

*Has
Mid-America
Reformed
Seminary
Changed its
Course?*

*Church
Controversies
and the
Culture Gap*



Smithers, British Columbia



Dr. C. Van Dam is professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario
cvandam@canrc.org

Has Mid-America Reformed Seminary Changed its Course?

It is important to note the relative lack of attention to God's Word

In May 2007 our brothers at Mid-America Reformed Seminary issued a *Doctrinal Testimony Regarding Recent Errors*. The preface indicates that this extensive document "represents the outcome of careful reflection by Mid-America Reformed Seminary's Faculty and Board upon the present controversies relating to the doctrine of justification and related issues." It further voices the hope that "the testimony will make clear where Mid-America Reformed Seminary's Faculty and Board stand in the context of contemporary discussion."

How do you know whether the promises made to your child are for real or not?

Although this is meant to be a public document, it is a curious fact that at the time of writing this article I could not find a link to this document on the website of the seminary. However, by entering its title in the Google search engine, it came up quickly.

Since Mid-America Reformed Seminary is an important source of ministers for the United Reformed Churches (URCNA) with whom we are seeking organic unity, a document like this has our attention. Although much of what this testimony states has my hearty agreement, the net result of reading it was

disappointment. Within the confines of an article for *Clarion*, I would like to concentrate on only one area to show why this is so. As my example will show, some of the theology defended in this document strikes at the very heart of our own relatively recent struggles for biblical doctrine in the Liberation of 1944. It, therefore, cannot but raise a needless obstacle to our heartfelt desire for unity with our brothers and sisters in the URCNA.

Some general impressions

The document takes a stand against "the theological errors now current, propagated by certain teachings of what has become known as the Federal Vision, by certain teachings of what has become known as the New Perspective on Paul, and by certain teachings of other individuals and theological movements" (p. 6). I find it a pity that while the document attacks a number of positions, nowhere is there any specific indication of who those propounding false teachings are, or where we can find their positions explained. The new perspective on Paul is a vast and variegated field for scholars but at least one can readily find representative books written by them. But coming closer to the Reformed and Presbyterian community, it would have been helpful to know to what material of the Federal Vision this testimony was responding. I raise this issue because some of the views attributed to them seem extreme. Without specific controlling examples the



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Editor: J. Visscher; Copy Manager: Laura Veenendaal
Coeditors: R. Aasman, E. Kampen, Cl. Stam, C. Van Dam

ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER:

Clarion, 57 Oakridge Drive South, St. Albert, AB T8N 7H2
E-Mail: veenendaal@shaw.ca

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
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danger of caricaturing an opponent’s position is real. I am not saying that the *Testimony* does this, but it would have been better to give more background information. For example, it is affirmed that there are those who teach “that each member of the visible church is necessarily savingly united to Jesus Christ and partakes of all the spiritual benefits of Christ’s finished work” (p. 10). In light of Scriptures’ clear admonition against hypocrisy in the church (1 Pet 2:1; cf. Matt 7:21) and the danger of falling away from the faith (Heb 4:1-11), I would not mind knowing where this position is held.

Another general impression is the heavy reliance on confessional statements with very little attention to Scripture itself. The *Testimony* was planned that way, but I for one regret that. I have no difficulty with the Reformed character of the eleven confessions used, but Scripture is to be paramount. It is important to note the relative lack of attention to God’s Word for there are divergences between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity which are never acknowledged in this *Testimony*. One gets the impression that they all teach the same doctrine. This, however, is not so as the Westminster Standards cover more topics and go into far greater detail on many issues than the Three Forms of Unity. One gets the clear impression that in this document the Westminster Standards are the primary confessions used and that they set the tone. One could almost come to the conclusion from the *Testimony* that Mid-America Reformed Seminary has decided to prioritize the Westminster Standards and in effect is disengaging itself from its original and specific Reformed moorings as found in the Three Forms of Unity.

In my view all of this is evident, for example, in the issue of the covenant of grace.

With whom does God make his covenant?

The *Testimony* states that “God made the covenant of grace with Christ as the second Adam and with all

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the elect in him" (p. 10, p. 23, also see p. 18). This is a quotation from the Larger Catechism (Answer 31).

What I miss in this testimony is the teaching of Scripture that the covenant is made with believers and their seed. Did not Peter on the day of Pentecost call his audience to repentance and say, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39)? The Westminster Standards also acknowledge this truth when affirming that the covenant is made with believers and their children. The Larger Catechism states that "infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized" (Answer 166). However, this dual approach (of covenant with the elect and covenant with believers and their seed) is not reflected in the *Testimony*. To insist, as the *Testimony* appears to do, that the covenant is only made with the elect does not agree with Scripture. God's covenant includes believers and their children.

We should never deny or give up the gain of the doctrinal struggles of the past

Also to the children the promises are given. If a child of believing parents rejects the promises, then the curse and not the blessing of the covenant comes on him or her. But their unwillingness to believe does not invalidate the reality or sincerity of the promises given (cf. Canons of Dordt, III/IV.8, 9). Whether in the end they turn out to be unbelievers or not, the covenant is made with them and the accompanying promises are theirs. This is evident from Genesis 17 where the Lord confirmed the covenant with Abraham and its promises and then said: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7). That the same truth applies to the church after the day of Pentecost is evident from the words of Peter just

quoted. This truth is also confessed in the Heidelberg Catechism when it says that "infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults" (Answer 74; also see the Form for the Baptism of Infants).

This issue is not a minor one. By placing the covenant only in the context of election, and by insisting that the promises apply only to the elect, the *Testimony* in effect calls into question the meaning of baptism as a sacrament applied to all children of believing parents. If the promises apply only to the elect, how do you know whether the promises made to your child are for real or not? The *Testimony* aggravates this question and is not helpful when it distinguishes between the visible church which includes the elect and non-elect and the invisible church which includes only the elect (p. 14). I do not find this terminology in Scripture. Scripture says the promise is for the believing parents and their children. Period. There are no further qualifications. The children belong and are included.

Indeed, Scripture teaches that the children of believers are holy (1 Cor 7:14) and are "sanctified in Christ" (Form of Baptism). This expression can be derived from the truth articulated in 1 Corinthians 1:2 where the congregation in Corinth is addressed as "to those sanctified in Christ Jesus." The children form part of the congregation. Along with the adults, they too have been sanctified, that is set apart and dedicated to God. The fact that the children are sanctified in Christ does not mean that they are regenerated or held to be regenerated. However, should a child in the congregation die in its infancy, we need not doubt its salvation, for the promises have been given to it and these promises have not been rejected. These children are holy (1 Cor 7:14; see also Canons of Dordt I.17). In this respect the *Testimony* is only partly correct when it denounces "the teaching that every baptized member of the church is savingly united to Jesus Christ apart from the exercise of repentance and faith" (p. 14). There are instances when an infant has not had an opportunity to repent and believe because of what we consider a premature death. Yet such a baptized child can be considered as a saved child.

