Church-Planting Strategy

Moving from a Transactional Model to a Community of Practice Model

David W. Boshart

Mennonites in the United States have, historically, been ambivalent about planting churches and have had an inconsistent record when it comes to church-planting motives, measures for success, and integrity of funding models. This trend continues today, with church leaders often defaulting to circuitous and indirect conversation about church planting. Among those working on church-planting strategy, two key questions—"*What* is the church for?" and "*Who* is the church for?"—remain largely unaddressed, thus contributing to the ambivalence and inconsistent commitments common to the territory.

Anyone who embarks on planting a church, however, will ultimately be responding to these questions, at least implicitly if not explicitly, and will, in the process, surface theological and ecclesiological values. Whether these values remain explicit or implicit, they will impact the nature of both the relationship and support that the church planter and emerging congregation experience with denominational or regional church entities.

From the outset, it is important to say that, technically speaking, churches are not planted; rather, they are replanted or transplanted. All Christian churches grow from seedlings or grafts; they do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Matthew Swora writes:

> While individuals such as Paul or Barnabas feature greatly in The Acts of the Apostles, Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit multiplies churches through churches, beginning with the first church of Jerusalem, going on to Antioch, Ephesus and beyond. . . .

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> But churches are not planted; they are *trans*planted from seedlings strong
> enough to survive in new soil. By "seedlings" I mean groups of people sharing
> a vision for a mission and a new church. These new church transplants, based
> on a common mission, may come from one church, or from several. That
> makes every church or cluster of churches a seedbed of more churches.[1]

Emerging churches are propagated from an existing body of believers who testify to their belief that Jesus is Lord. The faithful emerging community will live in conscious hope for all expressions of the church to exist with a telos of "oneness" (John 17:23).

Even so, church planters often organize new congregations out of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the ecclesiological status quo they experience. They long to be unshackled from institutional conventions and desire to correct insular tendencies of churches that lack a zeal for effective outreach. Those who have been involved in church planting get in touch quickly with the ambivalence expressed by long-established or institutionalized church when emerging congregations criticize the "stuck-ness" of long-established congregations. At the same time, long-established congregations tend to judge the idealism of the emerging congregation as naive and untempered by experience. These attitudes, while quite natural, pose unintended challenges to potential collaboration and mutually edifying support for a strong church-planting strategy.

In response to these challenges, this article examines the journey of one regional conference—Central Plains Mennonite Conference—with church planting within the context of Mennonite Church USA and the conference's attempt to embrace and support emerging Anabaptist congregations with effective strategy and support systems.

Two Denominationally Initiated Church-Planting Strategies

We can identify two denominational initiatives intended to produce new congregations in the Mennonite Church in the United States in the past seventy-five years.

Church-Planting Strategy #1: Every Church an Outpost

The first movement, in the 1950s, called every church to have an "outpost." In this initiative, existing congregations reached into neighboring rural and urban communities to hold Bible schools and Sunday schools. They established urban mission centers for food distribution and educational supports. They created communities of support for Mennonite young adults who had migrated to and

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1 For further exposition on this concept, see Matthew Swora, *Seedbeds and Orchards,* Central Plains Mennonite Conference website, Mission Leaders, Church Planting tab, accessed on June 30, 2023, http://www.centralplainsmc.org/church-planting1.html.

settled in cities following alternative service terms or college graduation. One strategic pattern in this era seemed to be that ministry in the context *preceded* the organization of a congregation. The Mennonite church experienced significant growth in the number of congregations and members during this time.

Little has been written about the strategy and outcomes of this initiative in historical literature, but one can find many examples of congregations that began as "outposts" of a sponsoring congregation or cluster of congregations.[2] In Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC), for example, nine of the forty-eight member congregations listed on the conference website originated from the outpost era. This number does not include several churches planted during that era that are either no longer part of the conference or have subsequently closed.

