Reformed Church in America

Oversight Team Handbook
A Guide to Church Plant Governance

By Ben Ingebritson
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If you are reading this, you are probably already a great blessing to a church plant. I have yet to meet a planter who does not want to be accountable to and upheld in prayer by a group of spiritual leaders during the planting process. Planting is really hard work on many levels—long hours, slow results, fickle people, tight resources, tough decisions, lonely leadership, and then there are the inevitable spiritual attacks. It’s a big help to have a team that is deeply invested in the ministry and knows the “big picture,” even if the team is not present for the day-to-day work.

Evidence shows that a good oversight or governing team often brings out the best in a planter. This contributes to a stronger, healthier plant. As an oversight team, you can truly influence the development of a church plant’s ministry! Planters need encouragement, wisdom, and accountability to perform at their best. When you offer those qualities, you become a blessing to the planter and the many people they touch.

This booklet outlines the unique work of governing a church plant so that each member of your church plant oversight team knows how their gifts can be used to support a planter’s ministry. Thanks for taking time to review this handbook as preparation for your important ministry together with your planter. God bless your good work!

Ben Ingebretson
Multiplication consultant, Regional Synod of Mid-America
1. Setting the Oversight Table: Participants, Meetings, and Duties

**Oversight team composition:** An oversight team should include the following key participants: the planter, a parent church representative (usually the lead pastor), a classis representative (this person makes the team a duly recognized classis oversight agency), wise council (e.g., another planter or experienced denominational advisor), other significant stakeholders (e.g., a co-parent representative), and a financial person (often someone from the plant core group). An oversight team can appoint a plant supervisor who will carry out the intentions of the team. A parent church leader often serves in this role. The oversight team should not be static; as leaders from within the plant emerge, these internal leaders should replace external participants on the oversight team. At the end of this process—usually after three to four years—the team will be fully staffed by mature, committed members of the plant.

**Multi-site model plants:** If a plant is a multi-site, oversight is the responsibility of the consistory of the parent church, though the consistory may need to delegate aspects of oversight to a sub-team so that adequate attention is given to the new site. It is often advantageous for the sub-team to invite an “outside” person onto their team who is experienced in church planting and able to provide wise counsel.

**Oversight team meetings:** Your oversight team should meet monthly. At the meeting, the team should review a written report from the planter and a financial report from the treasurer; the team should also allot time to engage in dialogue and prayer about key issues and concerns. The planter’s report should typically include the following:

1. Celebrations and “God sightings.”
2. Progress on benchmark expectations.
3. Progress and challenges in the overall planting project.
4. Financial reporting on the fiscal health of the ministry.

5. Personal and personnel report from the planter.
6. Extended prayer for concerns and needs.

**Planter/oversight team relationship:** The planter should lead the oversight team meeting, schedule the monthly time, and provide the agenda. Best practice recommends that the team adopt an “accountable leadership” model. This approach calls for authority, responsibility, and accountability for the plant to rest with the planter. Circumstances in planting often call for efficient decisions “on the ground” and the relative infrequency of oversight monthly meetings makes group work impractical. This authority is not absolute, but is given to the planter when he or she functions within agreed-upon boundaries and upon a foundation of trust. The boundaries include the following:

1. Ethical standards for ministers.
2. Theological standards of the RCA.
3. Agreed-upon planting objectives.
4. Agreed-upon planting benchmarks.
5. Agreed-upon budget limitations.

In exchange for the authority given to lead and make decisions in ministry, the planter has primary responsibility for the plant’s progress and must accept accountability for the ministry as it unfolds. It is as imperative that planters be given freedom within pre-set boundaries as it is imperative that planters be accountable for progress. A detailed description of this approach to oversight and authority can be found in the work of John Kaiser and his book Winning on Purpose (Abingdon Press, 2006).

**Oversight team responsibilities:** The oversight team takes ultimate responsibility for the ministry progress of the plant, the fiscal integrity of the plant, and the primary personnel issues and concerns with the plant. These three issues come together around the concern for “sustainability.” It is the oversight
team’s role to see the big picture as the plant moves from dependency on outside support in leadership and funding to indigenous leadership and funding. To achieve sustainability the oversight team empowers the planter, sets the boundaries, monitors the progress, watches the finances, and gives attention to the health of the planter. As the agent of the classis, the team must maintain the trust of the classis and other funding partners by reporting on the plant’s activities through minutes from meetings.

The oversight team also works with the planter to set needed policies and establish the boundaries within which the planter is free to do ministry. For example, the oversight team may work with the planter to develop plant policies for child protection, money handling, insurance, marketing, administering the Lord’s Supper, and other necessary contracts. The team may help the planter raise additional funds as well.

It is usually also the duty of the oversight team to help complete and file articles of incorporation for the state in which the plant is located. This usually requires each member of the team to sign the articles, thereby establishing the plant’s name, location, directors, and relationship to the Reformed Church in America. A sample of articles of incorporation can be found at the conclusion of this handbook.
2. Expectations, Covenant, and Risk

When you hold the first oversight team meeting, chances are, people will come with preconceived ideas about how things should be done. The planter, the parent, the classis, and the denomination are likely to have spoken and unspoken expectations. Clarifying those expectations early on is important. It can make the road going forward much smoother.

**Planter expectations:** The planter is likely to come with a number of expectations—some that have developed over many years, some formed through training in preparation for planting, and some that have developed through the planter’s relationship with the parent agency and initial core group. The planter will probably come to the planting project with a plan developed through these experiences and mentoring relationships. The planter is particularly likely to have expectations about the amount of funding the plant will get and the duration of that funding. It is important to discuss these expectations early so that the budgeting and fundraising needs of the plant are clear. The planter may also have expectations about the size of the core group and about other support resources offered by the parent or others.

**Parent/sponsoring agency expectations:** The parent or sponsoring agency is likely to come to the development of a new church with its own expectations about the target population, planting model, launch strategy, growth pace, and possibly even the date by which the plant should organize. Because the parent or sponsor may be investing the most in the plant, it is wise for the oversight team to allow the sponsor’s expectations to be expressed early and in reasonable detail. Again, the objective here is for these expectations to be aligned with those of the planter and other team members.

**Denomination/classis expectations:** The denomination and the classis are likely to have expectations for the plant as well. Those can include best practice elements, such as planter training, monthly planter coaching, pre-launch strategies, and funding integrity. The denomination and the classis have experience in a variety of planting settings, so be sure to seek their input for best practice insight.

**Planter coach expectations:** The coach is a key player who is usually not on the oversight team. The coach’s role is to be a “safe” advisor for the planter. Still, the coach has expectations that the oversight team should ensure are heard. The coach should know how the planter did in assessment and how the oversight team is feeling about the progress of the plant; this can be accomplished by sharing oversight team meeting minutes with the coach. The coach should not be expected to disclose sensitive conversations that took place with the planter and pertain to the planter’s personal struggles. The coach may be asked to share with the oversight team the planter’s monthly action plans if notice is given to the planter.

