

# History and Heritage

## The Story of How Midwest Church Extension Came to Be

Midwest Church Extension came into being as a result of the remarkable activity of God. By bringing together three separate and distinct church planting agencies with a diversity of ministry approaches and experience, God has molded them into one a new agency with a unified vision for the future of church planting in the Midwest. As one considers the history and the heritage of the former agencies it is easy to see, in sharp relief, the hand of God in bringing about the birth of Midwest Church Extension.

In the 1950s, each of the three agencies rose up out of their respective IFCA Regionals, being compelled by a vision for spreading the Gospel by establishing IFCA churches. Each agency was blessed with leadership that not only saw the possibilities for the ministry of church planting, but was also able to act on that vision by creating the agencies to actually plant churches.

1952 – Illinois Bible Church Mission (Dr. William McCarrell, Rev. Charles Svoboda and others)

1957 – Wisconsin Church Extension (Rev. Ray Williamson and others)

1957 – Indiana Bible Church Extension (Rev. Franklin Orr and others)

The early history of the Indiana agency is lost to us; but the early histories of the Illinois and Wisconsin agencies are well documented, demonstrating that many churches were planted. The primary method was that of locating believers who desired to leave liberal denominationalism and establish a Bible-based ministry. The agency would provide leadership for either a weeknight Bible class or Sunday services. After a period of development, a pastor would be called, the church graduated from the mission's care, and an independent work continued on. This pattern was fairly typical right on into the 1970s as the primary means of church extension within these agencies.

Starting in the 1970s and moving forward, the “typical” pattern became less typical. The circumstances that led to the establishment of churches became and remained far more varied. Some churches were started as daughter churches; others were begun purely for the sake of doctrinal purity; still others were planted as the result of and in response to irresolvable body life issues within existing churches; and still others were established as pioneer efforts due to the lack of an IFCA church within a given area. This departure from the “typical” pattern and the development of multiplied approaches demonstrates that each of the agencies were quite adaptable in their endeavors to plant churches. While the initial approach often resulted in a new church quite naturally and with a much narrower scope of potential issues, the variety of patterns and motivations behind the establishment of churches today creates a much wider scope of issues that must be dealt with by the agency in order to bring about a healthy church plant.

During these years, the Indiana agency was greatly blessed with the long-term leadership of Rev. Chester Martin. Beginning in the early 1970s as IBCM director, Chester had a “hands-on” style of leadership and not only directed the agency, but also personally planted some of its churches. He completed his work at Lyford, and then eventually moved to the Lafayette area where he established two IFCA works. Being “hands-on” as a leader himself, he drew and then expected church planters to function much the same. Many men were recruited and succeeded under this kind of guidance and support. In 1993, Chester stepped out of the director’s role, and the mission appointed Henry Vosburgh to assume those duties. At the time he was planting Tri-County Bible Church, in Rensselaer, Indiana and thus took the approach of dual ministry himself.

In time however, this approach began to evidence an insufficiency in a number of ways. One of the most serious was the necessity for the director to divide his attention and energies between the work of the agency and the development of the church he pastored. This necessity arose from the fact that financial support from Indiana’s constituency was not strong enough to allow for a director to devote his full attention to the mission. This dual-ministry approach, albeit of necessity, did not permit any serious long-range advancement of the mission. In fact, what often happened was that the demands of ministry at the local level took precedence over the advancement and development of the mission’s ministry. Unless a mission-related demand was so overwhelming that it could not be ignored, the focus of the pastor/director would often, and understandably, fall to that of the church. The ministry of the mission then only advanced when it either “fell into the lap,” or if someone other than the director initiated it. In those times when no field director was active, advancement was minimal – first, with respect to the potential that perhaps could have been realized; and, second, with respect to the administrative matters that would ultimately need attention to move the mission forward in ministry excellence.

In Illinois during these years, the mission was led by a series of directors and interim leaders. From the late 1970s on, the terms of service for directors amounted to an approximate average of two to four years. Looking back on those years, the pattern of aggressive church planting established under the first directors (Svoboda and Berkheiser) seemed to lessen. This was not indicative of the heart or passion of the mission leaders or board members; each of whom manifested a consistent desire for planting churches. It simply must be observed that only consistent and focused leadership is able to generate the kind of positive advancement that one would desire. Several factors were involved in the succession of leaders in Illinois, but a primary factor was the inability to find sufficient support for a full-time director. And yet, successes in church planting were enjoyed in spite of the shortened terms of service. By 1996, however, the Illinois mission was again without a director. It functioned well, maintaining its family of church plants and its loyal supporting constituency; but advancement was not addressed.

In Wisconsin during these years, two leaders manned the helm for church extension. Rev. Clyde Brogan, WCE Director from 1971-1985, moved the mission to adopt a position of equipping the Wisconsin IFCA churches to assume the lead position in church extension. He postured himself as an assistant to churches in the planting of other churches, and saw success in this approach. In the mission’s written history, it is recorded that...

“Under Rev. Brogan’s direction, the mission established Emmaus Bible Church of West Bend (1974). Within two years, Emmaus Bible Church

planted Open Door Bible Church in Port Washington; and in 1987, Open Door Bible Church planted Grace Bible Church in Adell.”