Some church history

During the 1940s, under the lingering influence of the late Abraham Kuyper, the concepts of church and covenant were dominated by the doctrine of election. As a result, the type of problems outlined above surfaced in the churches. At one point, a synod of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands meeting in Sneek-Utrecht declared in 1942 that "the seed of the covenant, by virtue of the promise of God, must be held to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ until, upon their growing up, the opposite should become apparent from their conduct or doctrine." This doctrine of presumptive regeneration was forced on the churches and led to the deposition from office of those who did not want to subscribe to this teaching. The eventual result was the Liberation of 1944 and the Reformed Churches Liberated, as well as the Canadian Reformed Churches.¹

Because the synod decision proceeded from the doctrine of election when speaking of the covenant, insecurity and questions about the value of baptism for one's children arose. If the promise is only for the elect, can I be sure that my child has really received the promise and that it applies to him or her too? Such questioning finds no basis in Scripture. The promises are for all those born in the covenant community. Those baptized in turn have the obligation to love and serve the Lord and to honour the covenant he made with them.

For the above reasons it is greatly regrettable that the *Testimony* takes its starting point in election when speaking of the covenant of grace and does not even mention the second biblical emphasis found in the Westminster Standards that the covenant is made with believers and their children. To be sure, the *Testimony* does not teach the doctrine of presumptive regeneration. However, the emphasis of this document in considering covenant only from the vantage point of election sends alarm bells ringing in the minds of those who know their church history.

Is Mid-America changing its course?

Is Mid-America changing its course? Reading through the *Testimony* makes this question come up. I can hardly believe that this is the case and I hope I am incorrect in even raising the question. After all, it was the faculty of Mid-America which produced the

commemorative series of essays on the Reformation of 1834 on the sesquicentennial date of that event. This volume contained a delightful article on the doctrinal significance of the Secession which basically covers much of the same ground about the promises and demands of the covenant as well as the place of children as I have outlined above.²

However, reading through the *Testimony* makes me pessimistic about the future and sad. As Canadian Reformed Churches we should never deny or give up the gain of the doctrinal struggles of the past. The *Testimony* is not balanced in its treatment of the subject of the covenant of grace which we have considered, but narrow, leaving little room for other views or positions which can be biblically defended and which have been honoured in their own past history.

May the Lord bless us as church communities as we continue to seek each other in the unity of the faith and may this latest obstacle not be a permanent one.

¹ See further on this J. Faber, "The Liberation: the Doctrinal Aspect" in C. Van Dam, ed., *The Liberation: Causes and Consequences* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1994) 1-27.

² See N.D. Kloosterman, "The Doctrinal Significance of the Secession of 1834" in P.Y. De Jong and N.D. Kloosterman, eds., *The Reformation of 1834: Essays in commemoration of the Act of Secession and Return* (Orange City: Pluim Publishing, 1984) 35-41.

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Submissions covering special events should be sent to the Copy Manager within two months of the event's date; there is a maximum length of 1000 words. If pictures of the event are available, please submit them (with a recommended digital size of 1200 x 1500 pixels or larger) with the article.

Rev. J.L. van Popta is minister of the Fellowship Canadian Reformed Church at Burlington, Ontario
jvanpopta@sympatico.ca

Church Controversies and the Culture Gap

In the past years there have been ruptures in church life that at a certain level seem completely inexplicable. Congregations that appear to be relatively peaceful are visited by times of turmoil and fractious debates. These difficulties have often been labelled (by those in the conflict) as disputes between the truly Reformed and the liberal members, or as conflicts arising between the truly Reformed and the legalists (depending on whose side you are on!). From the outside, many have said that these conflicts are between liberal and conservative factions in the church.

These disputes might centre on disagreements regarding the way we celebrate Lord's Supper, inter-church relations, worship, liturgy, music, accompaniment, church architecture and design, the role of women, and many other matters in church life. On the whole, the disputes are found in matters of praxis and not in doctrine and ethics. However, these disagreements have sometimes escalated to a level that ultimately created an atmosphere in which one side or the other no longer could happily worship in a united community.

The gap

I propose that there is another way to describe the growing divide we find in our churches. The

conflict is not a dispute between liberals and conservatives. It is not between legalists and "gospelists"! It is not between the truly Reformed and the backsliders or the negativists. When members leave to worship elsewhere, either in other churches or in other Canadian Reformed congregations, it is not a "purging" of bad elements. I propose that this divide is one defined by the rise of postmodernism in the western world and its effect in our church communities. On the one hand, there are those members who are still part of the modern world. Their lives are structured within the modernist worldview. On the other hand, there is a growing segment of members who are truly postmodern.¹ The young people and many of those who were brought up in the 60s and later are more and more postmodern in their outlook. Even some of the older members have shifted their perspectives to a more postmodern one. Their views on worship, religion, spirituality, and faith are structured in a way that is very different from their modernist predecessors and contemporaries.

There is a growing lack of understanding between these groups in our churches because there is a widening cultural gap. Because we are discussing matters of common concern from fundamentally differing

worldviews, we are misunderstanding and not understanding each other. There is a clash of cultures within congregations because (though we may not realize it) these differing worldviews underlie the words and actions of the members.

Modernism

Modernism, as the cultural product of the Enlightenment, has as a fundamental tenet that there are logical and scientific solutions to most problems. These ideas of the Enlightenment have greatly influenced the church of the Lord Jesus Christ: also Reformed churches with a Dutch heritage. Scientific analysis and logical defences became paramount. Even preaching was logically structured according to the rules of rhetoric: a theme and three points. Doctrine was fundamentally important. Good theology was finding biblical proof texts that proved the expressions of the confessions. There were ways "to do things." The sacraments were to be administered "in this way." Preaching was doctrinally focused. Theology was scientific. By the early twentieth century Abraham Kuyper's great encyclopedic method and structure of theology held sway in the Reformed world. "Head knowledge" was considered the most important part of

Reformed life. Faith came through information.