**Planter/parent covenant:** A covenant can be used from the beginning to formally articulate the expectations for the plant. The covenant is intended to be a reference document so that all parties can be aware of the plant’s objectives and track them over time. The covenant should also include performance expectations, a back-up plan should the plant not meet agreed-upon benchmarks, and provision for separation should the ministry need to be closed due to ongoing underperformance or other circumstances.

**Risk management:** Risk management is a way of thinking about the known and unknown challenges that are inevitable with church planting. It is important that key risk dimensions are addressed early on by the oversight team so that all parties are aware of and support the plan. The key risk dimensions are:

1. **Risk avoidance:** When the plant follows the agreed-upon plan with reasonable
flexibility and according to best-practice wisdom, the plant avoids known risks. There are several different ways the oversight team can dodge known risks. For example, the team can insist on monthly meetings so problems do not build up. The oversight team can also seek access, with the planter’s permission, to the planter’s assessment results, especially the behavioral interview. Any conditions or concerns expressed there will help the team guide the planter optimally. Another risk-avoidance tactic is to be sure the team you have composed is balanced and that all the players are on board. This raises the likelihood that the team will provide the best council for the planter and his or her partners.

2. **Risk minimization:** Risks can be minimized by ensuring the planter is meeting monthly with a coach and with the oversight team; following the agreed-upon planting plan; staying accountable; and remaining spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy. Another key area of risk minimization relates to funding. Plants that are either significantly under- or over-funded are at risk of either starving or enabling the plant. Tracking funding is a key duty of the oversight team, which, when done well, minimizes risk.

3. **Risk sharing:** Shared risk is reduced risk. When the parent, classis, and other partners are “all in” with their support, they share in the risk of the plant. When the planter is accountable to monthly benchmarks that are clear, knowing that progress is essential to plant viability, then he or she, too, shares in the risk of the plant. A sample list of benchmarks is found on pages 10 and 11. Being clear from the start about the risk each partner is bearing in the plant goes a long way toward establishing respect, trust, and confidence going forward.

4. **Risk acceptance:** We all enter church planting knowing that this is spiritual work. Only God converts a human heart, and we do this work recognizing the unseen realities that direct the visible outcomes. Whether they are due to human or supernatural factors, setbacks are common and accepted risks in planting. It is important that the team be a steady support to the planter through the inevitable setbacks.

Risk is a sensitive issue—particularly for the planter, who is often the most public face of the funding effort. It is wise for the oversight team to have an early conversation about funding conditions. Two typical approaches are taken in this area. The first, **unconditional funding,** assures the planter of all promised external funds regardless of ministry progress. Some planters may even assume additional funds will come if the existing pool is not enough. **Conditional funding** assures the planter all promised funds will be provided, but the disbursement of those funds may depend on actual plant progress. The reasoning here is that if the plant progresses slower than expected, existing funds will need to be extended over a longer time, thereby reducing the monthly amount. This will require the planter to either find bi-vocational work or raise additional funding. Conditional funding best manages the risk factors that all parties are facing in a church plant. While it does not preclude additional support when circumstances require it, conditional funding acknowledges the risk that all parties are carrying in the plant.
3. Caring for Your Planter and Staff

Church-planting pastors, even those with great passion and giftedness, serve in a high-stress vocation. There are myriad studies that confirm the pressures and stress that they face. Many times they have unrealistic expectations, few close friends, feelings of insecurity about their abilities, financial pressures from school debt and ministry sluggishness, the challenges of a young family, and/or the inevitable scrapes and bruises that come from interpersonal conflict in ministry. Planters often fall into the pit of judging their worth by the attendance at their last service. The support and care of a strong oversight team can help to alleviate some of the pressure and stress the planter bears.

The number one cause of burnout in church planting is unrealistic expectations. The reality usually falls short of dreams a planter may have of a fast growing, committed core group and a cool worship band experience. The oversight team must expect and plan on the inevitable setbacks and slow seasons that come with planting. Placing an emphasis on integrity, faithfulness, endurance, and wisdom often is the path that brings the fruit that is desired.

The following are specific things you can do to care for your planter:

1. Make an effort to connect just because you care. Don't limit conversation to meeting times.
2. Make space to listen to your planter if he or she wants to talk about personal challenges. While the planter may be somewhat guarded and private, make an effort to show you are willing to listen.
3. Provide the opportunity for the planter to connect regularly with a coach.
4. Give the planter time for vacation, Sabbath, professional development, and spiritual retreat. Ask the planter when time to refuel would be most helpful before scheduling these times.
5. Encourage your planter to develop friends outside the plant project. The benefits of other friendship circles are significant, and many planters need a push to form and maintain those relationships.
6. Strongly encourage your planter to care for their family, taking time out of the day to invest in those priority relationships.

Staffing: Your planter should be responsible for staff additions to the planting team. The oversight team should set the staffing policy (what positions and budgets are approved). In some cases, this will be the first time a planter has ever had staff that they are directly responsible for. The oversight team generally approves the decision to hire staff and the planter takes responsibility for staff selection, supervision, and evaluation. It is appropriate for the oversight team to get monthly updates on how the staff and planter are working together. It is also appropriate for the oversight team to communicate early regarding any concerns that would impact staffing decisions.
4. Oversight Issues

Membership: Membership in a new church plant is possible. The Book of Church Order gives a classis (and thus the oversight team, when it is the classis oversight agency for the plant) the ability to receive members into the congregation; the classis administers membership until the church is organized (1.II.7.11a).

Fast growth: Fast growth creates growing pains. It can lead to funding, staffing, and leadership challenges. One of the best strategies for dealing with the challenges that come with fast growth is to accelerate the placement of qualified individuals from the plant onto the oversight team. This can be at a pace of one to two new individuals each year. These people should be potential elders or deacons, though official titles may be reserved for when the church is ready for organization. Mentoring these new leaders early on builds a leadership base that can support the plant as it continues to grow.

Staff additions: Staff additions can be a positive sign of growth and development of the ministry. Three key principles should be followed when hiring new staff:

1. The oversight team should set the staffing policy (budget and position permission). The planter should make staff selections.
2. Staffing should be for the purpose of leading leaders, not just doing ministry.
3. Staffing wisely can be the difference between added growth and premature plateau. Most plants staff too early and poorly; creating a volunteer culture is critical.