Church-Planting Strategy #2: Five Hundred New Congregations in Ten Years

The second denomination-inspired movement began in 1985 when the General Assembly of the Mennonite Church adopted goals calling for, among other things, five hundred new congregations to be planted in the following ten years. Six months later, prominent Mennonite pastor Robert Hartzler called for a reality check regarding this goal, calling it "almost absurd":

> I believe in miracles. I believe that God can give Mennonites phenomenal growth and generous hearts. But there are some intermediate steps which require some basic changes in us before these miracles will be realized. So, let's not try to fool ourselves with nice-sounding goals if we are not willing to pay the price.[3]

It was clear from Hartzler's assessment that the denomination had not adequately considered the strategic planning needed to succeed in meeting these goals.

The 1995 report on these goals indicated that of "the 200 congregations planted, some later closed, others left their respective conferences and some remained conference participants years later."[4]

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2 See the term "outpost" in GAMEO, accessed June 30, 2023, https://gameo.org/index.php?search=outpost&title=Special%3ASearch&go=Go.

3 Robert Hartzler, "The Goals Are Almost Absurd," *Gospel Herald* 79, no. 3 (January 7, 1986): 34–35.

4 "Ten-Year Goals (Vision '95) (Mennonite Church 1985)," last modified September 6, 2013, https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Ten-Year_Goals_(Vision_%2795)(Mennonite_Church,_1985).

Recent Denominational and Regional Conference Perspectives on Church Planting

Interviews with various denominational and regional leaders between 2005 and 2009 surfaced a number of themes with regard to church planting as a strategic function of Mennonite Church USA. These themes included (1) the lack of a denominational strategy for church planting, (2) confusion over what structure within the church is responsible for the goal of developing missional congregations, and (3) attitudes of resistance toward church planting.[5]

Even though the vision in the 1950s and 1985 movements was driven by the denomination, the dominant paradigm for church planting in the Mennonite church has been characterized more by individual initiative than by systemic strategy. Even in the two twentieth-century initiatives, little or no strategy was developed to support the stated goals. One denominational leader in 2008 offered a view on the history and current situation: "In past decades, church planting seemed to be an individual matter. The phrase was used, 'So and so has a *heart* for church planting.' Therefore, they went off and planted a church." Another denominational leader said, "We are in a current stage where there doesn't seem to be a concerted effort in church planting."

Reflecting on the regional conference's track record with church planting, regional conference staff members noted the lack of strategy. One staff member said, "We seem to be relatively unprepared for church plants to arise. We seem not to know how to respond; we don't have procedures for responding to people when they come to us saying that they want to plant a church." A regional conference minister reflected: "It wasn't in anyone's portfolio to work on, and it wasn't a particular priority."

A regional conference staff member summarized the lack of strategy this way: "We've been in a time of transition ever since the inception of the conference. . . . We understood that we weren't going to plant churches the way we used to, but we didn't know *how* we were going to."

Mennonite Church USA articulated a mission statement shortly after the denomination formed in 2001: "Joining in God's activity in the world, WE develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures." The statement was not clear, however, about the object of the verbs "develop" and "nurture." One could argue that *developing* congregations referred to developing *new* congregations, while existing congregations were the object of the nurturing

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5 The perspectives of church leaders that follow are derived from my doctoral dissertation: David W. Boshart, "Planting Missional Mennonite Churches in Complex Social Contexts as the Denomination Undergoes a Paradigm Shift in Ecclesiology: A Multiple Case Study" (PhD Diss., Andrews University, 2009)—published as *Becoming Missional: Denominations and New Church Developments in Complex Social Contexts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 37–53.

function. When denominational leaders were asked to clarify the object of these verbs, they were unable to specify whether developing congregations referred to *developing new* congregations or *developing existing* congregations into missional communities.

By 2008, denominational leaders identified that the system suffered from ambivalence contributing to a lack of clarity about how each part of the denomination should contribute to the development of missional congregations. A statement by one denominational executive reflected this state of confusion: "Some would even wonder if [church planting is] an appropriate effort of the church." Another leader offered, "Even though there have been declarations made in the past . . . saying that now we are going to have a goal of [church planting] as a church-wide priority, it has been more talk than action." Yet another leader, reflecting the critique of regional constituents' concerns about new church-planting initiatives, said, "We have a negative response because of frequent failure due to gaps in training and accountability [of church-planting leaders] and some gaps in the nurturing process. Therefore, I sense there's some cynicism: 'Well, there's more money going down a rat hole.'"