For those church members embedded in a modern world and (unwittingly) holding to a modernist worldview, this method of theology, worship, preaching, and church life functioned very well. The Holy Spirit effectively did regenerate people who were dead in their sins. Preachers and churches successfully presented the gospel of Jesus Christ into a modern western European culture. Churches flourished. Congregations served the Lord. People worshiped. Children were baptized; young people professed their faith; couples married; the dead were buried with Christian funerals. The gospel was preached; the church of the Lord Jesus Christ was gathered; the Holy Spirit did his work, and the Father in heaven was praised for his grace. All this was done by Reformed confessors with a modernist worldview in a modern world.

Remarkably, however, this was done with pre-modern documents. The Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession were written in the 1560s, before the rise of modernism in Western society. They deal with the doctrines of the church in pre-modern ways. They are warm, personal, relational documents (see Lord's Day 1). The Canons of Dort, on the other hand, were the Reformed churches' pre-modern response to the modernist attack of the Arminians. Arminius was a modernist, who wanted to interact with the gospel in a logical, scientific way. The church responded with a pre-modern answer. Though we can see the rise of scholastic analysis in the Canons, there is still room for mystery (e.g. III/IV 12). Modernism had not yet overtaken the fathers at Dort!

Postmodernism

The world today, however, is migrating to a postmodern worldview. This worldview is structured, not on a scientific logical basis, but rather on a basis that accents relationship and experience as fundamental. Science and logic are to serve relationship and experience, not regulate them. Many in our churches are greatly influenced by postmodern thought. In fact, there is a large segment of the church community that is completely embedded in this new culture. They are formed and moulded by it. This is indisputable. This is their culture.

We are discussing matters of common concern from fundamentally differing worldviews

Postmodernism has often been caricaturized as a system of thought where everyone can have his or her own truth. This is not completely correct. It is correct that in the postmodern worldview, truth is not absolute. However, it is not just subjective, "each to his own." Rather, for the postmodern person, truth in this new worldview is one that is formed within communities. Different communities of faith or culture develop various truth claims. The Muslims have the Koran, the Christians have the Bible, the Hindus the Baghadavita. The Jews have the Law and the Prophets and the Writings. Postmodernism holds that in each community there is a valid fundamental truth and reality. This has led to very relativistic people who therefore live as if there were

no absolute truth at all. This is eminently obvious in Canada where we have a federally-sanctioned political program of multi-culturalism. Canada is one of the greatest postmodern experiments in history!

Postmodernist Christ followers accent relationship and experience, within community. This does not mean that they throw doctrine overboard, however. Postmodernists accent the necessity of belonging, of relationship, and of experience. This is a powerful incentive for the church to accent the role of "church" in the lives of postmodern members. Postmodernist young people want to belong to a community where they can experience the communion of saints and where worship is a meaningful authentic experience. The Three Forms of Unity, having come from a pre-modern world, are potent weapons to wage spiritual warfare in a postmodern world. These confessions are not written along modernist worldview lines and structures. They are, instead, written from a viewpoint much closer to the postmodern worldview, accenting personal relationships, belonging, and experience. Moreover, the postmodern church member is much more likely to accept the reality of mystery and unknowable found in the medieval and pre-modern worldview than in that of the logical modernist.

Contextualization

We must not attempt to argue that the modernist worldview is the Christian one and that postmodernism, in contrast, is anti- or un-Christian. That is not the issue. Modernist scientism itself is not at its roots Christian. Neither was the pre-modern medieval worldview fundamentally

Christian. Postmodernism is not either. Christians, however, live within their cultures. In Papua New Guinea the gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to Stone Age people. In the south Sudan the gospel is brought to tribal animists. They live and move and have their being within their cultures. They are formed by their cultures. Good mission theology teaches that the gospel needs to be acculturated without it being adulterated, so that those in different cultures can understand the grace that there is in Jesus Christ. Every preacher and missionary and church needs to contextualize the gospel for the hearers whether they are Christians or not. On Sunday mornings I preach in a Canadian Reformed congregation. Often, at 1:00 PM, I preach to Sudanese refugees. The refugees come from all sorts of tribes and languages and from a completely different – an African tribal and pre-modern – culture. I need to preach differently for these two groups of believers, because they have different worldviews. I need to contextualize the gospel differently for each community.

Controversies

I suggest that many conflicts in church life are fuelled by the inability of either side in the dispute to recognize that there even is a culture gap. We need to understand that we must create a dialogue across the gap that lies between modernist and postmodernist before it becomes a chasm into which the churches are sure to fall. When we discuss with each other, both sides in the dispute have to actively contextualize their words and responses. Otherwise there will be great misunderstanding.

The look and feel of church life is changing. The way things are done is in flux and the modernists

cannot understand it. As things in church life are beginning to change more and more, they retreat into a more and more modernist worldview. It seems as if the others are mounting a revolution. The others seem to reject the old paths and always seem to want to move into new forms of liturgy, worship, preaching, outreach, and worship space (only to name a few hot button issues). The modernists,

Gospel needs to be acculturated without it being adulterated, so that those in different cultures can understand the grace that there is in Jesus Christ

therefore, try to protect their losses by mounting vigorous defences against forces which they simply do not understand. They rely on their modernist logic and scientific way of reasoning to maintain their position. They defend the Reformed doctrines, confessions, and heritage against the relativism of the day, maintaining the truths handed down by the fathers. With great conviction they remain faithful to the Scripture and confessions.

The postmodernists, on the other hand, do not understand this response. They only want to enhance the worship and life of the church and feel that they are confronted by nay-sayers at every turn. They want to re-energize the communion of saints, but think that they are being stonewalled. They want a meaningful worship experience and cannot seem to find it among the modernist brothers and sisters. As the two

sides descend into the darkness of church conflict they flee from each other, erecting a dividing wall of hostility as great as the one separating Jew from Greek.

The modernist will think that all this talk of relationship and experience is way too subjective and that it's just Reformed-lite (if Reformed at all). The postmodernist, on the other hand, will think that the supremacy of doctrine and of rigorous theological discussion misses the point of believing in God: experiencing his presence and communion, and fellowship with fellow believers.

Cross-cultural dialogue

We need to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue within our own communities. There are strengths and weaknesses with both. Christ followers need to stand together in this world. Jesus Christ has broken down the cultural divide, the wall of hostility between Jew and Greek. He most certainly is breaking down this one by his Word and Holy Spirit. As we together sit under the preaching of the Word, let us grab hold of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort and use them as powerful witnesses to the truth. Cherish them as rigorous theological documents. And love them as wonderfully warm and experiential statements that we as children of the Reformation can use together. As preachers, teachers, parents and children, elders and parishioners, we need to engage in a meaningful dialogue across this culture gap lest our congregation and federation disintegrate in the coming decades.

¹ F.G. Oosterhoff makes a similar comment in "Dealing with Disagreements in the Church (2)." *Clarion* (Volume 56, Issue 8) p. 192.