Slow growth: Slow growth can be the result of many factors. Discernment is key here, and it may be wise to get an outside evaluation from a classis or denominational advisor. In some cases (usually involving unforeseen circumstances) it will be prudent to find additional outside funds to support the plant. In other cases that will be impossible or deemed inappropriate. If the plant consistently falls short of its benchmarks, the oversight team may need to adjust funding disbursement to spread available funds out over a longer period of time. This usually means offering the plant less monthly support. The planter may need to find additional work, find outside support, or consider closing the ministry. If a pattern of slow growth lasts three or more months, the oversight team should take action. Below are four options a slow-growing plant can consider:

1. Plant re-launch: Struggling churches and church plants can revitalize by revamping their ministry and “re-launching” with new energy and vibrancy. A re-launch might include a totally new ministry plan, target audience, planter, or funding design. If you are considering a re-launch, it is recommended that you bring in an outside, experienced evaluator to gain a more objective perspective on your plant. This season often calls for hard decisions, and an outside voice can help you make those decisions. It is also important to recognize that the systems of a church plant are deeply integrated; you can’t change one area without impacting other areas. Your team needs to weigh the impact of a re-launch carefully before entering into it.
2. Planter bivocational employment: This is not uncommon and can be a positive move. It usually works best to deploy a planter bivocationally early in the planting process, while the planter is primarily building a relational ministry and doesn’t yet have the added weight of weekend services. Expending valuable resources early and expecting bivocational work later often leaves the planter with inadequate funding when the demands are highest. Over the long haul, bivocational planting usually leads to a smaller ministry, though a brief season of bivocational work can be prudent.
3. Planter transition: When planter transition takes place in the early years of a plant, it can be very risky. Thankfully, there are
resources to help your team manage this situation with wisdom. You are encouraged to use the “Second Leader Transitions” document available on the RCA Church Multiplication website.

4. **Plant closure**: Deciding to close a plant is never easy, but planting is high-risk work. There is a 20 percent failure rate, so we accept setbacks, recognizing that, even in these challenging moments, God is at work.

There is a six-step process to work through in a closure situation:

1. Arrive at a prayerful shared decision as an oversight team.
2. Notify classis and denominational leadership.
3. Give the planter time to close the ministry (one to three months).
4. Arrange for appropriate severance and support for the planter.
5. Close the financial books for the ministry, settling all accounts.
6. Reflect on what has been learned, giving thanks to God for spiritual fruit.
5. Plant Size and Funding Models

Five key principles drive the sample planting models below and are worth considering in your plant oversight. All of the income numbers from the denomination, a classis church multiplication team, or other partners must be confirmed before you can assume they are accurate.

1. The numerical attendance potential of a plant is often revealed within the first year of the work and has significant impact on the budgeting design throughout the first five years. The size and funding models below are an attempt to map a budget pathway in light of the strongest early size-potential indicator: where the attendance levels out at after the launch. The models included outline budgets based on starting worship attendance of 100, 140, 180, and 225 people.

2. Each model assumes a core team of 40. The larger the core team, the greater likelihood a plant will launch at a larger level.

3. After launch, most plants do not grow in leaps and bounds but rather in a modest yearly advance of 5 to 10 percent. Therefore the launch number after the normal post-launch decline (here conservatively estimated at 20 to 25 percent) is key to building future funding design and also to determining which “plant model” your plant will fit best.

4. Funding sources are usually limited, requiring oversight teams to make careful use of the dollars they have year by year, with the objective of plant sustainability. Identifying or constructing a funding model based on the launch experience is wise stewardship.

5. The tested giving equation used in the following models is as follows: $10 per worship attendee per week in year one, $12 in year two, $15 in year three, $18 in year four, $20 in year five. Plant models with more mature givers or other giving projections based on region may yield different results.

Finally, churches that launch approximating the 100 Model are likely to require their pastor be bivocational, meaning the pastor is more likely to face greater financial challenges as he or she seeks adequate employment, leading many experts in church multiplication to consider the model unsustainable.
100 Model

Use this model for a church plant that starts with worship attendance of around 100 people.

Worship, Giving, and Groups

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<th>Age of plant</th>
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140 Model

Use this model for a church plant that starts with worship attendance of around 140 people.

Worship, Giving and Groups

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Income:

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<td>$30,500</td>
<td>$131,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$351,000</td>
<td>$55,900</td>
<td>$47,000</td>
<td>$130,000</td>
<td>$583,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
180 Model

Use this model for a church plant that starts with worship attendance of around 180 people.

Worship, Giving and Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of plant</th>
<th>Core group</th>
<th>Worship</th>
<th>Monthly giving</th>
<th>Yearly giving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One month</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>185+</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One year</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>$78,000</td>
<td>$99,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>$6,500</td>
<td>$78,000</td>
<td>$132,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>$8,320</td>
<td>$99,840</td>
<td>$168,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>$11,050</td>
<td>$132,600</td>
<td>$168,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>$14,040</td>
<td>$168,480</td>
<td>$168,480</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Income:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>RCA grant</th>
<th>Partner/Parent grant</th>
<th>Classis grant</th>
<th>Planter fund development</th>
<th>Offerings</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$7,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$23,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$78,000</td>
<td>$128,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$17,000</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>$99,800</td>
<td>$139,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$10,500</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$132,600</td>
<td>$153,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$168,500</td>
<td>$168,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
<td>$105,500</td>
<td>$18,000</td>
<td>$498,900</td>
<td>$704,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expense:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lead planter</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$74,000</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>$7,000</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
<td>$128,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$78,000</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
<td>$7,500</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>$139,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$81,000</td>
<td>$17,500</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$46,500</td>
<td>$153,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$86,000</td>
<td>$21,000</td>
<td>$8,500</td>
<td>$53,500</td>
<td>$168,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$379,000</td>
<td>$69,000</td>
<td>$51,000</td>
<td>$204,000</td>
<td>$703,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
225 Model

Use this model for a church plant that starts with worship attendance of around 225 people.

### Worship, Giving and Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of plant</th>
<th>Core group</th>
<th>Worship</th>
<th>Monthly giving</th>
<th>Yearly giving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One month</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>240+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One year</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>$8,233</td>
<td>$98,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>$10,400</td>
<td>$124,800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>$13,975</td>
<td>$167,700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>$17,550</td>
<td>$210,600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Income:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>RCA grant</th>
<th>Partner/Parent grant</th>
<th>Classis grant</th>
<th>Planter fund development</th>
<th>Offerings</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$7,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$21,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$98,000</td>
<td>$151,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$20,500</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>$124,800</td>
<td>$168,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$167,700</td>
<td>$187,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$210,600</td>
<td>$210,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
<td>$106,500</td>
<td>$18,000</td>
<td>$621,900</td>
<td>$833,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Expense:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lead planter</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$76,600</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>$151,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$80,500</td>
<td>$32,000</td>
<td>$9,500</td>
<td>$46,000</td>
<td>$168,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$84,500</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$52,900</td>
<td>$187,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$88,800</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$11,000</td>
<td>$60,800</td>
<td>$210,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$390,400</td>
<td>$153,000</td>
<td>$59,500</td>
<td>$229,500</td>
<td>$832,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Organization of a new church represents a spiritual step. It is evidence of God’s work in the lives of those the plant has reached through its ministry. This is something to celebrate. How do you know if your plant is ready to organize? The “three self” principle is a good place to start.

