal, moving away from following the word of God in preaching and church practice. Swiss people are highly educated, wealthy and spiritually ignorant. Most don't see any need for religion or even faith in a savior. It is commonly believed that politicians and psychologists are here to solve our problems.

PRAYERS:

- For the five congregations in Vienna, Neuhausen, Rankweil, Winterthur and Basel. For their efforts to reach the lost with the gospel of our savior Jesus Christ.
- For growing financial support so pastors can be fully supported.
- For their pastors to not be discouraged in the midst of opposition and little visible response.
- For wisdom and spiritual authority in preaching, teaching and counseling
- For the new plant in Innsbruck and its young pastor who just came from seminary
- For the other prospective church plant in Graz, south-eastern Austria, and for the pastor who has already been called.

OPC Sister Congregation - Bethel URC, Brockville, Ontario, Canada

Located halfway between Kingston and Cornwall, along the northern shores of the St. Lawrence River, Bethel's beginnings are similar to many other URCNA churches. In the late 1990s, a group led by Rev. John Roke, left the Christian Reformed Churches and organized as a URC.

Depending on one's perspective, Bethel URC is a smaller congregation. Including the pastor, two elders and two deacons, they are blessed with a membership of around 45-50 souls of every age group. Rev. Pete Van't Hoff's calling into the ministry began in his mid-30s. He entered seminary (Mid-America Reformed

Seminary, Dyer IN) in the fall of 2013, and was called by Bethel in October of 2017 and ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament on February 16, 2018. He was born and raised the son of dairy farming family. As a young man he moved away from the farm, received a technical diploma in Engineering Design & Drafting which led to self-employment in that field. Being married, with 5 children, after serving as elder in the church, the call to the ministry then took hold.



Rev. Van't focus is firstly to maintain the spiritual wellbeing, unity and community of the membership at Bethel. This is done through faithful preaching / teaching of the Word and an active visitation ministry among her members. Along with this, to engage and care for the community at large is a main priority.

PRAYERS:

- For our children, that the Father will protect them and arm them against a world that would do them much harm.
- For protection from the ravages of secularism, alcohol & drug abuse, that results in broken families and a struggling economy.
- Thanks for those who are strong in the faith and faithful in their service.
- For preservation of love for the Lord and His children.
- The worldly influences that surround us have taught us to know and to defend our faith.

OPC Congregation of the Week

Providence OPC, Tulsa, OK - began as many OPC congregations do. It started with a small group meeting for a Bible study. Eventually, this small group contacted the OPC home office and Rev. Ross Graham, the general secretary of CHMCE at the time, flew out to meet with them.

Providence was established as the daughter church of Westminster OPC in Bartlesville, OK. She held her first worship service as an OPC mission work on April 8, 2012 – Easter Sunday. This worship service took place in the home of one of the families and Rev. Joseph Auksela (pastor of WOPC at the time) led the service.

Among the key things this small mission work wished to emphasize was expositional Christ-centered preaching with strong application (third use of the law), a strong self-consciously confessional Presbyterian Church, joyful yet reverent worship, and an emphasis on the ordinary means of grace.

In July of 2012, the folks at Providence asked Mr. Jim Stevenson to candidate as the organizing pastor. Mr. Stevenson had just graduated from Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in pursuit of gospel ministry. This was a “second career” for him having previously served as a high school mathematics teacher for at-risk youth in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Mr. Stevenson had already been ordained as a ruling elder in the OPC in 2001 having served on the Session of Trinity OPC in Hatboro, PA, and later at Covenant Community OPC in Taylors, SC. Providence extended the call to Mr. Stevenson and he was ordained and installed as her organizing pastor by the Presbytery of the Central US in November, 2012.

