

Ex Nihilo

Starting a New Church

by Kent Annan

It's Palm Sunday, and on the way to the elementary school gymnasium where the six-year-old Crossroads Presbyterian Church meets, one passes developments of big, new houses that seemingly dropped from the sky. In the neighborhoods around Royersford, Pennsylvania, trees are still just twigs, and construction has brought the red dirt to the surface. A Giant Food/Pharmacy announces "Grand Opening" with a massive banner swaying in the wind; next to it are a dry cleaners and a Blockbuster video, both advertising opening deals. A few miles down the road a McDonald's is under construction—all wood beams, and not a single hamburger yet served.

One element of Crossroads's logo is a tableau of housing development roofs. This image of roofs mirrors the surrounding landscape. And what might look to some like a great place to find a new home and to others like an unfortunate case of suburban sprawl is, to Crossroads and other congregations like it, indication of soil fertile for a new church.

A table in the school lobby welcomes people with a "Crossroads First Service" scrapbook (October 13, 1996) that includes photos, press clippings, and newspaper advertisements—as well as brochures about church and presbytery activities. New church developments (the term used by the Presbyterian Church (USA) for church start-ups) seem to hold their own stories especially dear—as a sign, no doubt, that just as God has raised something out of nothing, so God

will continue to be present through the precarious early stages of growth.

In the gym, people are standing as they sing choruses projected onto a large screen that hangs down in front of the dark red curtain on the gym stage, where during the week kids probably practice for musicals like *Annie*.

Two basketball hoops have been cranked up and stretch out like mechanical arms 20 feet over the congregation. Block letter signs on the left wall say things like EXERCISE DAILY, next to cheerful penguins. On the right wall, a stalk of broccoli extols, "Play Safely." On the back wall is temporarily hung a quilt with the words "Come Meet Christ at the Crossroads" over a scene of new houses, a lake, hills, and trees. Two intersecting roads are superimposed, suggesting a cross.

Two Peavey speakers on four-foot stands are on either side of the gym. Up front is a small, plywood podium on wheels and a small table with a white tablecloth and a 20-inch-high wood cross on it. To the right stands a five-person band. Under the plastic folding chairs that serve as pews run painted basketball court lines.

Leading the service are Sheryl and Scott Kinder-Pyle, a clergy couple who fell in love at Princeton Seminary and graduated in 1988. The local presbytery called them in 1995 to serve as coorganizing pastors; they



Top: The Crossroads Presbyterian Church quilt
Bottom: Sheryl and Scott Kinder-Pyle

began in January 1996. The first service—after an exciting but lonely gestation period—was nine months later.

The Kinder-Pyles love the adventure and risk of starting a church. "Some days it feels too risky," says Scott, "but we get to meet people who are intimidated by the idea of church, and then tell them we worship in a school gymnasium. Then we say that for us the faith relationship with Jesus is what's crucial. We want to start a community around the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—which is exciting. Most of the

people here were baptized and then grew estranged from the church. Now they're exploring their faith again."

At a meeting in 1996, in the early planning stages, the Kinder-Pyles were explaining their vision of a Presbyterian church that was somewhere between traditional and contemporary, liturgical and spontaneous, formal and informal. They wanted a place where the secular and the sacred met. Scott remembers, "Then a 25-year-old guy said, 'I would come to that kind of crossroads church.' We thought that was a powerful image for what we wanted to be."

The road ahead is leading to a new building on property the church owns a few miles away.

During the Palm Sunday service, an announcement is made inviting everybody to come and bring their friends and neighbors to an Easter Saturday egg hunt and then an Easter morning sunrise service—both to be held on the future church site. (Holding these types of events on the "future site" seems a fairly common way for new church developments to lift up their visions, which often call for enthusiastic outreach, continuous growth, and generous financial contributions.)

The egg hunt exemplifies the Kinder-Pyles' ministry philosophy, which is not uncommon among new church developments (or, necessarily, other established churches.)

"My first reaction to the idea," says Sheryl, "was, 'No way! We're not about bunnies and Easter eggs.' But then we realized it was a great, nonthreatening way to let people invite their friends and neighbors to the future site. We'll tell a brief version of the Easter story and invite them all back to the site for Easter sunrise, as well as to the Easter service at the school. So it's great!"