The “three self” principle: Sustainability of a ministry requires that a plant be able to self-govern, self-support, and self-multiply its ministry. Self-government refers to the presence of people who can fill the offices of elder and deacon according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Self-supporting refers to the ability of the ministry to meet its financial obligations from the giving of the congregation alone. Self-multiplying refers to the church’s capacity to begin parenting ministries of its own, ministries that share the Reformed values to which the plant is committed. When a congregation can show it is self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, it is potentially ready to organize.

Before organizing, a church plant should also…

Complete an oversight team transition. This should have taken place over the months and years preceding organization so that the external members (parent church leader, classis representative, denominational or other wise counsel) have steadily been replaced by internal individuals who have the qualifications of elder or deacon. At organization, the team should be almost entirely made up of congregational leaders who now accept the role and title of elder or deacon.

Develop articles of incorporation and bylaws: This is a legal requirement of an organized ministry. Articles of incorporation are generally already in place, having been established during the opening months of the plant. Bylaws are required so that the ministry can formalize the process of decision-making within the body of believers and by a consistory made up of the local new church members. The classis should have an opportunity to offer input on the bylaws and must accept the bylaws proposed. There are bylaw templates that can help with the development of the document, though they should be carefully reviewed and accepted by the team. Examples of bylaws are available on the RCA Church Multiplication website. A sample set is also found at the conclusion of this handbook.

Process of organization

1. Make a request to the classis to become organized.
2. If you haven’t already done so, write and file articles of incorporation. (See sample at end of this handbook.)
3. If you haven’t already done so, attain an Employee Identification Number, which is the organizational equivalent of a Social Security Number.
4. Internal accounting procedures should be in place; the plant should no longer depend on a parent church to provide these services.
5. Adopt bylaws. The bylaws should be concise, containing only the necessary elements. A separate document of policies should be developed that can be more fluid and easily adaptable. The bylaws must be reviewed by the classis, which is responsible for approving the election process. (See sample at end of this handbook.)
6. Elect elders and deacons according to the process determined in the bylaws. Stagger the terms of those first elected to office to avoid a complete turnover at the end of the first term. The Book of Church Order says: “The first elders and deacons of a newly organized church shall determine by lot, at the first meeting of the consistory following upon their installation, who of their number shall serve for one year, two years, and three or more years” (1.II.7.11b).
7. Schedule an organization service. This is a classic service so it should be planned in close cooperation with the classis. Representatives of the classis should be present to preside over the formal steps of organization. During this service the newly elected elders and deacons should be ordained and installed and the pastor should be installed. The brief history of the new church is commonly celebrated with stories and pictures.

8. Function according to the bylaws.

9. The clerk of classis will notify the denomination of the church's organization and pastor's installation. The congregation will be recognized at the next gathering of the General Synod.

**Benefits of organization**

1. Organization protects a congregation from becoming isolated from the greater church. It formalizes ties of relationship and accountability.
2. Organization is a step of faith that God will provide for the new church.
3. An unhealthy dependence develops if growth and organization are delayed. Most plants should be able to organize within three to seven years.
4. An organized church has more influence at all levels of the denominational system. Elder delegates are able to shape decisions at classis, regional, and national levels.
5. Elected leaders are empowered. Once organized, leaders are ordained to the offices of elder and deacon. These are spiritual experiences when the church recognizes and celebrates the Holy Spirit's gifting in their lives.
6. Having elected, ordained leaders in place provides stability for the church when the founding pastor leaves.
7. Rotation of leadership is established. Bylaws require a regular turnover of leaders, which enhances ongoing leadership development and prevents leadership stagnation.

**Results of organization**

1. The new church will be eligible to send elder delegates to meetings of classis and to be included in the rotation of delegates to regional synod gatherings and General Synod.
2. Assessments from the General Synod, the regional synod, and the classis will begin on the second year following organization. Rates of assessment will begin at 20 percent of the full assessment the first year and increase by an additional 20 percent each successive year until 100 percent is reached in the fifth year.
**Sample Pre-Launch Benchmarks\(^1\) for Church Planting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Contacts</th>
<th>New Contacts (Total)</th>
<th>New Prayer Commitments (Total)</th>
<th>New Prayer Commitments</th>
<th>Prayer Communication</th>
<th>Team Meetings</th>
<th>Giving (Per Month)</th>
<th>New Leaders</th>
<th>Other Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$240</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Total 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$480</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(Total 35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$720</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(Total 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>3 new adult individual core commitments(^2)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 small group launched(^3)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$240</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Total 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving $240 per month(^4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>5 new adult individual core commitments (Total: 8)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 new leader identified and engaged in discipleship (Total: 2)</td>
<td>Giving $640 per month</td>
<td>(\text{1,200})</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>7 new adult individual core commitments (Total: 15)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 new leader identified and engaged in discipleship (Total: 3)</td>
<td>Giving $1,200 per month</td>
<td>(\text{2,560})</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>8 new adult individual core commitments (Total: 23)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1 new small group launched (Total: 2)</td>
<td>(\text{1,200})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td>9 new adult individual core commitments (Total: 32)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 new leaders identified and engaged in discipleship (Total: 7)</td>
<td>Giving $2,560 per month</td>
<td>(\text{2,560})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Your benchmarks should reflect input from all parties and the unique features of the plant.

\(^2\)Core commitments are adults who sign a commitment form indicating they will pray, serve, connect (small group), and give to the plant.

\(^3\)Small groups meet weekly during the pre-launch phase for worship, study, prayer, and social time.

\(^4\)Giving metrics are based on $20 per week per core group adult. Alternately, project giving by estimating $120 per month per person with a job at the plant.