A Richly-Filled Export Portfolio

A while ago, Pastor Wes Bredenhof wrote an article in *Clarion* about, what I would call, the "export portfolio" of Reformed Christian education. During the last five years I have been somewhat involved with this particular portfolio, therefore I would like to share some of my experiences.

Permanently shut!?

My first experience in South America started in 1959, when my wife and I moved to Brazil, where I was involved in education and mission until 1976. From 1978 till 2002, I taught at the William of Orange Christian school in Cloverdale, British Columbia.

After having lived for seventeen years in South America, it was hard to forget that experience; however, my new and different task at William of Orange required all the energy one could muster. Sometimes I thought back about those Brazilian years. It felt like a finished chapter of our career; a part of our life that had been closed off; the same feeling as when a heavy metal door locks solidly behind you.

At our retirement farewell as principal of the William of Orange, in 2002, we were very surprised when the school community offered us a trip to Brazil; the solidly closed door was reopened and even farther than we could imagine! Once in Brazil, it was pointed out to us that there was an urgent need for professional development; that, for example, workshops about teaching from a Christian perspective would be very much appreciated, since

many teachers themselves were new Christians.

And so it happened, that every year after 2002 I found myself back in Brazil, either teaching a course, or evaluating the Escola Bíblica Cristã in São José da Coroa Grande, or discussing the translations of *The Flame of the Word* into Portuguese. In 2006, when I traveled there with Andria Lengkeek, the secretary of Mission Aid Brazil, we helped finalize the preparations for a new Christian school in Recife. Guido de Brès opened its doors in February 2007.

Ears acquire eyes when you listen

For quite a number of years, Mr. P. Torenvliet and I had been involved in promoting storytelling as a teaching tool, or, in educational terminology, the narrative approach to teaching. We had presented workshops in different countries. Hardly could I have imagined that there would be a lot of work in that field in my post-retirement years! In 2005, I received an invitation to speak at a conference in Holland, so my wife and I travelled there.

At the Amsterdam airport we met a brother from one of our churches, who asked me whether I had presented workshops in South Africa. I responded that some South African school boards had invited us, but that there was no money to pay for the travel expenses. Spontaneously this brother offered to pay for those costs for the 2006 and 2007 conferences!

The technique of telling stories did not change much over the ages,

but the context in which it is being used constantly changes. When Mr. Torenvliet and I, in 1995, began with our storytelling project, the influence of postmodernism was not as obvious as today. Over time we became aware of the need to reflect more about the underpinnings of the narrative approach, as well as about teaching Bible lessons/stories; current challenges required our attention as well.

The redemptive-historical approach to teaching Bible is not passed on to the next generation of teachers by way of osmosis; it requires specific efforts, in our time as well. Postmodernists strongly dislike overarching narratives and claim that all grand narratives are oppressing and enslaving. Therefore they prefer to sweep all meta-narratives (overarching stories) into an imaginary garbage dump. Postmodernists brush with a very broad sweep; in that process they try to dump all grand stories like socialism, communism, capitalism, and Christendom. Many of our contemporaries favour personal, non-authoritative stories which "may be true for you, but aren't for me!"

It became clear to us that specific help should be offered to teachers who attempt to embed each individual Bible story into an overarching biblical narrative. In a postmodern culture one notices apathy for searching beyond an individual narrative, for attempting to establish a connection between an individual narrative and a unifying overarching story. All of us

are more influenced by the time we live in than we are aware of.

In addition, one could object that Reformed Christians have benefited from redemptive-historical preaching for a very long time. They should, theoretically speaking, have formed a sufficiently-thick protective Teflon coating, which would make them immune for these postmodern challenges, so that this sound approach to teaching Bible is not threatened.

However, we have solid reasons to believe that this redemptive-historical arch is not as robust as we may have assumed it was.

Deeply anchored

While we were in South Africa in 2006, someone inquired whether all the material of our storytelling course *Ears Acquire Eyes When You Listen* was accessible via modern media. Since this was only partly the case, we had sufficient food for thought on our flights home.

Once there, we partly rewrote the text for *Ears Acquire Eyes When You Listen*. The Reformed Curriculum Development Committee in B.C. provided us with funds for the modernization of our project. We were given the means to produce ten different presentations about the narrative approach to teaching. Number six of those presentations is entitled, "Is your lesson/story embedded?" "Deeply Anchored!" is the title of the next one. In these presentations we also attempted to deal with postmodern challenges; the series presents a number of suggested solutions for the identified problems, as well. Some of those solutions can be found in the two mini meta-narratives "Behold the Lamb of God" and "Rejected Messiahs."

I learned that leading workshops has an additional advantage for a pensioner. One cannot permit oneself the "luxury" of napping intellectually; or, at least, one thinks one doesn't.

EST – Paramaribo

Out of the blue, I received an invitation to teach church history at the Evangelical School of Theology in Surinam. EST was established a number of years ago, when the existing theological training in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam, became more liberal. Several members of our sister churches in The Netherlands, among them Dr. J. van Bruggen, lecture temporarily at EST.

I submitted a course outline to the principal, Dr. Frank Jabini. When that summary was accepted, I began with my preparations. I knew that my students in Paramaribo had never studied church history before. They also belonged to a very wide range of different denominations. Therefore I decided to set up the course in such a way that my course material would be thoroughly anchored in the scriptural underpinnings of the different church historical developments which were to be presented during the course.

I had a very good time at EST; I could share many of my Reformed Christian insights and learned much about fundamental commonalities we have with orthodox Christians who worship in different denominations. At a certain moment during the course I was asked what it means to be a Reformed believer. Since I had not much time, I had to make a quick decision and told them that Calvinists are probably most maligned about the dogma of predestination/election. I promised to discuss this topic, under the condition that prior to those discussions every participant would reflect about these four questions: 1. Do you know whether your name was entered in the book of life? 2. If so, can it be removed? 3. When was your name entered? 4. Why was your name written in God's registry? The next day we had a good discussion.

Orphanage – Querétaro

The leader of a Christian orphanage in Mexico, Dario Hillbrands, is very much interested in Reformed Christian education. The orphanage is affiliated with an evangelical group of churches. Under Dario's supervision functions an elementary as well as a high school; in addition, he leads teacher training courses.