From Nothing to Something

"From the perspective of the theology of mission," says Darrell Guder, Princeton Seminary's professor of missional and ecumenical theology, "the basic reason to start a new congregation is to continue the apostolic witness to the gospel, which has been the church's purpose since Pentecost. No one method results in a new missionary congregation, since it is always the work of God's Spirit. But in every process, there is the discernment on the part of one or more Christians that a community should be formed in a particular place to 'lead its life

worthy of the calling with which it is called' (Ephesians 4:1) and to 'be Christ's witnesses' (Acts 1:8)."

Stan Wood (Class of 1970), director of the Center for New Church Development at Columbia Theological Seminary, who also has eight years experience as a new church



Future site of Crossroads Presbyterian Church

development pastor, has analyzed the way the Spirit tends to work. In his forthcoming publication *New Church Development Guide: A Vision-Based Strategy for Developing New Church Developments*, Wood analyzes four basic models for starting new churches: research, program, leadership, and redevelopment.

Research models begin with a presbytery-wide investigation (of, for example, a new community or a minority group), which then moves forward if the demographics, etc., show that starting a new church is viable. Program models grow through ministry to an unchurched people, for example through evangelistic Bible studies, social justice activism, 12-step programs, and worship services. Leadership models are based around the work of an evangelist, tentmaker, or lay preaching mission and are most often used when there is no existing membership base to begin with. Redevelopment models take

place through consultation with existing Presbyterian churches. One example of this would be when a church is reborn through starting a new church alongside an existing church.

Crossroads fits into the research model, but Scott Kinder-Pyle is quick to point out that starting a new church is not primarily about models or demographics. "My mantra," he says, "has been that we are not a museum for Presbyterian lore. Nor are we marketers, selling the gospel at bargain prices with slick advertising campaigns. Crossroads isn't just here, in the suburbs, for demographic reasons. We are here to speak an odd, transforming story to a population of men, women, and children who are determined to file us away as another religion—or another coupon in the mail."

The last five years have seen an average of 37 new church developments per year in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Many of these are among racial/ethnic minorities (for example, Pakistani, Ghanaian, and Korean)—which was evident at the conference held by the denomination last July for new church development pastors and spouses. Sixty-five percent of attendees represented racial/ethnic minorities, mostly new immigrant groups. Less than 10 percent of new church developments (as of four years ago) had more than 125

members—though membership numbers ranged from 20 to 700.

And starting a church, of course, isn't free. Money comes from donations and from the presbytery, the synod, and/or the denomination. The denomination's sample budget predicts that the first two years—including office and worship space rental, advertising, office supplies, equipment, support staff, insurance, and so on—will cost approximately \$50,000 per year, plus pastor's compensation, though

each case is unique. As an associate pastor is added and a building fund is started, costs increase substantially.

Through the process, the denomination's Evangelism and Church Development Office



Brian Clark, a new church development pastor in Virginia

helps new church developments by consulting with synods and presbyteries; by providing leadership and planning for workshops and training events; by organizing a national new church development pastor and spouse conference; and by identifying and developing resources.

Though the models capture the way things tend to go and budgets are necessary for each new church to get off the ground, the story of each new beginning is different.

“Like the individual response to the invitation to follow Christ,” says Guder, “the response of a community to Christ’s call is always the consequence of God’s Spirit working in many mysterious ways to bring people to faith and to each other in worshiping communities.”

One such place where the Spirit has brought people together in surprising and sudden ways is at Riverside Presbyterian Church in Sterling, Virginia.

A Riverside Birth

After graduating from Princeton Seminary in 1985, Brian Clark took a pastorate at Sligo Presbyterian Church, in Sligo, a small, rural town in western Pennsylvania. This was a redevelopment project, and Clark enjoyed a 12-year ministry that saw the church become younger and the youth programs take off.

“But I knew even in seminary that my calling was to new church development,” he says. “It’s just that I wasn’t ready right away. Everything in Sligo was great, but I felt God was leading me toward something new.”

Then came the opportunity backed by the General Assembly and the local presbytery to start Riverside Presbyterian Church in Sterling, Virginia. So in January 1997, Clark, his wife, and their three children moved to Virginia.

With a pastor, financial backing, and denominational support, all the recipe needed was one vital ingredient: people.

“Two couples active in another church in the area were interested in helping us to start,” he says. “Then I looked at my kids and said, ‘You’re the youth group.’”