\(^5\)Leadership discipleship pertains to individuals the planter strategically disciples to develop their potential to disciple others as small group leaders or other ministry point people.
Month 9  50 new contacts (total: 1,100)
10 new adult individual core commitments (total: 42)
2 new leaders identified and engaged in discipleship (total: 9)
1 new small group launched (total: 3)
1 preview service (total: 2)
Giving $3,360 per month

Month 10  50 new contacts (total: 1,150)
10 new adult individual core commitments (total: 52)
3 new leaders identified and engaged in discipleship (total: 12)
2 new small groups launched (total: 5)
2 preview services (total: 4)
Giving $4,160 per month

Month 11  50 new contacts (total: 1,200)
5 new adult core commitments (total: 57)
5 new leaders identified and engaged in discipleship (total: 17)
1 new small group launched (total: 6)
2 preview services (total: 6)
Giving $4,560 per month

Month 12  Launch regular public worship with a goal of 150 in attendance
1,200 total contacts
57 total adult core group commitments
5 total small groups
17 individuals engaged in leadership discipleship
6 total preview services
Sample Planter/Parent/Partner Covenant

“…so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.” —John 4:36

I. Commitments of the parent congregation to the planting project

a. We will support this effort with prayer and advocacy by: ____________________________________________________________

b. We will keep communication open and healthy by: ________________________________________________________________

c. We will commit these resources: ________________________________________________________________

III. Commitments of other partners _________________________________ to the planting project

a. We commit to support this mission with prayer and advocacy by: ____________________________________________________

b. We will keep communication open and healthy by: ______________________________________________________________

c. We commit these resources: ________________________________________________________________

II. Commitments of the planter to the planting project

a. I will keep communication open and healthy by: ________________________________________________________________

b. I will be accountable by: ________________________________________________________________

c. I will honor the support of my partners by: ________________________________________________________________

d. Other commitments/expectations: ________________________________________________________________

III. Commitments of other partners _________________________________ to the planting project

a. We commit to support this mission with prayer and advocacy by: ____________________________________________________

b. We will keep communication open and healthy by: ______________________________________________________________

c. We commit these resources: ________________________________________________________________
d. Other commitments/expectations: _____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

IV. Shared commitments in decision-making relative to:

a. The primary objective, target, and purpose of the plant:
   As partners and planter we commit together to maintain the original intent and purpose of this plant, unless we agree otherwise.

b. The fiscal sustainability of the new church plant:
   As partners and planter we commit to a financial plan and budget that is appropriate and agreeable to all parties.

c. Leadership performance evaluation:
   As partners we agree to clear performance measurements and to monthly/quarterly assessment of the success or future viability of the plant.

d. We agree to meet monthly to review progress and our shared commitments.

e. Other _____________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________

Signatures of parent and partner leadership:

Parent _____________________________ Date ____________
Parent _____________________________ Date ____________
Parent _____________________________ Date ____________
Parent _____________________________ Date ____________
Parent _____________________________ Date ____________
Sample Monthly Oversight Team Report

MONTHLY OVERSIGHT TEAM REPORT FOR _______________________________________________

Date ______________________________

I. Benchmark updates:

1. New contacts: _____________________

2. Core group adult development
   Members at start of month: __________
   Members at end of month: ___________

3. Average service attendance: ________

4. Small group development
   Groups at start of month: ____________
   Groups at end of month: _____________

5. Total monthly giving: $ _____________

6. New leaders recruited: _______________

7. Leaders you are discipling or coaching: _______________

II. Plant progress/celebrations/challenges/opportunities:

III. Have you met with your coach? What are your current action plans?

IV. Financial update:

V. Personal and staffing update:

VI. How can the team support and pray for you?
Sample Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws

Articles of Incorporation of [Name of Church]

This sample is provided for instructional and informational purposes only, and should not be used (in whole or in part) without first consulting with an attorney.

One: The name of the corporation is [insert name of church], Inc., a [non-profit religious] corporation.

Two: (a) This corporation is a religious corporation and is not organized for the private gain of any person. It is organized under the [Nonprofit Religious Corporation Law] of the State of [insert citation to applicable statute] exclusively for religious purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code of 1954 or the corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue Law (the “Code”).

(b) The specific and primary purpose of this corporation is to establish, operate and maintain, in the City of [insert city], County of [insert county], State/Province of [insert state/province], a church for religious purposes in order to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. This corporation is and at all times shall be a “local church” as such term is defined in the Reformed Church in America Book of Church Order (as the same may be amended from time to time). Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained anywhere in these articles of incorporation, this corporation is a member church in the Reformed Church in America; is (and at all times shall be) subject to and governed in accordance with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America; and agrees that the provisions of this Article Two (b) shall not be amended or modified in any manner without the prior written consent of the Classis of which this church is a member.

(c) In furtherance of the foregoing purpose, this corporation may, among other things, preach, teach, and proclaim religion in accordance with the doctrinal standards and liturgy of the Reformed Church in America; conduct and maintain meetings for worship, study, and instruction in the Word of God; print, publish, and circulate tracts, leaflets, religious periodicals, and books; support mission personnel and ministers of the gospel, both at home and abroad; raise and disburse funds for religious purposes; cooperate with other religious bodies in advancing the Word of God on earth; purchase, own, hold, lease, and acquire, either by gift, grant, bequest, devise, or otherwise, all kinds of property for religious purposes or to the extent as may be permitted and allowed under the laws of the State/Province of [insert state/province]; and do all other things in connection therewith as may be convenient or necessary to carry on the work of God on earth. In no event whatsoever shall this corporation, except to an insubstantial degree, engage in any activities or exercise any powers that are not in furtherance of the primary purpose of this corporation.

(d) Notwithstanding any other provision of these articles of incorporation, this corporation shall not carry on any activities not permitted to be carried on (i) by a corporation exempt from federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Code or (ii) by a corporation contributions to which are tax deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Code.

Three: The principal office for the transaction of business of this corporation shall be located in the County of [insert county], State/Province of [insert state/province]. The name and address of the corporation's initial agent for service of process in this state is [insert address].

Four: The existence of the corporation [shall be perpetual/is limited to ___ years].

Five: The number of directors of this corporation shall be as established from time to time in the bylaws, but in no event shall be less than three. Until otherwise established in the bylaws, the
number of directors of this corporation shall be three. The names and addresses of the persons appointed to act as the initial directors of this corporation, until the selection of their successors, are as follows:

[Name]
[Street address]
[City, state/province, and zip/postal code]

[Name]
[Street address]
[City, state/province, and zip/postal code]

[Name]
[Street address]
[City, state/province, and zip/postal code]

Six: (a) No substantial part of the activities of this corporation shall consist of carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation, and this corporation shall not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distribution of statements) any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.

(b) The property, assets, profits, and net income of this corporation are dedicated irrevocably to religious purposes, and no part of the assets, profits, or net income of this corporation shall ever inure to the benefit of any director, trustee, officer, or member thereof or to the benefit of any private individual.

(c) Upon the dissolution and winding up of this corporation, after paying or adequately providing for the debts and obligations of this corporation, the remaining assets of this corporation shall be distributed to and shall become vested in the Classis of the Reformed Church in America of which this corporation is a member, so long as such classis is a non-profit corporation organized and operated exclusively for charitable and religious purposes and has established its tax exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Code. If such Classis is not a non-profit corporation organized and operated exclusively for charitable and religious purposes or has not established its tax exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Code, then the remaining assets of this corporation instead shall be distributed to and shall become vested in such other Classis or Classes of the Reformed Church in America as may be designated in writing by the highest assembly of the Reformed Church in America (which, as of the date upon which these articles of incorporation are adopted, is the General Synod).