After initial contact, Dario asked for our course binder for *Ears Acquire Eyes When You Listen*. The content of this binder was recently reorganized and contains, among other material, several instructive articles about the redemptive-historical approach to teaching Bible. Dario asked me to present a course outline for a workshop with his teachers and promised that his students would translate all 200 pages of the binder into Spanish. Working at the orphanage became a moving and a learning experience. It was inspiring to see how Mr. Hillbrands totally trusts that the Lord will provide all that is needed for the orphans and how he, simultaneously, is totally active in acquiring funds, for example, for a new school building from the Mexican liquor board (many orphans are the victims of alcoholism) as well as from German veteran soccer players, who bring in money for the orphanage and, every two years, play a good game against the team of the town of Querétaro.

In conclusion:

Since no licenses are required and the portfolio is overflowing, I highly recommend becoming involved in exporting Reformed Christian education. It is very, very enriching, refreshing, and rejuvenating. As for the costs, the Lord will provide you with all you really need.



What's New???

Rev. E. Kampen is minister of
the Canadian Reformed
Church at Orangeville, Ontario
eric.kampen@canrc.org

It appears that my plan to have a "What's New?" column every third issue was a little too ambitious. Many local and regional bulletins are faithfully sent my way. I can see that many things are happening. However, not all items are suitable for this column. Nevertheless, though a little off the target date, here is another installment. Effort will continue to be made to stay as close to our target of every third issue as possible. Perhaps some of the churches that do not yet send their bulletins may wish to help the cause by providing me with more resources. In case you wonder if your church is participating, you can always send a note my way to find out.

The first item that caught my attention is something that may very well happen in other congregations. It pertains to a desire to come across as friendly and inviting to visitors yet unwittingly contradicting this by other actions. Since the point of mentioning this is edification and not condemnation, the name of the congregation will not be mentioned. Here follows the scenario. On the cover of a local bulletin, a warm welcome was extended to all those worshipping with the congregation that day. This was followed by a request to kindly leave the last two pews open

for guests. While it is true that many members consider the last benches in the auditorium the best seats, in general the back seats are not seen as seats of honour. Ask any backbencher in the House of Commons or a person who sits in the back row at a hockey game. This, however, was a minor thing compared to what was found on the next page. There it was clear that the church had fallen behind substantially on the regular contributions. The opening line in the congregational news contained a strong admonition to the congregation about not contributing to the church. The financial situation was also a dominant theme in the consistory report on the same page. This was followed on the same page by a special note in which the dire situation was further laid before the congregation. Without doubt, finances are a fact of congregational life. Sad to say, sometimes congregations fall behind quite a bit, making it difficult for the treasurer to meet the obligations. That is not a good thing. It would seem that a local bulletin is the place to communicate this to the congregation. At the same time, what does this tell a visitor who perhaps has finally gathered the courage to attend a worship service? His heart was warmed by

the words of welcome. Perhaps being unfamiliar with the whole situation, sitting in the back was not the worst feeling. Just the same, what would such a visitor think when reading through the bulletin before the start of the service as he read all these appeals for money? What does it say about a congregation's faithfulness and sincerity if the bills cannot be paid? From a welcoming and outreach point of view, it would say a great deal to visitors if bulletins could report that the financial obligations were faithfully met each month and councils had to discuss how to best use the extra funds.

At times, councils face the question of what to do with abstentions in voting. The Spring Creek Council decided "that abstentions in voting will not be counted among the votes cast on a particular issue and a majority will be determined with reference to the votes cast." This seems like a good rule. Without this rule, abstentions in essence count as negative votes and the person gets the benefit of having voted against something without having to give account for his position.

That we are involved in a common struggle with common issues comes out in a number of consistory and council reports touching on the entertainment choices of the members of the

church. Again, I will avoid mentioning specifics. I will only say that these are items gleaned from bulletins as far apart as Australia and Canada. In one short report it was noted that the consistory had received a letter from a concerned family within the congregation expressing disappointment in regards to members of our congregation going to a particular motor bike show. In another short report, concern was expressed about the tendency for the youth to party around at restaurants and other places rather than in the family homes. A third short report related a concern about the use of leisure time by members of the congregation, in particular,

visiting pub-style restaurants with live entertainment. In one of the reports, the consistory encouraged the youth to focus their entertainment in the family environment. In another, the consistory indicated that this would be a good topic at a future congregational meeting. It is indeed a challenge to show our Christian faith also in our choices for entertainment and the use of leisure time. This is not just a problem for the youth of the church. In the end, of course, what are needed are not directives from consistories but serious discussion among the members about these matters, and daring to hold each other to account.

Church News

Called by the church of Elora, Ontario:

Rev. D.Vandenburgt
of Glanbrook, Ontario.

Called by the church of Smithers, British Columbia:

Rev. R.Aasman
of Edmonton (Providence), AB.

With this, we come to the end of another update on news from the churches. Hopefully, it will not just satisfy the desire to know what's new but it will also serve as food for thought and discussion. Till next time.



Derek Stoffels

Mr. Derek Stoffels is principal of the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed School in Smithers, British Columbia principal@ebenezerschool.com



Transformation – Whose Job is it?

Have you ever asked and wrestled with the following question: “Why aren’t our young adults or school children acting more Christianly? They went to a Christian school after all!”

This question is typically asked by someone looking at the young people of the church and finding them engaged in unkindness, insensitivity towards others, inappropriate language, music, clothing, drinking, partying, watching the same movies etc. as other kids. The result is the question, “Why aren’t they different? Twelve years of Christian school and this is how they act?!” To be fair to the young people the adults of the church can too often be included in this question as well.

This question or line of thinking makes me apprehensive because the question is not one that can be or is handled well in many cases. The question is also one that has been and is vigorously argued by various people.

What makes it difficult to handle? I will try and lay out my thoughts on this point. It is a topic that is complicated by many factors. It is also a question that quickly drives straight to the purpose of having Christian schools and a divide in how that purpose is seen. Transformation, the putting on of the new nature, is what people want to see happen.

I wish to make clear that it is not my intention to try and dodge my responsibility as a teacher for the spiritual development of the covenant children entrusted to me each day. Rather, my goal is to show that it is not *necessarily* the schools that are the problem but instead that we may need to clarify how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming us and our children and do some self-examination to see if we have unwittingly conformed to the thinking of the world when we ask this question or ones similar to it.

Problems with the question

As a teacher and principal I find this question difficult because, while I know where the questioner is coming from, I believe it is really the wrong question. I also feel some level of frustration at being expected to somehow have changed a person. On the other hand, part of me does wonder why all the teaching and interaction with students often does not seem to make a difference right now. So I am torn between feeling responsible and also knowing that I am not really responsible.

The basic problem with the question is that it assumes that the school’s task is to transform the students. This sentiment has been alive and well in Christian schools for a long time. This sentiment was publicly dealt with in the

discussion about the profile of a graduate that was ably and somewhat controversially responded to by Rev. Wielenga a number of years ago. There remains today a difference of opinion about whether transformation is a task of the school.

