

Planting a Church Against the Odds

“It can’t be done.” These words could have easily applied to the planting of Millersville Bible Church (aka MBC) located near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Why? A number of reasons could be given.

1. The original group: Seven remaining members from a Mennonite Church became the first members of MBC. This included the two former pastors and their wives, the former senior pastor’s sister and son, and one other woman. Most would view this as a potentially volatile group for starting a new church.
2. An inadequate facility: Built in 1876, the original building of MBC was very small, had inadequate parking, nursery, and bathrooms; no foyer, no Sunday School rooms, hard wood pews, and no A/C.
3. A young pastor: Steven Cornell (formerly under the name Steve Butts) the founding and present senior pastor was only 24 years old when he began his ministry at MBC.
4. Limited finances: The group could only afford a pastor’s salary of \$130.00 per week (no benefits).

Despite the “odds”, in 1985, Steve Cornell and his wife Becky believed that God wanted them to start a Church in Millersville, Pennsylvania. The strongest attraction was the strategic location of the church within walking distance to all the buildings of Millersville State University.

Although no students attended the church, the Cornells believed that God wanted them to reach the campus for Christ.

The early years of church planting were both exciting and challenging. Establishing a church, starting a family (the Cornells now have four children), and working a “side” job required focus, discipline and determination. Within the second year, 30 community people and at least 50 University students began attending MBC. This did not provide much additional financial resource but the church refused to let that hinder their desire to reach students. By the third year, the church purchased an adjacent apartment building to convert for Sunday School and office use. Toward the end of the fourth year, Pastor Cornell was able to receive a modest full time salary and by the fifth year the church added a full time associate pastor (R. Scott Fisher). Steve and Scott labored diligently to train elders and build a firm biblical foundation for the church’s future.

In the next five years, the church would expand to two services with several classes meeting in other locations. MBC was specially blessed to have Dr. John MacArthur Jr. as its tenth anniversary speaker, an event which drew close to 1000 people. As it became increasingly difficult to maintain growth on our existing site, the elders made three crucial decisions about the future.

1. We cannot sell our existing site to purchase another one.
2. We must pay off the small debt on the Sunday School building (approx. \$40,000.00).
3. We must do our next expansion debt free.

Although we were firmly convinced that these were the right decisions, we felt like we stacked the “odds” against ourselves. Land and building are expensive. Paying the existing debt seemed like a large enough challenge. However, we rested in the realization that God delights in doing what man considers impossible. The God who had provided in the past would provide in the future according to His timing and will.

Entrusting the material and financial needs to God, we strongly believed that He wanted us to tend to the quality of shepherding and ministry. “Ministry before material needs” became a motto for us.

In the next two years, after much prayer and waiting on the Lord, God allowed us to be in a position to reach our goals. During this time we moved Sunday services to a middle school, purchased a bus to transport students and prayed for a permanent site for our growing church of nearly 300 people. After many inquiries about potential sites, the church purchased the Lancaster Youth for Christ building. The facility, located on 30 + acres, is four miles from the town of Millersville.

After completing a \$750,000.00 renovation, MBC moved to its new home and continues to grow. The facilities in the town of Millersville are used for offices and student ministries.

Presently, MBC has four full time pastors, seven part time staff and an annual budget close to \$500,000.00. With 400 attending (including 60-70 university students), the Church must consider going to two services and new building additions. MBC has also sent seven of its own people into full time missionary service (reflecting a primary emphasis of our missions program). Among the seven was former associate pastor, R. Scott Fisher.

Through a monthly column for the Lancaster Sunday News, (circulation over 100,000), a daily and weekend radio program, writing and speaking for Songtime Radio, an international ministry based in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, conducting numerous conferences and seminars (with specialized ministry to pastors), and several books (including Resolving Church Conflicts, and Handling Debatable Matters in the Local Church), Pastor Steve has had considerable opportunity to extend the ministry of MBC beyond its local setting. Locally, Steve has served as a Chaplain for the University men’s football and basketball teams.

MBC has built its ministry on a carefully articulated philosophy. Based on Matthew 28:19-20, we state the following:

Obedience to this final command of Jesus Christ is the mission of Millersville Bible Church. Because of this, disciple-making lies at the heart of everything we do. Accomplishing this challenging task involves a two-fold responsibility. First, we must be careful to employ the means God has provided for building his church, and second, we must seek to understand the attitudes and world-views which prevail in the culture to which God has sent us. At MBC, we focus on the following:

1. Proclamation of the Gospel in an age of Pluralism.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the only source of eternal salvation. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me." This message confronts the pluralistic attitude of our society which declares that all religious beliefs are equally valid. At MBC, we believe that only the Gospel is the "power of God unto salvation for every one who believes." We seek both to proclaim the gospel in our community and train each disciple to effectively communicate it to those with whom they have contact.

2. Teach the Scripture in an age of Relativism.

Jesus prayed: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth." God's revelation to man, His instruction for what we should believe and how we should live, is found in the 66 books of the Bible. Though our society promotes the idea that there is no absolute truth, the Bible declares itself to be the inerrant word of God. The disciple of Christ must not only understand the teachings of the Bible, but obey them as well. At MBC, we strongly emphasize the preaching, teaching, and application of God's Word. The Scripture is our sole authority for life, and cannot be overruled by such things as religious tradition or personal experience.

3. Worshiping God in an age of Materialism.

To worship God is to love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is the foremost command of God. The Bible warns the believers not to put anything "before the Lord God." We cannot, as Jesus taught, "serve two masters." He also said that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses. In an age of materialism, possessions can easily become modern day idols competing for the devotion of our hearts. At MBC, we encourage people to serve God with single hearted devotion – seeking first His kingdom and righteousness. We view all aspects of life as a stewardship for which each of us will give an account to God.

4. Fellowship of Believers in an age of Individualism.

The New Testament clearly teaches that it is God's design for every Christian to be an active and accountable part of a local assembly of believers, willingly serving others. This results in the mutual encouragement and support of all believers in their walk with Jesus Christ. In contrast to this, our society promotes individualism; the attitude which seeks to please self, elevates personal fulfillment, and avoids costly involvement with others. At MBC, we challenge believers to fulfill God's design by meaningfully relating to others in the church. Merely attending the worship

services will not accomplish this; other opportunities for both fellowship and service must be pursued.

5. Godly Leadership in an age of Anti-Authoritarianism.

Like every institution ordained by God, the Church of Jesus Christ has a structure of authority. The Bible reveals that God's design for leadership in the local church consists of a group of godly men called elders. At MBC we follow this pattern, with elders overseeing and guiding the life of the assembly. Though our society today largely rejects authority, the faithful disciple of Christ desires the accountability and security which come from willing submission to those God has placed as leaders in His church.

Today, Millersville Bible church is healthy, united and growing – well positioned for ministry in the 21st century. Several have helped us to come to this point.

Seven Key Emphases for Biblical Churches

Millersville Bible Church

Steven W. Cornell

Senior pastor

1. Emphasis on qualified and strong leadership: 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; Hebrews 13:17.
2. Emphasis on maintaining unity: Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 2:3-5.
3. Emphasis on humility in service: Luke 17:10
4. Emphasis on every member ministry: Ephesians 4:16; Hebrews 3:12-13
5. Emphasis on understanding debatable matters: Romans 14:3
6. Emphasis on commitment: Hebrews 10:23-25
7. Emphasis on evangelism and discipleship: Matthew 28:19-20.