Seven: [Insert here any other provisions that are (a) mandated by applicable state law, or (b) permitted by applicable state law and considered useful to the church. Consult your attorney for details.]

The undersigned incorporators declare that they are the persons who have executed these Articles of Incorporation and hereby declare that this instrument is the act and deed of the undersigned.

Executed on _____________, 20 ___ at _______________________.

[typed name of signer], Incorporator

[typed name of signer], Incorporator

[typed name of signer], Incorporator

[If required under applicable law, notarize the signatures.]
Creating Bylaws for Your Church

According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, the word bylaw has probable roots in the Old Norse word bylog, which meant town or village law. Since the word entered the English language in the 14th century, its meaning hasn’t changed much. Today, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a bylaw as a “a rule adopted by an organization chiefly for the government of its members and the regulation of its affairs.” Whether bylaws are rules adopted by a village, a business, or a church, they still represent a structure under which we agree to live together.

Are bylaws really necessary?

Some wonder why, on top of the organizational guidance offered by articles of incorporation and the RCA Book of Church Order (BCO), local churches need bylaws. We have found that it is helpful to the ongoing life of the church to have a written record of the customs and practices that govern the life of the church. Bylaws can provide that record. At minimum, the BCO requires that every church have a written bylaw or rule of order selecting a classis-approved method for the nomination and election of elders and deacons (1.I.2.14).

How are bylaws helpful?

Imagine that you’re gathered at a table with friends or family for game night, and the group decides to play a card game. When the dealer gives each player six cards, you’re confused. You’ve always played this game with a hand of eight cards. You point this out to the rest of the table and are told, “We always play with six cards here.” Different houses often have different rules for the same game. When we know the local rules, we can adjust the way we play. We just want to be assured that everyone is playing by the same rules.

Bylaws are a way for your church to state “the way the game is played here.” They provide the ground rules for local decisions about the operation of the organization. Who has voting rights? When are meetings held? How does one become an officer? How long can one hold an office? Who has authority to make a decision, spend money, or reserve a room? Bylaws tell people what they can expect within the organization and how to get things done, while respecting the rights of others within the group.

Your bylaws are an educational tool for new members and leaders. They explain how the church embodies its vision to achieve its mission. They help new elders and deacons understand their role and the boundaries of their authority. They hold all church leaders accountable for the authority that has been given to them by those whom they serve.

Bylaws also serve as an institutional memory, particularly during times of transition. They provide the stability and structure a church needs to continue operating as its leaders, its members, and its context change.

Elements of bylaws

The exact elements of your bylaws will depend on the needs of your church. However, most bylaw documents share certain features. Below are the names of the most common articles within bylaws. Articles are commonly identified with Roman numerals. Sub-sections of articles are identified with Arabic numerals.

- Preamble
- Name (must be consistent with the articles of incorporation filed with the state)
- Purpose (may be omitted if contained in the articles of incorporation but shouldn’t conflict with the articles of incorporation)
- Membership
- Meeting
- Fiscal year
- Elections
Writing the script

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you begin to craft your bylaws:

- **Process matters.** The process by which this document is created is as important as the final product. Get your congregation involved in the process; seek their input and advice. Don’t simply adopt a set of bylaws from another organization; craft bylaws to serve your church specifically.

- **Be clear and concise.** Don’t include more detail than is needed to express how something should be done. Write in complete and easy-to-understand sentences.

- **Robert’s Rules of Order advice:** You don’t need to state the obvious (i.e. a consistory can appoint committees).

- **Get an outside opinion.** Ask someone like your classis or regional synod clerk to review your draft of the bylaws. A knowledgeable person from outside of your church may see errors and oversights you would otherwise miss and can sincerely affirm good work.

Use the definitions and examples below to help you describe in your bylaws the way your church functions and what it strives to do.

**Preamble.** Establishes a hierarchy of supervision documents within the lines of which the bylaws are written and to which the bylaws are subject.

**Example:** This church is a member church in the Reformed Church in America and is subject to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, including its *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. Furthermore, these bylaws may not supersede the articles of incorporation or the laws of this state. If there is any inconsistency between these bylaws and those documents, the documents shall take precedence.

**Article I. Name.** What is the official name of the church, as stated in the articles of incorporation? By what other names is the church known that will or could be used to identify the church?

**Example:** The name of this church is Iglesia Alas de Águila, translated in English as Eagle’s Wings Church. This church, a member church of the Reformed Church in America, is subject to and governed by the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, as well as these bylaws.

**Article II. Purpose.** Why does this church exist? What is its mission and vision? The purpose should be stated as succinctly as possible. Note what is already written in the articles of incorporation and align the bylaw statement with it. Also see the preamble of the *BCO*, which addresses the purpose of a church.

**Example:** The purpose of the congregation is to:

- worship God
- proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ
- bring people to an understanding of a new life as a disciple of Jesus Christ
- serve the Spanish-speaking community by providing opportunities for multicultural relationships to flourish and honor God

Called by God and led by the Holy Spirit, with the guidance of the leadership of the church and the helping hands of missional partners, we strive to fulfill our purpose by:

- growing personally in our faith and relationship with God
- growing spiritually and intellectually with one another in our relationships
- being an asset in our community by showing the love of God through education of individuals and families
- promoting and engaging in local and worldwide missions

**Article III. Membership.** How does someone become a member of this church? What are the various forms of membership in this church? How is membership maintained in the church? What are the privileges of
membership? How can one discontinue membership in the church?

**Examples:**
**Church A**
**Article I – Membership**

Section A: Membership in the Calvary Reformed Church, Reformed Church in America, shall be granted by the board of elders. The categories of membership are confessing, inactive, and baptized, as defined in the BCO.

Section B: Confessing members have voting privileges at congregational meetings and are eligible to hold the office of elder and/or deacon. Inactive members and baptized members have the privilege of the floor at congregational meeting and are not eligible to hold office.

**Church B**

Section A: This church is “the body of Christ” and therefore encourages membership as a sign of belonging to the body of Christ. Membership in [name of church] includes “confessing” members, “baptized” members, and “inactive” members.

1) Membership is granted by action of the board of elders. A record of all the members of the church shall be maintained by the board of elders.
   a. **Confessing members** are members who have received Christian baptism and have been received by the board of elders through profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or presentation of a satisfactory certificate of transfer of membership from another Christian church, and who continue an active relationship with this congregation.
   b. **Baptized members** are members who have received Christian baptism, but have yet to be received by the board of elders as confessing members.
   c. **Inactive members** are former confessing or baptized members who have ceased an active relationship with this church. An inactive member is placed on the inactive registry by action of the board of elders.