A Case Study in a Regional Conference's Attempt to Support Church Planting: Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) offers a story of one regional conference's journey with church planting.[6] Founded in 2000, CPMC was created through the merger of the Northern District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Iowa-Nebraska Conferene of the Mennonite Church, one year prior to the larger denominational merger that resulted in the creation of Mennonite Church USA. In the twenty years between 1985 and 2005, CPMC and its antecedent conferences invested more than $1.5 million in supporting emerging churches in places where there were no constituent churches.[7]

In the last half of the twentieth century, church planting in Mennonite Church USA followed the trends of mainline Protestant models.[8] In these models the conference provided full-time financial support for a church planter for the

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6 The information contained in this section of the article comes from my own participation in the events discussed. Future scholars seeking to do research in this area will find documents related to the events described here and the work of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference church-planting strategy team archived with the Central Plains Mennonite Conference office. Conference contact information can be found at www.centralplainsmc.org.

7 Boshart, *Becoming Missional*, xv.

8 Paul Nixon, "How Much Should It Cost to Plant a New Church?," May 14, 2019, https://www.churchleadership.com/focus/how-much-should-it-cost-to-plant-a-new-church/. In this article, Nixon offers a cost/benefit analysis of planting churches with

first two years with a declining subsidy every following year until no subsidy remained, somewhere around the fifth year. The expectation of the funding body was that within five years the church planter and a collected core group would have grown to become a "self-supporting" congregation. This was the model that CPMC had followed in the twenty years between 1985 and 2005.

Little attention, however, was given to what was meant by "self-supporting." By what metrics should an emerging church no longer be seen as *emerging*? The congregation could afford a salaried pastor? They could afford staff and a building? They sustained a full complement of congregational programs? They had reached a critical mass of attendees to carry their own costs of operation? For more than a century, missiologists have described mission movements to have reached maturity when they demonstrate the "three-self paradigm:" self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing.[9] Paul Hiebert introduced a fourth self: self-theologizing—that is, churches have the capacity to read, interpret, and apply scripture for themselves.[10]

In spite of CPMC spending over $1 million in the twenty years prior to 2005, no self-supporting congregations had emerged as a result of the conference's church-planting strategy, by any measure of the "four-self model." In fairness, however, it would be a mistake to discount transforming experiences of ministry in the lives of those who intersected with the core of people who were attempting to start a church. Ministry and church planting may go hand-in-hand, but they are not the same thing. Christian ministry and witness that does not result in the establishment of a self-sustaining congregation *matters* whether a church takes root in that context of ministry or not.

After two decades with no emerging churches reaching sustainability, it became clear to conference leaders that it was past time to stop attempting the same strategy while hoping for different results. In 2004 CPMC declared a moratorium on providing salary subsidies to church planters as well as a moratorium on any conference-initiated church plants until a more comprehensive strategy could be articulated. It was a stark declaration, and it appeared that, for the time being, the conference had dropped out of the church-planting business.

In rebooting the conference church-planting strategy, funding was channeled toward the infrastructure needed to develop a more fulsome approach to church planting. At the same time, while the conference did not initiate planting new churches and provided no salary subsidies for church planters, new Anabaptist

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external subsidies in the United Methodist system and advocates for lower cost approaches and longer launch ramps; e.g., five years instead of three years.

9 John Livingstone Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 3rd ed. (New York: Foreign Missionary Library, 1899).

10 See Hiebert's history of the three-self paradigm in Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006), 193–224.

churches began to emerge in the geographic region. Several neo-Anabaptist and immigrant leaders arriving in the region began to organize local Mennonite congregations and, at the same time, to seek conference affiliation.

One of the emerging congregations was planted by a Hispanic couple who relocated to a small city with a large Hispanic community made up of first- and second-generation immigrants who were beginning to establish long-term ties to the community, as well as more recently arrived undocumented immigrants who were much more tentative about their long-term residence in the community. After a couple years in this location, one of the spouses continued to lead the original church while the other spouse started a second Hispanic congregation forty miles away.