For the past six years, growth has been slow yet steady. We are currently meeting in a small store front and have been in this facility since 2013. Early in their history they would feel relief if attendance reached twenty during the morning worship service. Today attendance usually reaches into the sixties in the morning and twenties to thirties in afternoon/evening service. The meeting place has a capacity of ninety

chairs. The congregation is beginning to think more seriously about larger facilities. Whether that is another rental facility or the purchase of a building remains to be seen. A larger facility will provide ability to host events such as a conference. Much prayer for wisdom concerning the future is needed.



This October Providence had two families and a young single woman join, five infant baptisms, and two non-communicant members make their public profession of faith. There are two more couples joining in the not too distant future and at least one other non-communicant member ready to make a profession of faith. The Lord has blessed the congregation richly. Providence have also had some steady visitors coming recently. Pray that they would be moved to unite with Providence.

The Providence Session consists of Pastor Jim Stevenson, Ruling Elders Gordon Robson and David Belanger. At this time they have no diaconate. As membership grows, Providence will consider the need for more elders on the Session as well as establish a diaconate.

Many are already aware that this past February, Benjamin DeBoer, a young man in our church was struck by a car and lost his right lung. He spent three weeks in the hospital, most of it in Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock. Ben is doing remarkably well,

so much so that you would never know by looking at him that he even had such a life threatening accident.

PRAYERS:

- For the Lord to raise up such men who are ready to serve as Ruling Elders.
- For the Lord to provide able men serve as Deacons.
- For Benjamin DeBoer and the therapy sessions he will endure for some time.
- For continued faithfulness in walk and witness.
- For Pastor Stevenson and the Session as they minister to God's people.

OPC Mission Work of the Week

Downingtown, Pennsylvania

Downingtown OPC is a young mission work located in Downingtown, PA, about 30 miles west of Philadelphia. It started as a small Bible study led by Regional Home Missionary Dave Holmlund in January 2017, and the Lord's blessing and grace have been evident from the beginning.



Rev. Gregory and Ginger O'Brien

The Bible study quickly developed into a worship service in April 2017 and now has around 40 people, young and old, who have a simple yet strong desire to worship God and testify to the glory of his grace.

After moving to Downingtown in October 2018 with his wife (Ginger) and four children (Jude, Crosby, Audrey, and Matthew), Rev. Gregory O'Brien was installed as the organizing pastor.

PRAYERS:

- For the preaching of the Word and that Christ's riches would be made manifest to the church; for their hearts to be burdened for the lost and bold in their witness.
- For the development of healthy church practices for future ministry;
- For a new location to meet for worship as their lease runs out mid-November.

SouthWest Presbytery News

PSW Church of the Week

Providence Presbyterian Church (PPC), Pflugerville, TX

Rev. Jack Peterson and the Session of Grace OPC, San Antonio, TX, served the Lord with passion as they enabled and facilitated the development of PPC. Grace OPC had a passion to plant a church in Austin, as the session records of Grace OPC shows that the decision to proceed with a church plant was made on February 18, 1980. When Rev. Peterson could not lead the Thursday evening bible study in Austin, members of the Grace Session stood in.

The first members of the Austin Bible Study to seek church membership were Mr. & Mrs. James Morgan, and they were received as members of Grace OPC on September 14, 1980, and their son Joshua was baptised at that time. In March 1981, Rev. Peterson held the first vesper service for the Austin group, and the possibility of a church plant was discussed.

Regular worship services began on June 7, 1981, through the service of Rev. Peterson. In common with early church plants today, PPC ran the gamut of meeting places. In April 1981, Rev. Glenn Black,

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Missionary-at-Large of the Presbytery of the Dakotas was sent to Austin to evaluate the feasibility of a church plant. His report was favorable, and Rev. Gerald S. Taylor (then at Winner OPC in South Dakota) was called by Grace OPC, San Antonio, to serve as its associate pastor, and as the organizing pastor of the Austin Chapel (PPC). The work was funded by the Presbytery of the Dakotas, OPC Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, Grace OPC, and the Austin Chapel.



