



Gospel-Centered Renewal: The Philadelphia Story

by Natalie Hart

Spirit and Truth Fellowship, a church in a primarily Hispanic and African-American low-income community of Philadelphia, Penn., recently lost half its members, most of its deacons, and its praise team.

But this was an occasion for praise, not panic. That's because those who left Spirit and Truth were sent out to form two new Philadelphia church plants, both part of an urban neighborhood that is being transformed by the gospel.

The neighborhood, which includes Puerto Ricans, Koreans, and African-Americans, now boasts seven new Home Missions-supported CRC churches and a house church. These churches are located near a community center, a Christian school, an art program, a legal

department, and a training seminary for urban church planters, all either launched by or closely affiliated with Spirit and Truth.

In the winter of 2012, another corner of the neighborhood is to be occupied by the Esperanza Health Center. The center will work closely with Spirit and Truth and the other nearby ministries.

This holistic, gospel-centered community renewal effort began 37 years ago,

when Manny and Blanca Ortiz and Randy and Sue Baker began ministering together in Chicago. They planted five churches and related ministries. Since planting Spirit and Truth in Philadelphia 23 years ago, Manny and Sue have become co-directors of Home Missions' Philadelphia Initiative for Church Planting.

Spirit and Truth always planned to plant churches, but it wasn't until 1999, when Ortiz and Baker started praying

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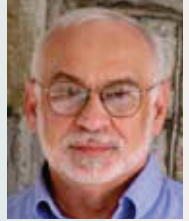
The congregation of By Grace Alone

First, rely on God. Sue Baker describes their ministries as growing organically through prayer, always waiting for the Lord to provide

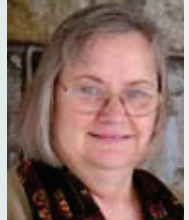
Cluster Helps to Grow Ministries

God is using Home Missions' Philadelphia Initiative for Church Planting to start a growing cluster of CRC ministries.

The Initiative comprises several components. First is the development of a cluster of new CRC church plants that meets every five to six weeks for encouragement, sharing, and prayer. Over the last few months, the church planting strategy has shifted from being initiated by Spirit and Truth to being initiated by this cluster, with the goal of seeing other clusters of two to three churches in close geographic proximity developed throughout the city.



Manny Ortiz



Sue Baker

Another aspect of the Initiative is the coaching and mentoring of all of the church plant pastors and leaders, which is done by Manny Ortiz, Sue Baker, and Drew Angus. Angus is the regional leader for Home Missions' Eastern U.S. Mission Leadership Team.

Finally, a new training institute, the Philadelphia School of Bible and Urban Mission (PSBUM), was established to assist church plants with the development of emerging and indigenous leaders.

reNEW COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

These three words capture the essence of Christian Reformed Home Missions' work with partners in North America:

- reNEW: We serve as a catalyst to start new churches and campus ministries and cultivate renewal in churches that are following the mission of God.
- COMMUNITIES: God calls us to form new communities of faith that engage our context, so that lives and communities are transformed.
- TOGETHER: Community transformation and new ministry happen best when we partner with local churches in a shared commitment to follow God in mission together.

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with some seminarians about church planting, that they started active work.

Every church planted by Spirit and Truth was launched by someone closely connected with the congregation. For example, church members who lived in the nearby Germantown neighborhood met as a small group for two years. They then launched Germantown Hope Community Church in 2002, led by Kyuboem Lee, one of the seminary students who had been in conversation with Ortiz and Baker.

Pastor Allen Drew was a member of Spirit and Truth for several years before God called him to plant Mt. Airy Community Church, which became the fifth church plant in 2009.

The pastor of one of the newest plants, Rob Whitmire of Grace and Peace Fellowship, became a Christian as a teenager at Spirit and Truth.

Most of these ministries reflect their parent: they're small urban churches that are deeply rooted in their neighborhoods. They are "walk-to" churches that reflect the ethnic and class make-up of their respective neighborhoods.

Germantown was started with mostly Caucasian members, but is now as multiethnic as its location. Lee points to the neighborhood potlucks they organized after Sunday evening services for putting them on "neighbor-to-neighbor footing, sitting together as peers with no difference in status."

Four core values shape how Ortiz and Baker enact their vision for urban ministry.

the leaders and the people. Meetings for the Christian school stalled until the spring of 1999 when 20 people, including a prospective principal, attended a meeting; the school opened that September.

Second, receive visionary teaching. As Baker puts it, Manny Ortiz's teaching and preaching flow from a kingdom view of horizontally reaching the neighborhoods. The vision for urban missions is always before the congregation.

Third, keep it rolling. Baker describes the shift in the congregation's perspective after that first church plant as "catching the bug." Those with a passion for urban missions were drawn to them, and others caught the bug while they were there. Robert Wafula was so energized by his involvement with the Germantown plant that he started a church for Africans in Philadelphia.

Fourth, don't run everything. Spirit and Truth supports its church plants financially for a time, and they meet together for prayer and fellowship every six weeks, but each plant has its own leadership and organization.

The congregation of Spirit and Truth is still finding its way after the departure of so many members, but it has confidence. God has provided before. As Baker says, "the more he provides, the more our faith grows." ■



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