Caught up in this is the problem that by linking unacceptable behaviour to the school’s efforts one ignores or limits God as well as the responsibilities other parties have in the child’s life. What about God? The home? The church? The question takes the so-called triangle of home, church, and school watched over by God and pretends that only the school exists or at least grossly exaggerates the school’s role when it comes to spiritual formation.

Why does that happen? Is it because the children spend so much time at school? Or is it because we have conformed to the world in some way? The question of time spent in school can be responded to by saying, “Hold on, let’s do the math. Over twelve years of schooling about 14,500 hours are spent in school and about 90,750 out of school.” Looked at that way one could wonder why the school is being blamed. For every hour a child is in school they spend over six hours out of school. Surely school can’t have much impact then!

There is an element of foolishness in that argument, but I do want to use it to point to my essential point which is that I believe we misunderstand or misrepresent the Spirit's work of regeneration and the time we live in when we ask the question and point to the school, church, or parents. Maybe the quantity of time spent in school is not the reason for the question.

Why does it seem like our children aren't living christianly?

Maybe it is instead indicative of us having conformed to the pattern of this world. Our system of public education is seen by many people and policy-makers as the way to change the world. Even a person like Neil Postman, who sees much that is wrong with society and with the education system, ultimately, although with resignation, places the salvation of the world in the hands of the school system (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 162). Do we make the same mistake when we ask the question, "Why does twelve years of Christian schooling not seem to make a difference?" Do we also believe that we can change the world via schooling?

Problems with answering the question

When the question is asked or the statement made with the school identified as the problem, it is easy for a teacher or keen school supporter to react defensively and say it is not the school's or teachers' fault. In the heat of the moment it might even be

countered, unwisely, that it is the parent's rather than the school's fault. At this point Christian interaction becomes more difficult because of the approach each side has taken.

A better approach would be for the initial question/statement/perception to be phrased as, "Why does it seem like our children aren't living Christianly? What can we do that we are not doing?" When phrased like that it is much easier for the parties involved in the discussion to react temperately because no one is being blamed for something beyond their control. In this approach the communion of saints is sought and likely to be experienced.

Sometimes the question is responded to with, "Yes, they are doing wrong but it could be worse. They're only human after all." This is a fallacious response and offers poor and false comfort at best. Other times people say, "Give the kids a break, they are young and will figure it out." That answer is no more biblical than the first answer, nor is it a comfort, since we know how fragile life is, how easily and unpredictably it can end. On the other hand, many times people do seem to "figure it out." Many parents who become consistory members, mothers and fathers of distinction, school board members, or teachers, went down similar roads as the children in question are going. All of this points to God's grace, our weakness, and Satan's craftiness. In those things lies the answer to the matter.

So what is the answer?

To properly answer this question we need, as always, to turn to the teachings of Scripture. We need to see what God teaches

us about being transformed, about sanctification, about putting on the new nature. The confessions are helpful here, especially the Canon's of Dort chapter 5, which I will refer to frequently, since it summarizes some key points of Scripture that are related to our question.

Our weakness and God's grace

In Articles 1, 2 and 4 of chapter 5 we are taught that although we are regenerate, we are not free from sin. We are free from the dominion and slavery of sin but not from daily sin, even serious daily sins. These sins anger God and grieve the Holy Spirit, but thanks to God's grace we are called back and "through His Word and Spirit He certainly and effectually renews them to repentance" (Art. 7).

The articles make very clear how sanctification is a process completed only when Christ returns on his great day. Article 14 says, "Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he *maintains, continues and perfects it.* . . ." (emphasis mine).

The responsibility for action lies with ourselves, but transformation is worked by the Spirit

By now you may be wondering if I am suggesting that the earlier answer of, "Give the kids a break. They will figure it out," is the one I would give. Absolutely not!

With the Canons of Dort I say that we "must constantly watch and pray that they may not be led

into temptation" (Art. 4) and that we must be engaged in the "serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works" (Art. 10). There is no room given for the idea of it being okay to live sinfully or heedlessly of God's word. God's command is straightforward: be holy, be transformed, and be perfect all the time.

As mentioned earlier, the Scripture and confessions are equally clear that perfection will not be seen at this time. This means that children who have had the blessing of a family that honours God, that attends church faithfully, that sends them to a Christian school, will still not somehow be perfect. They will sin daily just as their parents will, their teachers will, their minister and consistory members will. At times they and we will "in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh" (Art. 4). As this article makes clear, none of us have any excuse for that.

So, what does this mean? It means we are to be perfect, to be transformed, but also that we are not yet perfect, so that transformation or holy living will be manifested in fits and starts and will be totally reliant on God's power and not on our own. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4, the "treasure is held in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Interestingly and seemingly contradictorily, God also tells us in the very next chapter that we are Christ's ambassadors; a very different perspective than jars of clay. God's grace and our weakness highlighted once again.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when we see problems among the youth or any member of our church, we should not begin by pointing to the Christian school, nor the parents, nor the church, nor God. That is to fall for the crafty tricks of the devil. The place to go is to prayer, to communion and exhortation with those whom you see doing wrong. Humility and a recognition that "there but for the grace of God go I" is crucial to approaching and handling the matter correctly. The plank in our own eyes needs to be worked on and kept in the forefront of our mind as we approach our erring brother or sister. God's sovereignty and plans must also be remembered.

Thoughtful prayer and constant reading and discussion of God's Word will lead us to the right understanding of transformation

By understanding the time we live in, bought and freed from slavery to sin but still sinning, and by holding fast to the inestimable treasure of the doctrine of the perseverance of true believers and saints, we can see more clearly what the problem is. Then we can ask the right questions, be still when we are to be still, and act and speak when we are to act and speak. Then we will in self-examination delve into why things are as they are and what can be done about it. We will carefully and lovingly initiate change in our

own family practice, our schools, and the church in the areas we have been negligent or complacent in. We will recognize that the responsibility for action lies with ourselves but that transformation is worked by the Spirit.

To that end thoughtful prayer and constant reading and discussion of God's Word will lead us to the assurance of salvation, to the right understanding of transformation, to the grace and humility of Christ. It is well worth making the confessions part of a personal annual reading schedule. They do not take long to read and as summaries of key biblical teachings they do give the essential teachings in remarkably few words. Additionally I recommend reading Mike Goheen's excellent article on family time that was previously published in *Clarion* (Volume 49, Issue 6). For further ideas about the importance of consciously planning to build a strong faithful family and ways to do so, Stephen Covey has written an excellent book called *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*. This book is well worth purchasing for the advice it gives in being intentional in raising children with the end goal clearly in sight. Remembering that "our" children are really God's covenant children should waken us to our awesome responsibility in raising them and then lead us to think and act wisely regardless of the personal cost or sacrifice of time and our own interests.