Another Hispanic church was initiated by an undocumented immigrant husband-wife couple who had been forced to leave their former Mennonite congregation due to leadership conflicts. Five years into their new ministry, the husband was arrested and unjustly deported to Honduras. The wife continued to lead the congregation. Interestingly, the deportation mobilized the conference congregations into an advocacy movement that brought national attention to the situation.

Two other congregations were established by neo-Anabaptist leaders who were introduced to the Anabaptist tradition as seminary students. One of these congregations took the form of a new monastic community where all members resided in the same neighborhood. A second emerging community was initiated by a neo-Anabaptist leader who gathered together people with Mennonite backgrounds and convictions who were living in the city for career reasons, where there were no existing Mennonite congregations.

These five emerging congregations, originating outside of a conference-initiated strategy, provided a profound laboratory for conference leaders to re-examine the conference's assumptions about church planting. What was happening in the vision of these leaders who were seeking affiliation with an institutional church structure? What did they need? What were they hoping to gain in relating to the wider church structure? These leaders were already organizing congregations without salary subsidies from denominational sources. There must have been another motivation for their interest in affiliation.

The conference began to organize gatherings for these church planters, and, after several gatherings, it became apparent that the church planters' first priority was not seeking financial support (though they would not turn it down if it were offered!). They were seeking mutual support, wise counsel, prayer support, places to ask their questions, and theological solidarity with others who were championing the same missional vision. Retreats focused on providing space for reflection on the experiences of church planters and extended times of prayer. This activity resulted in increasing camaraderie among the church planters and increased self-confidence in their ability to be effective in their work.

Between 2005 and 2019, eight new congregations emerged in CPMC. Five of them remain in existence as of the writing of this article, and all five remain affiliated with their conference and denomination. None of the five have received financial subsidies directly from the conference.[11] While the record of reaching sustainability was imperfect, the results were substantially better than the previous twenty-year record. How might we account for this shift in results?

1. Building Trust and Aligning Values

First, the conference began to "frontload" the process of formalizing relationships with leaders of emerging churches with time spent clarifying the theological/missional and contextual commitments of the church planter. This work built trust between the church planter and conference leaders and assurance that there was strong alignment between the missional trajectory of the church planter and the conference's core values.[12] And instead of starting the church-planter-to-conference relationship with an infusion of salary support, a substantial amount of *time* was invested to understand and clarify the theological and missional commitments of the church planter and the alignment of these commitments with the conference's theology. With that alignment clarified, church planters and conference leaders could bond in a supportive relationship at deeper levels than had been previously seen. There was an authentic sense of being in this work *together*.

2. Ending Salary Subsidies and Beginning Reflective Practices

Second, the conference reframed its understanding of the kind of support that the conference was best positioned to offer. This reframing involved leaving behind a dependency-inducing model where the conference primarily offered support through salary subsidy while leaving the church planter to organize their congregations as they saw fit. Though it seemed draconian at the time, the end of salary subsidies to church planters opened new opportunities for more meaningful and relational supports.

A reflective practice model began to emerge. Reflective practice finds its roots in the work of educators David Kolb and Donald Shön and continues to grow

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11 These five churches are Iglesia Cristiano El Balsamo (Muscatine, IA), Iglesia Menonita Centro Cristiano (Washington, IA), Iglesia Torre Fuerte (Iowa City, IA), Shalom Mennonite Church (Eau Claire, WI), and Third Way (St Paul, MN).

12 The history of church planting in CPMC included a number of stories where the conference endorsed a leader of an emerging church only to find a few years later an insurmountable divergence in theology and ecclesiological commitments between the leader and the conference. These relationships ended painfully.

as a practice of professional development for leaders.[13] Kolb's model involves four interlinking stages of reflection: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. New competencies emerge when leaders step back from the intensity of new challenges and consider what has happened, what is happening, what could happen, and *what needs to happen* in order to increase leadership and organizational effectiveness.

Financial resources from the conference were allocated to support theological and leadership education of church planters, and micro grants were made available as seed money to support ministries of the emerging church as they engaged their context. The conference also organized annual retreats for these leaders to focus on theological/missional reflection, their church-planting experiences, intercessory prayer, and inspiration. The conference covered the cost of church planters' participation in these retreats.