2) The board of elders may also acknowledge persons who contribute to the life of this congregation.
   a. Associate members are persons who participate in the life of this church part of the year but have a primary membership in another church.
   b. Friends of the church are persons who are not members, but are persons who participate in the life of this congregation. Another name for this set of the congregation is adherents.

**Article IV. Congregation meetings.** When is a meeting of the membership held? How are members informed of the meeting? Who can participate in the meeting and in what way?

**Examples:**
**Church A**
The congregation meeting shall be held each June at a date determined by the consistory. Notice of the meeting shall be provided a minimum of two Sundays prior to the date of the meeting.

**Church B**
The annual meeting of the congregation shall be held on the Sunday preceding Thanksgiving.

1) The date of the meeting must be published to the congregation at least three weeks prior to the meeting. The agenda for the meeting shall be distributed or posted at least one week prior to the meeting. Any confessing member who desires to have an item on the agenda must submit the item and the reason(s) to the clerk at least two weeks prior to the announced meeting date.

2) Special meetings of the congregation may be called by a majority vote of the consistory. At least fourteen days’ notice shall be given prior to the date of the special meeting. The announcement shall include the purpose of the meeting.

3) Voting privileges are granted to confessing members. Inactive members and baptized members have the privilege of the floor at all congregation meetings (not voting privileges). Only confessing members are eligible to hold office.

4) Absentee ballots are not allowed, unless the consistory has included the allowance of absentee ballots in the meeting announcement. Absentee ballots may only be counted on the first ballot cast for the issue.

**Article V. Fiscal year.** When does a new year begin in this congregation? When do new consistory members begin to hold office?
When does a new financial year begin and end?

**Examples:**

**Church A**

The fiscal year shall begin on July 1 and end on June 30.

**Church B**

The fiscal year shall coincide with the calendar year. The consistory shall be installed on the first Sunday after New Year's Day.

**Article VI. Elections.** The only authority given to the congregation in the *BCO* is the election of its elders and deacons. This fundamental right is so protected that a church cannot change its usual practice for election without securing the permission of the classis, as well as classis approval of the bylaw change. The *BCO* specifies that elders and deacons be elected for a term not to exceed five years. The *BCO* also says that consistory members should be at least 21 years old, but someone as young as 18 years old can serve on the consistory at the discretion of the church (1.I.2.14a).

**Examples:**

**Church A**

Section A: Qualifications - All confessing members of the church that are age 21 or older are eligible to be elected as elders or deacons.

Section B: The consistory shall nominate persons to serve as elders and deacons from the confessing members of the congregation. The consistory presents a slate to the congregation to elect as elders and deacons in June of each year.

Section C: When a vacancy is to be filled, a person may be elected and installed to serve the remainder of the unexpired term, or the consistory may appoint and install a member of the great consistory to the same office of his or her previous service until the next election of elders and deacons.

Section D: The names of the persons elected as elders and deacons shall be made known to the church on three successive Sundays preceding their installation on the fourth Sunday of July, in order that any legitimate objections may be presented to the board of elders for its judgment.

**Church B**

**Election of Officers - Elders and Deacons**

1. The elders and deacons shall be chosen from the confessing members of the church who are at least twenty-one (21) years of age.
2. No person shall be eligible to hold the office of elder or deacon, unless they have been a member of the congregation for one (1) year at the date of election.
3. The following are not eligible to serve on the consistory: the church staff, excluding any installed minister(s) serving under call.
4. The offices of elder and deacon shall be filled on a rotating basis with staggered terms, in which an individual elder or deacon shall be elected and shall serve for three (3) consecutive years, and then be ineligible for election to the consistory for two (2) years.
5. It shall be the duty of the consistory to prepare a slate of nominees for the offices of elder and deacon. The slate shall be based upon a nominating ballot of the congregation secured at the outset of the selection process. The slate will recommend one nominee for each vacancy. The slate will then be presented to the congregation at its annual business meeting. The slate of nominees shall be published for two (2) consecutive weeks prior to the congregational meeting, if possible.
6. The congregation shall vote by secret ballot.
   i. Absentee ballots may be obtained from the elders prior to the congregational meeting and must be filed with the clerk, in a sealed envelope, prior to the opening of the meeting. Absentee ballots will be counted on the first ballot only.
   ii. Election shall be declared when the nominees are confirmed by the majority vote of the congregation.
   iii. The ordination and installation of newly elected elders and deacons shall be made on a Sunday as soon as practical following the election.
7. If an office of elder or deacon is vacated before the end of the term, the consistory shall select a person to fill the vacated office for the remainder of the unexpired term. If the office-bearer is serving for two (2) years or less, the office-bearer shall be eligible to be elected by the congregation for a regular three (3) year term.
8. The newly elected elders and deacons assume their respective offices on
September 1. The formal installation of the consistory shall be held on the second Sunday of September.

Article VII. The governing board/consistory. Describe the governing board of the church: its size, its composition, its regular meeting time, its responsibilities, and the limits of its authority. The consistory is the most important group in the church. The church cannot be organized until it has a consistory in place so it can be self-governing. The BCO notes, “The consistory shall be guided in its transaction of business by such rules of order as it shall adopt from time to time, and which are in accord with the Government of the Reformed Church in America” (1.I.4.1). See Chapter One, Part One of the BCO for more information about the consistory.

Examples:
Church A
A) The consistory: The consistory is the governing body of this church. A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through its committees. The consistory shall act in all matters calling for judgment and decision, which are not specifically assigned to the board of elders or to the board of deacons. Its members are the installed pastors and the elders and deacons currently installed in office. 
B) The consistory shall meet on the even-numbered months of the year. The day of meeting shall be set at the first meeting of the new fiscal year.

Church B
A) The Consistory
Section A: CONSISTORY
The church shall be governed by the church consistory and shall consist of six (6) governing elders, six (6) pastoral elders and six (6) deacons elected from the confessing membership.
Section B: TERM
The term of service of the elected members shall be three years. A governing elder is eligible to serve a second consecutive three-year term. A consistory member concluding a term of service is not eligible to be elected unless that consistory member has been out of office for at least two years.
Section C: ELIGIBILITY
Each nominee must:
• be a confessing member,
• be eighteen years of age or older,
• live in the Holland area,
• not be paid staff, and
• not be a member of the household of a full-time salaried staff member or consistory member.
Section D: The consistory normally meets every other month. The consistory shall determine its meeting schedule at the first meeting following the congregation meeting. The meeting schedule shall be announced to the congregation.