*The Education Matters column is sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Teachers' Association East. Anyone wishing to respond to an article written or willing to write an article is kindly asked to send materials to Clarion or to Otto Bouwman
obouwman@cornerstoneschool.us*

Press Release of the General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches meeting in Smithers, British Columbia, May 9 - 22, 2007

It may not be the most frugal or accessible place for a synod to meet but it is surely one of the most beautiful. Located in the shadow of majestic Hudson Bay Mountain in northern British Columbia, the town of Smithers was the location for the 2007 General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

May 9

On Wednesday, May 9 at 9:00 a.m. the Rev. Julius VanSpronsen, youthful pastor of the convening church, the Canadian Reformed Church at Smithers, called the meeting to order in the newly purchased and beautifully renovated church building. He asked those assembled to sing Psalm 1 and read Isaiah 51:1-16. He elaborated on the basic thrust of this passage and showed how it also had a bearing on the work of this major ecclesiastical assembly. He then led in prayer and asked that Psalm 67 be sung.

Thereafter he welcomed those present and wished them the blessing of the Lord. Moving on to the soon to begin work of synod, he informed the brothers about the preparations made, the facilities, the meals, additional mail received, and a host of other business-type matters. Special thanks for all of the preparatory work was extended to the father and son team of Dick and Phil Bandstra, along with all those who assisted them.

The credentials were examined by members of the convening church and found to be in good order. It was reported that two alternate delegates were present. The Rev. E. Kampen came in place

of the Rev. C.J. VanderVelde and the Rev. C. Bouwman came instead of the Rev. R. Aasman.

Next, elections for the executive took place. The Rev. D.G.J. Agema (Fergus, Ontario) was elected chairman, the Rev. J. Visscher (Langley, BC) was made vice-chairman, the Rev. G. Nederveen (Burlington, Ontario) was chosen as the first clerk dealing with the Acts and the Rev. R.A. Schouten (Aldergrove, BC) was designated as the second clerk to take care of the correspondence.

General Synod was declared constituted. Seeing, however, that the executive needed time to sort through the additional correspondence, to propose advisory committees, and assign agenda items, a lengthy recess was called.

After lunch Synod convened again and decided on a number of housekeeping matters; as well, the various committees and their assignments were finalized. Thereafter, the committees went to work.

After a delicious supper, Synod came together in plenary session and was addressed by Pastor Lim, the executive secretary of the ecumenicity committee of the Presbyterian Church in Korea (PCK). He, along with three other brothers, had travelled all the way to Smithers to address Synod. In his brief prayer and address, he passed along greetings from his church, apologized for the poor communications between our churches, referred to matters of baptism and Lord's Supper, and spoke about the martyrdom of many in the PCK during World War II. After his remarks, the chairman thanked Pastor Lim for his contents and wished the PCK the blessing of the Lord. The vice-chairman, Rev. Visscher, prayed for the PCK.

May 10

The next morning, Thursday, May 10, Synod was opened at the regular time of 9:00 a.m. The Chairman informed the members of Synod and others who were present that it was his intention to follow the Bible reading schedule used by over 700 high school students at Christian high schools in Manitoba and Ontario. After opening devotions the members of Synod went into their various committees to work further on their assigned tasks.

That evening the Rev. John Bouwers, the fraternal delegate from the United Reformed Churches in North America, addressed the assembly. After his address, which can be found in the Appendices of the Acts, he was thanked by the Chairman. His churches were wished the blessings of the Lord and when closing prayer was later offered by one of the members of Synod, special thanks was offered for the close and growing relationship between our respective churches. After a number of different appeals were dealt with, Synod was closed for the evening.

May 11

On Friday morning, May 11, Synod met again and after devotions, various committee proposals were discussed, critiqued, and then taken back by the committee for fine-tuning. The bulk of the morning and all of the afternoon was spent on committee work. In the evening session the question of women's voting for office bearers was brought into discussion.

May 12

On Saturday, May 12, Synod did not meet. The first Saturday after a synod convenes is customarily claimed by the Foundation for Superannuation for its tri-annual meeting and this time it was no different.

May 14

The following Monday, May 14, saw the Synod meet again at 9:00 a.m. Once again the devotions were done in step with high school students in Manitoba and Ontario who during this week were slated to focus on the ascension of our Lord. The Chairman led the devotions in his usual able manner.

Thereafter various appeal matters were discussed. A lengthy discussion followed on how the advisory committees of Synod should approach relations with our Presbyterian sister churches and the differences between them and us. All members received the floor to express their opinion as to whether or not the discussion on the differences ("divergences") should continue, as well as on the purpose and the goal of these discussions.

Next, one of the Synod advisory committee presented its report on the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands and asked for reactions from the floor. After many reactions were received, it took its submission back for further revision. Synod went back into committee mode.

In the evening Synod went into plenary session and turned its attention to delegates from foreign churches. The Rev. Pauline Bedard of the Eglise Reformee de Quebec, the Rev. Karlo Janssens of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, the Revs. Peter Wallace and Richard Needham of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and the Rev. Bruce Hoyt of the Reformed Churches in New Zealand all addressed Synod. They brought the greetings of their respective churches and spoke openly about the challenges in our relations. In the case of the Dutch churches tensions between us were openly acknowledged and addressed. In the case of the ERQ and the RCNZ, there were heartfelt pleas for help and assistance. With respect to the

OPC, there was a stirring charge to continue to do battle together for the truth. All in all, it was a beautiful evening. As one member of Synod said afterwards, "It's too bad that the whole federation could not be present this evening."

May 15

Tuesday, May 15 opened with plenary session. Some more committee proposals were put into discussion. Comments were received and taken back. A matter of appeal was dealt with and finalized. A report on the General Fund from the Church at Carman East was received and finalized. The rest of the afternoon was taken up with committee work.

Supper was special in that a barbecue was held at the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed School to which both the members of Synod and the members of the congregation were invited. The weather proved to be perfect, the turnout was great, and the food was delicious. A good time of fellowship was had by one and all.

Thereafter, Synod members went back to work in their respective committees. Closing devotions were conducted by the Rev. Wallace, the fraternal delegate from the OPC.