“We decided to start a Bible study. Twelve people came, and none of them had ever worshiped in a church regularly before.”

As a next step, Clark decided to ask other churches to “lend” some of their members for one Sunday so he could start with a decent-sized worship service. The churches

agreed, and Clark planned the first Sunday service for March 1997 in a meeting hall in his apartment building.

“The first Sunday,” he says, “I was hoping for 30 people. Two hundred and fifty showed up. About 100 of them said that they were not worshipping anywhere at the time—and that they were interested in com-

ing the next Sunday. At the end of the service I said, ‘Alright, I’ll let you know sometime later this week where to come next Sunday, because this place in my apartment building obviously won’t work.’”

The next Sunday, 100 people arrived at an elementary school, where they still meet. (They now use every hallway and alcove for

Where Have All the Pastors Gone?

by Kent Annan

Presbyterian Church (USA) pastors aren’t yet the subject of multimillion-dollar bidding wars like, say, a star center-fielder. But there is a decreased supply, and, thus, an increased demand. Yes, there are fewer pastors in the denomination now than there were 10 years ago. But it’s not just that there are fewer pastors available. It’s also that most pastors don’t want to play for the Montreal Expos—that is, small churches.

The Reverend Marcia Clark Myers (Class of 1979), associate director of churchwide personnel services for the Presbyterian Church (USA), is quoted on the denomination’s web site as saying, “There is

not a shortage of ministers in the Presbyterian Church.” She says there are 14,000 active ministers of word and sacrament. The problem is ministers aren’t going to smaller congregations. More than 3,000 of the denomination’s 3,897 congregations currently without installed pastors have 100 members or less.

No matter the cause, having almost 4,000 churches without pastors requires some correction.

Myers suggests the denomination should work to create a more positive climate for pastoral ministry, encourage ministers to be open to a call to pastoral ministry, and employ creativity to see that churches are served appropriately.

The result of the denomination’s unfortunate problem has been somewhat positive for candidates for the pastorate. Dean Foose, Princeton Seminary’s director of alumni/ae relations and senior placement, says the market turned in favor of pastors in about 1996.

The result, for many, has been abbreviated job searches and higher salaries.

Pastors now tend to have a short wait for a call after they have gone through the approval process and circulated

their Personal Information Forms (PIFs). Unless holding out for, as an example, a specific geographical location, finding a church now tends to take two to four months.

In 2000, some Presbyterian churches started raising their compensation packages. The range between the lowest and highest paying churches used to be about \$10,000, but as churches have sought to make themselves more attractive to candidates, the range has grown to about \$20,000, mostly in housing allowances to make up for cost of living differences.

“My spin on this,” says Foose, “is that the fact that fewer people are preparing for pastoral ministry is not a negative thing. We happen to have hit a shortage of pastors for mainline churches, but

there’s a certain cyclical nature to this. The ‘50s, for example, were a heyday. About 80 percent of Princeton students were preparing for pastoral ministry then. About 60 percent go into pastoral ministry now.”

So where do Princeton alums go after graduation if they don’t all head to churches?

Of the 162 M.Div. graduates in the Seminary’s Class of 2000, 12 became pastors; 45 became associate pastors; 16 were in pursuit of a call; 6 became missionaries, chaplains, or joined specialized ministries; 37 went on to various graduate programs and seminaries for Ph.D.s,

Th.M.s, L.L.D.s, etc. (and at least four of those have since taken calls in churches); 4 went into Christian education; 7 took internships; and 7 went into non-ministry work. Another 28 were not reported.

“PTS,” says Foose, “was founded to prepare men—and now women—for pastoral ministry. Now it prepares people to think theologically about life and the world. It prepares them for all kinds of ministry. And the centerpiece continues to be pastoral ministry.” ■

Snapshot of Presbyterian Pastors

- 11.5% of pastors are under age 40
- 50% of pastoral candidates are under age 40
- From 1994 to 1999 there was an increase of 319 clergywomen serving congregations as pastors and associate pastors. During the same period, there was a decrease of 993 clergymen serving congregations as pastors and associate pastors.
- 54% of pastoral candidates are women
- 18% of pastoral candidates are racial-ethnic

Christian education; the cafeteria houses children's Sunday school; and the main lobby is transformed into a nursery.) Clark quickly hired a youth director and a music director.