3. Strengthening Conference Connections

Third, as greater theological alignment was tended, conference leaders began to elevate the profile of these emerging congregations and their leaders in the conference through the conference publications and spotlighting them at annual conference meetings. Rather than assuming that church planters didn't have time to participate in conference organizational structures, conference leaders invited church planters to participate more fully in those structures. As church planters became more known to the existing congregations of the conference, new conversations emerged between members of emerging congregations and existing congregations. Individually, church planters began to express their desire to be known and more intimately connected to other congregations in the conference; they wanted to be taken seriously as emerging congregations who were engaged in vital ministry and witness.

As their confidence as members of the conference grew, church planters began to assert their need for more financial support to free up time to lead their fledgling congregations. Through a careful discernment process, the conference began to connect church planters with leaders of existing congregations to develop multiple "communities of practice" made up of members from emerging church partners and representatives of four to six long-established congregations, with the goal of renewing the mission of all involved.

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13 Barbara Bassot, *The Reflective Practice Guide: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Critical Reflection*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2015). See also David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984); Donald A. Shön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).

A Community of Practice Model

These communities of practice formed by bringing together representatives of one emerging congregation with representatives of four to six long-established congregations in a covenant of shared commitments for the purpose of reflecting on the experiences of each partnering congregation. This involved decentering the emerging church as the strategic focus of the relationship. The covenant explicitly structured the relationship to minimize the image of long-established *sufficient* congregations *pouring into* the *insufficient* emerging congregation. Tending to this dynamic through specific commitments in the covenantal agreement increased the self-esteem with which the leaders of the emerging congregation came to the table.

In quarterly meetings over a shared meal, each congregation represented in the community of practice reflected on their concrete experience in ministry. Following this sharing, the conversation turned to the framing question of *abstract conceptualization* for each gathering of the learning community: "Based on what we are experiencing in each of our local contexts of mission, what are we learning that can help us be more faithful and effective in our context of ministry?" A conference minister responsible for church planting facilitated the reflective conversations of each community of practice. The hope was that such reflective practice would lead all partners involved to active experimentation in their respective contexts of ministry.

To balance the dynamics of well-resourced congregations and to decenter the emerging congregation as the "object" of the community of practice, the covenants of understanding were structured using assets-based community development (ABCD) principles.[14] That is, the emerging church was asked to name the gifts and strengths (assets) it brought to the relationship. The strengths and gifts of the long-established churches were also named. The needs, or deficits, of both the emerging church and long-established church partners were also named. By framing the covenantal relationship in this way, everyone at the table offered their considerable gifts as well as acknowledged their insufficiencies.

This approach also strengthened the reflection of these communities of practice in important intercultural ways. Because all partnering congregations had first explicitly named their assets and their deficits, it followed that race, class, educational level, and culture differences were less likely to be seen as tacit dynamics to manage in the relationship and more likely to be lenses that enriched the corporate reflection of all involved.

The second part of the covenant of understanding involved relational commitments that each party made to the community of practice. These commitments

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14 John P. Kretzman and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 1993).

involved the long-established congregations sending people on a regular basis to worship and fellowship with the emerging congregation. Fears that a group of visitors dropping in on the Sunday worship service would overwhelm the emerging congregation were quickly dismissed when all experienced the burst of energy and good will that came with these regular visits.

Long-established congregations also committed to inviting the emerging church leaders to preach in the long-established congregation once per year. The expectation was that the visiting preacher would offer a typical sermon rather than use the time to update the church they were visiting on the progress of their fledgling community. While this required four or five Sundays away from the emerging congregation each year, it provided the leader of the emerging church an opportunity to address the long-established church from a position of authority (sufficiency) rather than dependency.

Only after the congregations enacted these commitments were existing congregations invited to make financial commitments to the emerging congregations. While the conference served as the conduit for the exchange of money, its leaders emphasized that the community of practice should understand that if a contributing congregation forgot or stopped providing funding, the conference would not make up the difference. The covenantal commitments for the communities of practice were limited to three years, with the potential for renewing the covenant for a second three years. After six years, the formal covenant would end along with any financial support.

