

HOME MISSIONS

ANNOUNCING THE BIRTH OF RESURRECTION OPC

// SEAN GREGG



The members of Apple Valley Presbyterian Church in Neenah, Wis., who form the core group for the Oshkosh congregation

O*shkosh*: for many, the word stirs up images of little children playing in denim overalls. But the session and members of nearby Apple Valley Presbyterian Church in Neenah, Wisconsin, see a mid-sized city of that name with no NAPARC presence. Or, at least, they did. Their daughter, Resurrection Presbyterian Church, is due to be born there in December.

Oshkosh, the eighth-largest city in the state, is southwest of Neenah, twenty-five minutes down newly designated Interstate 41. Unlike some mid-sized Midwestern cities, the economy and population of Oshkosh are stable. The population of about 65,000 has good demographic diversity.

The city grew up around the lumber and paper industries. The famous overalls are no longer made in town, though the company that makes them still has offices there. Fishing and boating are big business, and a local defense contractor was recently awarded a large contract to build vehicles for the military. More than 13,000 students attend the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, and another 10,000 attend Fox Valley Technical College.

New Hope Presbyterian Church in Green Bay planted Apple Valley Presbyterian Church, about forty-five minutes to the southwest, in the early 1990s. Apple Valley is in the middle of Wisconsin's Fox Cities, a group of six cities that run into each other at the northern end of Lake Winnebago. The cities have a combined population of nearly 300,000.

A Solid Core Group

A family from Oshkosh began attending worship at Apple Valley, and they soon brought another family, which brought another family. About two and a half years ago, Pastor John Hartley and the session began praying regularly from the pulpit that the Lord would grant a daughter church to be planted in Oshkosh.

About one year later, one of the Oshkosh families

approached the session, saying that they were ready to be part of the core group. Others quickly followed suit, and soon an evening Bible study was begun in Oshkosh. In February, the search began for an associate pastor, and the congregation voted to call Robert Holda in July.

The core group includes three ruling elders from Apple Valley. One is a former nondenominational minister in Oshkosh who grew in his Reformed convictions, the second is a retired Oshkosh police officer, and the third was employed in the area's paper industry.

About twenty people are committed to the work, and several more have expressed interest. Many who will soon be worshipping in Oshkosh have spent a number of years at Reformed churches. In the core group are retirees, middle-aged couples, young families, and newlyweds.

Apple Valley's session decided to wait for families to approach them about joining the plant, rather than trying to prompt families to leave. While the new plant will be relatively close, it results from a desire to see friends and neighbors in Oshkosh reached for the gospel, rather than to see a split within the Apple Valley congregation. "I love them so much," Hartley said. "I'll miss them, but the whole church recognizes that the Lord led in all of this."

Pastor Holda is leading the group through Ken Golden's book *Presbytopia*, as they consider how to speak to unbelievers about Christ without relying on Reformed vocabulary that won't be easily understood. The group is excited to take on the hard work of planting a church. Holda points out that his family is the newest in the group, and the others already have a history of worshipping and working together at Apple Valley.

Holda's Path to Oshkosh

Robert Holda was ordained on October 21, 2016, completing a long and winding path to the ministry. He was raised by nondenominational parents who left the Roman Catholic church in their twenties. He was a believer, but lacked a robust

theological foundation in his younger years. In his early twenties, he attended a Reformed Baptist church, where he heard the doctrines of grace and the sovereignty of God clearly proclaimed for the first time.

That proclamation brought peace to Holda, who was working on his B.A. in elementary education. After graduating, he taught middle school in Chicagoland for five years. During that time, he attended Grace Community Bible Church in Elgin, Illinois, where David Sunday was the pastor. It was during those years that Holda met Grace McHugh, who was attending the Church of Christian Liberty, which her grandfather, Paul Lindstrom, had founded. Grace's father was an elder in the church, and he took Holda through the Westminster Confession of Faith. While he grew in his understanding of Reformed doctrine, he did not yet feel a call to the ministry.

One and a half years after Bob and Grace married, he began teaching at a private boarding school. A year later, the Holdas began house-parenting positions at a sister campus in Chicago's south suburbs. That was where the Holdas first encountered the OPC. They became members of New Covenant Community Church in Joliet, Illinois, in 2012. By this point, Bob had earned a masters degree in education, and he began to consider whether he was called to use his gifts in an administrative position at a Christian school.

Pastors Bruce Hollister and Alan Strange approached Holda separately and told him that he was gifted for the ministry, and they recommended seminary study. Bob enrolled at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in 2013. Summer internships, one at New Covenant Community Church and a second at Bethel OPC in Oostburg, Wisconsin, helped to confirm a call to pastoral ministry. He was licensed in March and graduated from



Bob and Grace Holda with daughter Ellie

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Pastor Holda leading a Sunday evening Bible study

seminary in May.

Holda was in contact with several churches, including Apple Valley. Still, while he was convinced of his call to pastoral ministry, church planting was not on his radar. "We knew we probably weren't going to be foreign missionaries, but not much beyond that," Holda said. "We spent the summer praying and candidating, and the Lord faithfully led us through the options on the table."

Committed to staying in the OPC, but initially a bit unsure about the nature of church planting, Holda says he was encouraged by one elder who half-jokingly referred to the Oshkosh option as church in a box. While he knows there is much hard work ahead of him, Holda is glad that this is not a parachute drop, and that Pastor Hartley and the overseeing session will be readily accessible.

Looking Ahead

While he knows being the only Reformed church in Oshkosh will come with challenges, Holda and the core group are excited by the opportunity to introduce their neighbors to Reformed theology and see them benefit from it.

Worship is scheduled to begin the first Sunday of December at Christian Community Childcare Center. The building was a church building in the past, and the group will be able to have a sign up on both Saturdays and Sundays. The rental fee includes the ability to set up on Saturday and use the building all day on Sunday. Current plans are to hold worship at 10 a.m., but having the facility all day long enables the congregation to add to their Sunday schedule as time goes by.

Apple Valley and her new daughter are happy to see a Reformed witness in Oshkosh, but they aren't ready to stop there. "We'd love to see OP churches up and down Interstate 41 from Green Bay to Milwaukee," Pastor Hartley said. Holda agrees, and both see Fond du Lac, at the southern tip of Lake Winnebago, as a great place for New Hope Presbyterian Church's great-granddaughter to grow up in the years to come, Lord willing.