"We're in a predominately unchurched area," he says. "In a study, .01 percent said they would be interested in a Presbyterian church in the area. However, it was important to the unchurched that we were Presbyterian, because it showed we weren't a cult."

The church now averages an attendance of more than 400 at their Saturday night and Sunday morning services. From the beginning, the population has been mostly young families. These days there are about 20 infants in worship and another 20 in the nursery. Clark says young families immediately feel welcomed when they walk into the worship space and "see a line of strollers in the back." The church is near the headquarters of AOL. Many in the congregation work at places like this—as well as for government contractors, the CIA, and environmental firms. The congregation is ethnically diverse, and people tend to be highly educated.

So why do all these families who weren't attending church suddenly show up at Riverside?

"At the heart of it, I think we're attractive to new families because God shows up, and people know it," Clark says. "We wish we knew exactly what it was, but I really think that's what it is. And you can't teach that. There's no formula for splitting the Red Sea; God splits it and you just walk through."



Left: Sung-Joo Park
Below: Hanbit Presbyterian Church in Atlanta



The church emphasizes "connection," he explains, "because we're so unconnected here. This community didn't exist 10 years ago. Nobody has roots. We're a place where everybody is new. Time and again, I hear people say things like: 'I felt like I needed to meet some people, but then I came here and found that I needed to meet God.' Or they say: 'I came thinking my kids needed something, but...'"

Worship services are eclectic—with a 40-person wind symphony as well as two rock bands. "Our philosophy is that we're not going to let the music wars split us up," says Clark. "We're the family of God. Like a family driving in a minivan, we take turns listening to different music."

Preaching has also had to adjust to what the church family wants. "My preaching has changed drastically," he says. "I don't use PowerPoint now, because people in our area are PowerPointed to death all week."

But people do like creativity. On Palm Sunday, everybody marched behind a donkey to the church's nearby property, where they plan to eventually build their own building (no date set yet: "We're concentrating on ministry first; the facility will come"). For Christmas Eve they built a miniature Bethlehem village outside, where 1,200 came to worship. They've also done a reenactment of the feeding of the 5,000—with chocolate donuts. "People were surprised and excited," says Clark. "It must have been something like how the actual crowd reacted."

Clark grins when asked for an example of why he so enjoys working in a new church development: "There are so many!" he says.

"One night in February 1997 we did a sort of exploratory Sunday night worship service. The week before the service, I got a call from a young woman asking if it was okay if she and her husband visited us. 'I'm Japanese,' she said. 'My husband grew up in Florida, and he's African American.' Then after a long pause

she asked, 'Is that a problem?' I said, 'Of course not!'"

"So they came and loved it. She's a medical doctor and an amazing soloist. He's an engineer. She had been part of a Presbyterian church in the South. The pastor, 15 years ago, had said after she was married, 'Why don't you come to the church for a while by yourself, then later bring your husband.' They hadn't been to church since. The advantage of our church is that as a start-up, it was a chance for a new beginning for them. They've been involved ever since."

Stories like these, as well as his belief about what's best for a young church, are why Clark says, "Ministry in this church is a very long-term commitment for me. I think this will be longer than my first commitment [of 12 years]. The need for consistent pastoral leadership is important, as long as I can continue to grow and adapt with this congregation."

So what's his key to success?

"No matter what church you go to, you need a clear sense of the mission of God," he says. "There's not one mold for being a new church development pastor. It's about being where God calls you. The passion has to be there—as for any ministry. I've met with lots of pastors doing what I'm doing, and they're all really different."

Risk and Reward

Wood, though, says there tend to be some common characteristics of "effective new church development organizing pastors."

It's not especially surprising that they tend to be creative, self-motivated evangelists who are willing to face the loneliness of starting from scratch and who are energized by the joy of seeing new people gather in Christ's name. But Wood goes further.

He says new church development pastors tend to be gregarious people—persons who are excellent preachers and worship leaders. Evangelism skills and excitement about church growth are accompanied by "a pastor's heart appropriate for the projected worship attendance size of the new church development plan." They have a vision for new church development, as well as an ability to work in the culture and language of the target population. The ability to use missiological and anthropological methods and insights is also valuable. "A strong, vibrant commitment to Jesus Christ, accompanied by the verbal ability for sharing their experi-

ence of the joy of the Lord,” is joined by an enthusiasm for the Reformed tradition and the Presbyterian Church. And if the minister is married, it is important that his or her spouse be on board and supportive.

