

MEET PTS



CHURCH PLANTER CHARLIE COTHERMAN SERVES SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

Remember Charlie Cotherman '12? We told you about Charlie in our 2012 issue of *celebrations* after he'd been awarded a prestigious fellowship from the University of Virginia for doctoral work in American religious history. Well, he's back! Back with a Ph.D. under his belt and a church plant he pastors in Oil City, Pa. Back with his wife, Aimee '11, and their three children. Back to teach as an adjunct professor at PTS and back to live in postindustrial, small-town, rural Pennsylvania, where Charlie and Aimee were raised.

"I grew up in a youth culture whose mantra was 'Go big or go home,'" Charlie reflects. And Charlie definitely went big by going to UVA to pursue his scholarly calling (one of a triad that for Charlie also includes pastoring and family life). "But something in me had changed when I entered seminary: church planting morphed from an intriguing idea to a real possibility." He started noticing, though, that the church-planting enterprise often focused on large urban areas. What about the millions of people living in America's small towns and rural areas?

"At UVA, Aimee and I began a several-year process of discernment about what we would do following my doctoral program," he recalls. And together they sensed that God was calling them home. Or at least very close to home. "In the summer of 2016, a year before I finished my degree, we loaded up a rented truck and moved with our kids and my half-completed dissertation from the bustling university town of Charlottesville to a small town about 30 minutes from where we grew up—Oil City, Pa.—and planted Oil City Vineyard church—OCV."

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Why Oil City? "In many ways Oil City epitomized the problems of the Rust Belt. After Quaker State Motor Oil moved its corporate headquarters out of town 20 years earlier, the city's infrastructure collapsed. Poverty, declining population, blighted housing, brain drain, and drug abuse abounded. But as real as the problems were—and are!—we then sensed and have now found an amazing amount of promise here," Charlie explains. "Young leaders who are willing to roll up their sleeves and love their town have emerged, and God has opened doors of influence and connection with other churches, town leaders, and local government." Planting a church has also planted hope in a growing number of hearts in Oil City.

As evidence of God's work in this place, Charlie notes that OCV started with eight people in the Cothermans' living room. Today, a year and a half later, they've twice outgrown their meeting space and now accommodate a regular Sunday attendance of more than 100 people at the local YWCA. Their largest gathering came this Christmas—145 people in Oil City worshipped at OCV!

"We serve a God who is on a mission to save the world he created. Praise God! It's not us, the Church, who have a mission in the world; rather, it's the God of mission who has a Church in the world. We get to join him. It's both a privilege and a responsibility. Aimee and I are grateful that we get to be part of God's mission in this corner of his world."

Sound exciting? If you sense the "big call of God to 'small places,'" Charlie and Aimee invite you to join them by following it! You can also learn more about the Seminary's **Master of Divinity with Church Planting Emphasis** or **Graduate Certificate in Church Planting and Revitalization**.

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