Dr. Paul Thyren assumed the leadership of WCE in 1987, continuing the philosophy established by Clyde Brogan, and developing the assisting ministry of the agency to a point of excellence. The teaching of a theology in planting churches also received due attention in the Regional, and much was accomplished in effecting the health of many Wisconsin IFCA churches. The reception of this ministry is estimated in the Wisconsin’s record of full financial support of the WCE director. Yet when it came to the end result of planted churches, only one project came to fruition in the 1990s in spite of different attempts. For various reasons, the message proclaimed and taught by WCE was no longer motivating the Wisconsin churches to advance themselves into new planting territory.

Against that historical background, God began to prepare the way for a solution to the challenges faced by each agency. In November, 1997, Tri-County Bible Church graduated from Indiana Bible Church Mission, and the agency began to move toward establishing Henry Vosburgh as its full-time director. Subsequently, in early 1998, the Indiana and Illinois agencies came to an agreement to share Vosburgh’s ministry while remaining two separate agencies. This arrangement addressed some key problems:

- It provided a financial base allowing Vosburgh to work full-time in church extension.
- It filled the leadership vacuum in the Illinois agency.
- It created a situation in which the director was able to focus on the work of the missions exclusively and thereby focus on developing the agencies toward a more excellent conduct of ministry.
- It provided the opportunity for personal involvement in starting new works.

The mutual relationship of the IBCMs proved to be very cordial and beneficial with progress being made on both fronts. Under Vosburgh’s leadership as director of both agencies there was considerable fruit. Six new projects were brought to the agencies, two others graduated, and additional serious prospects were on the near horizon.

In spite of that, however, a new set of circumstances became evident with a dampening effect on the forward movement of church planting in Indiana and Illinois. The ability of the agencies to grow and expand their influence and activity was inadequate to keep up with the rate of population growth in the Midwest. The strategy had become one that was far more reactive than proactive. Ministry in the two agencies from the director’s standpoint was more focused on addressing immediate needs rather than on addressing the future with a strategic, visionary approach. With America growing by 7,000 people daily, and an inability to meet that challenge, there was a growing desire to move the ministry of church planting in Illinois and Indiana beyond the reactive mode to a proactive one. That was deemed the key to addressing the spiritual needs in a manner relative to the rate of growth in Midwestern communities.

In addition to this primary concern there were some other questions that were troubling; one of them being what would happen if, in the future, relational difficulties arose in what had to that point been a cordial relationship between the two IBCMs?

Meanwhile in Wisconsin, in the middle of 2001, Director Paul Thyren began to sense the moving of God in his heart to return to the pastorate. The WCE board, knowing of this development in Thyren's ministry, sought the Lord for His direction for the future of the agency. It was originally anticipated that Thyren would make a change sometime in 2003.

Faced with recruiting an agency director in a climate when directors were difficult to find (some CE agencies had gone years without finding directors), the WCE men determined that it was a more feasible solution to approach the Illinois agency about assuming responsibility for church planting in the Wisconsin Regional. In early 2002, representatives of the two agencies met in Lake Zurich, IL to discuss the possibilities. A spirit of harmony and fellowship prevailed over that meeting as the men sought to address the issues. Soon after that meeting, Thyren was called to serve as pastor at Grace Bible Church, in Adell, WI. This greatly accelerated the need for a director for WCE. Illinois responded with a proposal to appoint a field director that would have church planting in Wisconsin as his primary focus. The concept was approved by the Wisconsin agency, and word was put out to its constituency with the purpose of determining the support for such an endeavor. The response was gratifying, but it was deemed insufficient to lead to an appointment.

The WCE Board then arranged to bring Henry Vosburgh to the October 2002 Regional with the assignment of "creating hope" for Church Extension in Wisconsin. Vosburgh was warmly received by the fellowship and their collective interest in church planting was evident. As a result, another proposal was floated offering Vosburgh's services to Wisconsin as a Church Extension Representative. That proposal received the endorsement of all three agencies -- Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin.

This move addressed the immediate problems faced by WCE. It provided a man to "stand in the gap" and help the State keep its focus on church planting. It avoided the difficulty of a loss of interest that might have resulted from a long vacancy in the leadership of WCE. It may likely have prevented WCE from becoming totally inactive. It also provided leadership for any church planting opportunities that might have arisen within the State; there was now someone who could oversee such an effort. Finally, it provided the agency with someone who could represent it in churches for conferences, pulpit supply, and other ministry engagements. On the other hand, the problems outlined for the Indiana and Illinois agencies also became Wisconsin's problems.

In the light of the fast moving developments and in anticipation of the future; but most importantly in response to what they felt was the clear leading and prompting of God, the leadership of each of the three agencies determined that perhaps it was time to consider the prospect of merging together. It was their earnest desire to determine whether God was leading them to accomplish together as one what three apart could not do.

A meeting was scheduled at Tri-County Bible Church, on February 18, 2003, to begin exploring in that direction. Over the ensuing months, things providentially fell into place each step of the way until, on November 15, 2003, the process was officially culminated in an historic meeting at East Hazel Crest Bible Church, in East Hazel Crest, IL. The new Board of Directors was seated on November 25, 2003 and Midwest Church Extension was born.

We look to the future to see how God shall bless this infant agency as it builds upon the many years of history and heritage that He has provided as a foundation. To Him be the glory!