Wood says that in training new church development pastors, he would “emphasize supervised work in a new church development, maybe in a full-year internship—or, better, multiple internships in new church developments. I would also emphasize missional and practical theology.”

Princeton Seminary recently established a New Church Development Internship Award for the purpose of equipping people for ministry in new church development through stipend support of part-time and/or full-time internships in field education placements. At the 2002 commencement, three students received the first awards, which were made possible by a major gift from an alumnus of the Seminary and his wife, who also studied at PTS. A desire to encourage seminarians to consider, and governing bodies to support, new church development motivated the gift.

“To me, the most important factor in a new church development’s success is the pastoral leadership,” says Sung-Joo Park (Class of 1992), who pastors Hanbit Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. “Because a new church is not established, not stable, people don’t have direction. When people visit the church, the first impression they get from pastoral leadership is the worship service. As the church grows, we need more programs. But in the beginning, pastoral leadership, character, and endurance are very important—as well as the cooperation of the church’s core leaders.”

In addition to giving leadership, these ministers must be willing to face a different set of circumstances than most pastors.

“In the beginning it’s really lonely,” says Pam Driesell Anderson, pastor of Oconee Presbyterian Church in Watkinsville, Georgia. After graduating from PTS in 1998, she did a year-long internship at a church in Virginia. Then in August 1999, a presbytery called her to start a church in a fast-growing area near Athens, Georgia. They gave her a list of names of people who might be interested; a few were. She started a Bible study. The first worship service—in a school cafeteria—was in March 2000. The congregation has grown to 150 people.

“Being an extrovert,” she says, “I just created my own community by saying things to people like, ‘Look, I’m coming over to be with you tomorrow.’ That was hard. A lot of times I wondered if I was spending my time well, if I was doing the right things. But the hard things are also the things I love—the lack of structure, never knowing what’s going to happen next.”

There are other benefits as well. “It’s easier to do a new thing than to change an old thing,” says Marion Park (Class of 1989). She and fellow PTS alum Fred Choy (Class of 1989) started Seattle Community Church, and because of limited funds they started, in the summer of 1998, as tentmakers. They took over an unused Presbyterian church building and began making connections. The first worship service was in October 1998; now about 200 people (60 of them children) attend weekly. Park recently left Seattle Community to move with her family to Long Beach, California, where she will serve at Lakewood First Presbyterian Church, an already well-established church. But she says she’d love to do another new church development someday.

“Because we were starting fresh, it was easier in a way,” she says. “No one ever said, ‘Well, we’ve never done it that way in the past.’ Also, we were allowed, by the very nature of the setup, to fail. Though there was a lot of pressure to succeed, because we were financially self-supporting. It’s been an incredible challenge—very tough and incredibly rewarding to build from scratch.”

“I read an article by Stan Wood,” says Driesell Anderson,



Marion Park with her family

“that gave a profile of people well suited to be new church development pastors [see above]. Only a small percentage of pastors in the church fit this profile. That was an epiphany. I knew this was for me. I was just really, really jazzed about it. I couldn’t believe everyone didn’t want to do this!”

A Triumphant Entry

The post-worship routine is different when the service takes place in a rented gym. Palm Sunday worship at Crossroads Presbyterian Church quickly turns into a community packing-project (one of many small, unique ways people in young churches must work together).

As Sheryl concludes the benediction with “...the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,” soundboard wires are already being unplugged and wrapped up to be stored till next week. A family starts folding and stacking chairs—mother and father, elementary age son and daughter. The Crossroads banner in the back comes down. The podium is wheeled out. The big overhead screen recedes into the ceiling over the stage. Those not working talk above the clamor.

After about 20 minutes, the only evidence of what has just happened are the palm branches left scattered on the floor—remains of a triumphal entry reenacted. The only people left are members of the praise band practicing for next week and some small kids running around dressed up in their now-disheveled Sunday best.

And, indeed, there has been a kind of entry by Jesus here—into this gym, into this neighborhood. Certainly it’s not the only way Christ has arrived; there are other churches and other ways. But one dynamic way the Spirit enters neighborhoods is through the birth of new churches. ■



Pam Driesell Anderson and members of Oconee Presbyterian Church in Watkinsville, Georgia