Rev. Taylor began his work in Austin in January 1982. In 1983 Rev. Taylor began meeting with Dr. Joseph P. Lawson and Mr. James W. Van Dam as elder candidates. Dr. Lawson withdrew for family reasons. On January 14, 1984, Mr. Van Dam was examined by the Grace OPC Session, and was approved as elder nominee. Mr Bennett and Mr. Morgan were approved as deacon nominees. At the annual congregational meeting on January 14, 1984, these men were elected to their respective offices. They were installed during the morning worship service on March 4, 1984. Of these men, Mr. Van Dam faithfully served PPC until his relocation to Maryland, in mid-2011 - a total of 30 years devotion to the growth and development of PPC. Pastor Taylor was installed as the first minister of PPC at a special service of recognition on April 29, 1984.

On May 8, 1984, PPC's Session held their first meeting. At that time membership stood at 42 communicants and 21 covenant children on its roll. Of these, 15 communicants had transferred from other Reformed churches, and 23 had come from no church background or from a non-Reformed church. From

early days PPC gave generously to ministries of the OPC outside of the local congregation.

In April 1996, the present building site was purchased in Pflugerville. Having a ministry in a city with a large university and high-tech population offers many opportunities, but does result in some turnover in the population of the congregation. The word of the Lord continues to go out, however, and God continues to build the church.



During 1990-1997, Rev. Arthur Riffel, a retired OPC minister, served as the church's associate pastor. Rev. Riffel had previously been the founding minister of New Covenant OPC, South San Francisco. PPC owes great debt of gratitude to its successive pastors. Rev. Gerald (Jerry) Taylor (founding minister) who returned to his home state, Maryland, and was followed by Rev. James Hoekstra. Rev. Hoekstra acted as the power-wheel of planning and planting the present building site. In 1998 he returned to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Rev. F. Allan Story arrived in September 1999 and served PPC until December 2014. Rev. Glen Clary was installed at PPC in December 2012, assisting Pastor Story. Upon Rev. Story's departure, Rev. Clary became the sole pastor of PPC, until Rev. Robert Canode was installed in 2017.

The members of PPC have always been actively involved in ministry activities of the church, such as Sunday School teaching, nursery supervision, hospitality events, outreach and evangelism, music ministry, financial records, and building design,

construction, and maintenance. The Lord has abundantly blessed PPC with people who have amazing gifts for His service. Many are the deep and abiding friendships that have been made in the family of God at PPC as they encourage one another in the faith delivered to the saints.

The membership of PPC today stands at 100 communicants, and 60 covenant children on its roll. PPC is served by Pastor Glen Clary, Pastor Robert Canode, Elder David Hall, and Elder Scott Diesing (currently on leave of absence). Corrie Engelbrecht, Mike Spranger, and Tom Easterday (just installed in October) serve as deacons.

As for the current work of PPC officers, they are currently thinking about the future of PPC and their long term planning.

PRAYERS:

- Of recognition and gratitude for the faithful and diligent work of Rev. Jack Peterson (retired), and for present comfort in retirement for Rev. Peterson and his family.
- Thanks for the commitment of Grace OPC, San Antonio, and that the Lord shall bless them in their walk and witness.
- For wisdom and unity of the Session of PPC.
- For peace and harmony of the congregation as they grow in number and in grace.
- Thanks for planting South Austin Presbyterian Church, for their encouragement and support.

Listening In and Sounding Out

Asia Bibi, Pakistan - The peace of Pakistan.

Due to the recent release of Asia Bibi, the young mother imprisoned for years because of her Christian faith, we are seeing much unrest and civil disobedience throughout the country.

We praise God for Asia Bibi's release and the government's pledge to stand by the Christian Community in Pakistan and keep the peace. Extra police officers and Army Rangers have been assigned to Christian Hospital Sahiwal (CHS) for protection.

Please pray for CHS and the extended work of World Witness in Pakistan. Everyone is currently safe, and we trust God to protect, guide and keep the staff and patients in the coming hours and days.

Source: *ARP World Witness*

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