

ECO SPOTLIGHT

Foundations of a Flourishing Church

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), Jesus portrays the gospel message as seed spread over varied surfaces—a path, rocky soil, a thorny patch, and good, rich soil. Only the good soil provided the right environment for the plant to thrive and reproduce.

What constitutes good soil for the church? While there are many necessary ingredients, none are as critical as a clear understanding of our identity in Christ and of the authority of the word of God, highlighted in ECO's first three Core Values: Jesus-shaped Identity, Biblical Integrity, and Thoughtful Theology. (eco-pres.org/who-we-are/)

“Jesus and his Gospel are central to everything I believe and why I feel called to serve others in ministry,” says NPC member Liesel Ackley. “ECO confesses the centrality of Christ and Scripture, while also maintaining the educational and intellectual values that have always been important to me, as well as the Reformed tradition.”

In the ECO Information Series (eco-pres.org/resources/eco-information-series/), Synod Executive Dana Allin describes ECO's cultural ethos as “preserve the core, stimulate progress.” The core, he says, upholds a theological understanding of the authority of Scripture, prioritizes being a connectional and covenantal body, and embraces the totality of Jesus' mission, “meeting the tangible needs of people in the world and also being absolutely clear that the way to

On Sunday, October 22, 2017, the Administrative Commission (AC) held an open meeting for the members of the congregation with the stated purpose of providing a forum to ask questions of the AC. The meeting was well attended; about 65 NPC members present. The AC opened with introductions. Some AC members expressed a desire for our congregation to remain a part of the PC(USA) denomination. NPC members shared their hearts about the move and eloquently explained that our church has diligently explored our options, prayed, and that leadership carefully listened to the whole congregation. Member after member expressed support for Session's decision to seek gracious dismissal and provided their reasons for wanting to join ECO. One member wondered if “love for neighbor” would remain central after the move to ECO, and several members responded with the reassurance that the love experienced at NPC was due to Jesus at the core, and that would not change. A few shared deep concerns about NPC remaining in the PC(USA). Questions were raised about the property and timeline for the next steps.

Jesse Garner, chair of the AC, explained that this meeting marked the end of the data collection phase and thanked NPC's members for their honest comments. The next step is for the AC and NPC to work out the specific terms of presbytery's response to our request for dismissal.

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salvation is through Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection for us.”

A Jesus-shaped identity, as defined by ECO, places Jesus at the center of our lives and disciple-making at the core of ministry. “Jesus lived a self-sacrificial, other-centered life, which also becomes our challenge and mandate,” says Elder Diane Chen. Cultivating an identity shaped by Jesus goes beyond receiving his gifts of forgiveness and eternal life to being “transformed and guided by the Holy Spirit who now lives in us,” and following in Christ’s sacrificial footsteps.

A theological understanding of the authority and integrity of Scripture recognizes that the entire Bible “bears witness to the God and Creator of the universe who loves and saves his people and has a plan for the world from eternity to eternity,” she adds. “It is not merely a manual for Christian living...nor should we pick and choose which sections to follow and which to ignore.” Like prayer, “Scripture functions as a means of dialogue between God and us. As we read, embrace, and appropriate the truth of Scripture, we grow deeper in our knowledge of God’s will and ways. This enables us to sense and obey the Spirit’s guidance, and as a result our relationship with God becomes more authentic and even contagious to others around us.”

Consistent with Reformed tradition, ECO also advocates the life of the mind, emphasizing lifelong “thoughtful theology” in its culture and resources. As participants in small group or Wednesday night study at NPC can attest, the life of the mind has an important corporate dimension. “From the newest believer to the most seasoned lifelong follower of Jesus, everyone is on a learning curve,” Diane observes. “When we come together as the body of Christ in the church, and share our gleanings from Scripture or grapple with the challenges of biblical interpretation and application together, we become both teachers and learners, contributors and recipients.”

In addition to encouraging theological education and lifelong learning, ECO prioritizes a coherent theological foundation. While a good deal of this work is ongoing under the auspices of the National Theological Task Force (theology-eco.org), ECO has established a set of Essential Tenets to define its theological core. (eco-pres.org/essential-tenets/) For pastors, elders and deacons in an ECO church, official service requires willingness adhere to these Essential Tenets, while acknowledging that one may have doubts in a particular area. “Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent,” they write in the preface, “we also recognize that when essentials become a matter of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in the common mission and ministry.”

The theological and disciple-making affinities between ECO and NPC, Liesel says, spoke to her own theological values as a pastor and scholar. ECO’s emphasis on bearing a Jesus-shaped identity, maintaining biblical integrity and cultivating thoughtful theology were deeply attractive: “I quickly saw these values at NPC when I first visited several years ago, and I think that’s why NPC so easily felt like home to me. Being part of a denomination that shares our own core values will strengthen and equip NPC to continue to do what we’re already passionate about.”

ECO’s main website, www.eco-pres.org, provides a helpful introduction to the denomination, as well as information about how ECO is organized, foundational documents and resources, and member congregations. Additionally, videos from ECO’s annual national gatherings can be explored at www.econationalgathering.org.