B) The Board of Elders
Section A: The board of elders is composed of the installed elders and the installed ministers. The board shall meet a minimum of four times a year. Normally the board meets every other month. The board shall determine its meeting schedule at the first meeting following the congregational meeting. The meeting schedule shall be announced to the congregation.

Section B: Responsibilities unique to elders
1. Authorize appropriate requests for baptism and make proper arrangements for services of baptism.
2. Approve appropriate applications for membership. Provide for the reception of new members either by confession of faith, re-affirmation of faith, or transfer from other churches. Also approve the transfer of members to other churches.
3. Discipline any member who is in violation of the standards and regulations of the congregation or any of its governing bodies, following the Disciplinary Procedures of the RCA.

C) The Board of Deacons
Section A: The board of deacons is composed of the installed deacons. The board shall meet a minimum of four times a year. Normally the board will meet every other month. The board shall determine its meeting schedule at the first meeting following the congregation meeting. The meeting schedule shall be announced to the congregation.

Section B: Responsibilities unique to deacons
1. Supervise the counting of and accounting for the congregation’s offerings. The board shall establish policies to guide the handling of money and its reporting.
2. Determine the recipients of the congregation’s benevolences and the amount given to the recipients.
3. Determine and supervise the congregation’s mission involvement in the community.

Church C
A) [Name of church] recognizes supervising elders
and shepherding elders. The supervising elders attend to the governance or supervision of the church structure. The shepherding elders focus on the care of the membership.

B) [Name of church] recognizes administrative deacons and outreach deacons. The administrative deacons oversee the collection and distribution of the finances. The outreach deacons focus on the mission of this congregation to the community and globally.

Article VIII. Officers and duties. Provide a general description of the role each officer should play in the consistory. The BCO specifies that “the consistory shall elect one of its ministers serving under call to be president of the consistory who shall preside at all of its meetings except where otherwise provided” (1.I.3.1). The BCO also specifies that the consistory shall elect one of the elders to the office of vice-president and the consistory shall have a clerk (1.I.3.2, 1.I.3.3).

Examples:
Church A
Section A: Pastor - The pastor serves as president of the consistory. The consistory may request that the classis authorize its commissioned pastor to serve as the presiding officer when that person is the lead pastor.
Section B: Vice president - The vice president is selected from the board of elders and approved by the consistory. In the absence of the pastor, the vice president shall assume the responsibilities and duties of the president.
Section C: Clerk - The clerk is elected annually by the consistory from among its members. The clerk is responsible for recording the minutes of regular and special consistory meetings, and sending notices as directed by the consistory.
Section D: Treasurer - The treasurer is elected annually by the consistory but does not have to be a member of the consistory. The treasurer is responsible for paying the financial obligations of the congregation from the funds provided and providing financial reports to the deacons and consistory.
Section E: The “great consistory” is all confessing members who have served on the consistory. The great consistory may be convened by the consistory when matters of special importance relating to the welfare of the church demand consideration. Members of the great consistory have only an advisory voice.

Church B
Section A: The officers of the consistory shall be president, vice president, clerk, and church business administrator. All officers shall be members of consistory.
Section B: The senior pastor shall be the president of the consistory. The vice president and clerk shall be elected from the board of governing elders; the pastoral elders shall elect a clerk; the deacons shall elect a chair of deacons and may appoint a secretary.

Article IX. Committee structure. The BCO says that the consistory may function through committees between sessions. What does the committee structure look like in your church? How is it set forth in your organizational documents? Who can serve on a committee? What is the extent of a committee’s authority? Some bylaws contain a description of each committee and its duties. Other bylaws simply state that committees may be appointed. The church may describe the committees in greater detail in a separate policy manual instead. What would work best for your church?

Example:
Section A: The consistory may appoint such standing and ad hoc committees with such tasks and persons as it deems necessary to serve specific purposes.
Section B: Committee authority, structure, meetings, quorum, and meeting notices will be determined by the written policy of the consistory.


Article XI. Amendment. Bylaws always need a provision to change the document so that it can adapt to fit the church’s changing needs. However, because bylaws are a record of the identity and practices of the congregation,
changes to the bylaws should be deliberate and should be implemented according to the process described in the bylaws.

**Examples:**

**Church A:**
These shall be the bylaws of [name of church] upon their adoption by two-thirds affirmative vote of those present at a duly convened congregational meeting of the church.

**Church B:**
These bylaws may be amended at a congregation meeting by recommendation of the consistory. The consistory shall provide notification of the proposed change(s) no later than when notification of the congregation meeting is given. An amendment is approved when at least two-thirds of the members present have voted in favor of the amendment.

**Church C:**
These rules of order may be amended at any consistory meeting provided that two-thirds of the members present vote in favor of the proposed amendment, and that the proposed change had been approved (by majority vote) at a prior consistory meeting.
Additional Articles

1) Consider including additional articles in your bylaws if they will help your church leaders govern consistently and fairly. You may, for example, add an article to your bylaws about finances, the formation and structure of an executive committee, or rules specific to multi-site operations.

2) Your consistory may ask some of its members to supervise administrative or personnel responsibilities. However, if you want to empower that group to act without the approval of the full Church leaders should be familiar with the wording of their state nonprofit corporation law’s treatment of electronic meetings before amending the church’s bylaws to provide for such meetings.

3) Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised recommends that churches that want to hold electronic meetings of boards and committees address the following issues in either their bylaws or standing rules:
   • the type of equipment required for participation in meetings;
   • contingencies for technical difficulties or malfunctions;
   • determination of a quorum;
   • how to raise a point of order challenging the continuing existence of a quorum;
   • how to seek recognition and obtain the floor;
   • how motions are to be submitted in writing;
   • methods for taking and verifying votes;
   • provisions for ensuring that nonmembers do not participate, especially in the case of special meetings in which confidential information will be shared.

Incorporated churches can address electronic meetings in their bylaws only if authorized by the applicable nonprofit corporation statute. In most states, nonprofit corporation laws have been revised in recent years to allow boards to meet electronically.

Lastly, bylaws must be reviewed regularly and kept current. Common wisdom suggests that it is better not to adopt bylaws than it is to adopt them and not actually follow them.

It is now your task to create a living document that connects today’s congregation with the values established in the past, while putting in place the means for future leaders to reshape the document to reflect the evolving needs of the church.
**Additional Resources**

*Church Planting Landmines*, Tom Nebel and Gary Rohrmayer (Saint Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2009).

*Inner Life of the Church Planter*, Gentry McColm (Saint Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2012).

*Planting Fast Growing Churches*, Stephen Grey with Trent Short (Saint Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2007).


*For more information on topics related to the information in this handbook, please contact Ben Ingebretson at beningebretson@gmail.com or Tim Vink at tvink@rca.org.*