Assessment of the Community of Practice Model

The community of practice model reframed the conference's role in church planting in seismic ways. Ten years out from the onset of this model, several important observations can be made:

- Establishing patterns of mutuality with the communities of practice was hard-won. It took at least one year of quarterly meetings to mitigate the tendency of members from existing congregations to see their role as problem-solving when church planters shared their experience in the group.
- Representatives of existing churches tended to be more pessimistic about the future of their own congregation's mission. Sometimes this attitude brought negativity to the group's reflective practice and members of existing congregations unintentionally put pressure on the emerging church leaders by projecting their hope for the future of the church on the successful fresh witness of the emerging congregation.
- While the relational design of the community of practice intended to emphasize mutuality, the financial support that existing congregations were providing was a palpable, if tacit, dynamic in the relationship. On

the other hand, when an existing congregation dropped the ball on their contributions and the emerging congregation suddenly had a shortfall in support, honest and forthright conversations were needed among the partners. It can be argued that these conversations ultimately fostered a greater level of transparency, vulnerability, and trust than may have emerged otherwise.

Challenges notwithstanding, a number of positive outcomes emerged from the community of practice model. First, strong, stable, rich relationships developed over time among the congregations in the community of practice groups, particularly when many of the same representatives from existing congregations made visits to the emerging congregation and quarterly meetings. Evidence that these relationships moved beyond "sponsorship" to authentic friendship came from several observations: Every community of practice enthusiastically renewed the first three-year covenant with only minor funding changes for a second three years. In one case, though the conference staff announced the covenant could not be renewed for a third time, one community of practice renewed their commitment anyway without the financial sharing component. Community of practice participants demonstrated "bonded" relationships when they encountered each other at larger conference assemblies and in some cases traveled together to national assemblies. As the communities of practice matured, friendships deepened and became less symbolic as members of immigrant congregations began to invite Anglo participants from the community of practice to their birthday, wedding, New Years, and quinceañera celebrations, while Anglo participants invited members of Hispanic communities to traditional family meals and gatherings.

Second, community of practice members experienced three-dimensional hospitality.[15] Where community of practice gatherings happened in conjunction with visits to the emerging congregation, concern was expressed by participants of existing congregations that their presence might overburden the small emerging congregation if lodging and meals during the visit were needed. When participants from existing congregations allowed themselves to be hosted, however, the act of being host increased the emerging congregation's self-esteem and morale. Members of existing congregations arrived on the scene in a receiving rather than delivering posture. Members of the emerging congregation would repeatedly ask that the visits continue and that they be allowed to provide hospitality. When leaders of emerging congregations made annual visits to partner congregations, they were given a place of esteem in the pulpit. This act of giving and receiving hospitality balanced the power between dominant and minority racial identities in natural ways. As the facilitated conversations matured through

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15 David W. Boshart, *Planting Missional Mennonite Churches in Complex Social Contexts as the Denomination Undergoes a Paradigm Shift in Ecclesiology: A Multiple Case Study* (PhD Diss., Andrews University, 2009), 195–96.

reflective practice, partners began to think more deeply and consciously about such hospitality—that all had received from a loving and redeeming God—as a core value in their missional commitments to each other and within each of their contexts of ministry.

Progress toward Reversing a History of Unsuccessful Church Planting

Prior to 2005, Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) and its antecedent conferences did not have a good track record of successfully nurturing sustainable churches. During the next fifteen years, CPMC supported leaders of emerging churches through providing theological and leadership education, sharing a limited number of micro-grants to support contextual ministries, and developing covenantal communities of practice involving partners from emerging and existing congregations. This new model decentered the insufficiency of the emerging church while minimizing the perceived sufficiency of the existing congregations through a facilitated reflective practice focused on central questions equally relevant to all partners. This practice resulted in rich, authentic relationships; validated the legitimacy of emerging congregations and their leaders; increased and expanded the experience of missional hospitality; and appears to be an intervention that reversed a long history of unsuccessful church planting.

While the shift in the conference's role did not mean that every emerging congregation reached sustainability, the results were far better than the experience of the prior twenty-year history, and at a much lower financial cost to the conference. More research is needed, however, to understand how much the reflective practice model has moved existing and emerging congregations toward new levels of mission vitality and how that practice can be further adapted in support of a more successful church-planting strategy.