May 16

The next day proved to be a special day for several reasons. The morning session resulted in a decision being made to receive the Reformed Churches of New Zealand as a church in ecclesiastical fellowship. It thus became the ninth sister-church. Thereafter another appeal was discussed and finalized. Synod then went back into committee; however, at 3:00 p.m. the power went out in the building and the surrounding area. This presented Synod with a number of technical challenges and resulted in the evening's plenary session being cancelled.

May 17

Thursday morning (Ascension Day) dawned bright and beautiful but the power was still out. With the help of a number of portable power generators, Synod convened in plenary session. Discussion was held on the advisory committee report dealing with the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa. It was also held again on the request of the church at Hamilton to appoint a committee on "women's voting rights." The matter of the official website of the churches was discussed and the report on it was adopted. Also adopted were reports dealing with the address church and the archive church.

Synod then took the important step of deciding to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches of Quebec (ERQ). To mark this special decision, the Synod sung Psalm 87:1 and 4 and Rev. Schouten led in thanksgiving prayer.

Thereafter the report on the Theological College was adopted. It included a decision to appoint a committee to deal with funding the costs of students who are enrolled in the Pastoral Proficiency Program.

Synod moved on to deal with churches in Scotland. It decided to continue the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Church of Scotland, but to acknowledge that the previous synod of Chatham had erred when it entered into the same relationship with the Free Church Continuing and to discontinue it.

From Scotland the Synod travelled around the world to Korea. It decided to continue the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Presbyterian Church in Korea. Seeing that communication with Korea continues to be a challenge, Synod agreed to contact the sister-churches and see whether a

rotating visiting schedule can be set up to improve the information flow.

At 7:00 p.m. a worship service was held in the church building to commemorate the ascension of our Lord. It was led by Rev. Schouten of the church at Aldergrove. Afterwards the congregation was invited to remain as Synod convened again and the Rev. C. Kleijn, the fraternal delegate from the Free Reformed Churches in South Africa, was given the floor to speak on behalf of the churches that he represents. He gave a very clear overview of his churches, as well as the needs and challenges that they face as they live in what has been described from a racial perspective as a "rainbow nation." The Canadian Reformed Churches were asked to pray for our sister-churches there, as well as to consider financially supporting the mission work being done.

May 18

Synod spent Friday morning, May 18, in committee. In the afternoon a number of draft proposals were discussed and taken back to committee. With regard to the overture of Regional Synod West dealing with the Lord's Supper for shut-ins, Synod decided that there was no need to make special provisions in the Church Order on this matter.

Friday evening was devoted to our relations with the United Reformed Churches in North America. After the general mandate of the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity was adopted, Synod moved to discuss and adopt the report of the Church Order sub-committee. This was followed by an extensive discussion on the report of the sub-committee on Theological Education. The advisory committee of Synod received a great deal of input and took it back to its committee for fine-tuning.

May 19

Saturday morning, May 19, dawned and Synod was called to order again. The advisory committee's revised report on Theological Education was presented, discussed, and adopted. Thereafter, the report of the sub-committee on the Song Book was dealt with and adopted. It is worth reporting that all decisions regarding the URCNA were adopted unanimously.

Inter-church relations continued to occupy the attention of Synod as thereafter reports dealing with the Free Reformed Churches in North America, the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, and the Reformed Church in the United States were adopted.

In the afternoon session Synod decided not to include the Apostle's Creed in the Forms of Baptism. The Forms of Subscription proposed were adopted and will be included in future editions of the *Book of Praise*.

At 3:00 p.m. Synod adjourned for the remainder of the Saturday, as well as for the Lord's Day. It was decided to meet on Monday, May 21, even though it was a public holiday in Canada.

May 21

Victoria Day arrived and Synod re-convened. The morning session was spent in committee. Synod met in plenary session after lunch. A number of items were taken back to committee after remarks were received. Synod decided not to enter into an official relationship with the Presbyterian Church in Eastern Australia, the United Reformed Churches in Myanmar, and the Independent Reformed Church in Korea. On the other hand, it decided to continue ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches in Brazil (IRB). A request by one of the churches to investigate the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil was

declined due to insufficient material being supplied to synod. A decision was made to continue membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) and to send a full delegation to the next meeting of the ICRC to be held in 2009 in New Zealand.

On a different note, Synod received a proposal from the Board of Governors of the Theological College to add another professor to the faculty thereby bringing the number to full-time professors to five, but then to have Synod 2010 make the actual appointment. Synod Smithers, however, disagreed with this proposal and instructed the Board of Governors to initiate an independent review of all aspects of the work done at the College, to consider alternate options for the delivery of programs, to review the appointment process for faculty members, and to come to Synod 2010 with its recommendations.

Synod also turned its attention once again to the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands and made a decision that concluded discussion on the Form of Marriage but called for monitoring how decisions regarding the fourth commandment work out in practice in the churches. It also instructed the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad to pay attention to the contents of new hymns rather than to their number. The Committee should attempt as well to get answers to hermeneutical concerns regarding matters of divorce and remarriage. Finally, the CRCA was told to hold joint meetings with the Dutch deputies on a more regular basis so as to facilitate increased discussions on matters of mutual concern.

Under the matter of Bible translations, Synod continued to recommend the NIV for use in the churches. It also left it in the freedom of the churches, should they feel so compelled, to use other

translations such as the NKJV, NASB, and the ESV. If a local church recommends other translations to synod, it was urged to do its own careful study first before making such a recommendation.

The request of the church at Hamilton for Synod to appoint a committee on women's voting had not yet been decided on and hence was back on the table. The result of several rounds of discussion was that Synod decided to appoint a committee to study the matter and report to the next synod.

Various items connected to the *Book of Praise* relating to the Apostle's Creed, Bible references, and the capitalization of pronouns relating to God were agreed upon.

Synod then proceeded to a different matter and agreed that the Canadian Reformed Churches should officially join the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). A report on the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Hersteld or GKH), a group that broke away from our sister churches, was discussed and adopted. Their request to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship was declined and they were urged to work towards reconciliation with the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated).

May 22

Tuesday, May 22, was to prove to be the last day of Synod 2007 and a busy day it turned out to be. The morning opened with a motion to reopen the discussion of the previous night's decision on the GKH. This was discussed and passed. When this matter was revisited and debated later in the day, Synod decided to maintain its decision.

The Psalm section of the *Book of Praise* received due attention and Synod decided that a thorough review should be done of all 150 Psalms, that an updated Psalm section should be prepared, that Dr. W. Helder should be engaged to do

this work, and that the churches should be asked for input at all stages of the process.

The Hymn section was dealt with next and it was decided that the twenty-eight hymns proposed by the Standing Committee should be provisionally approved and tested for a three year period in the churches. Churches will be encouraged to send their responses to the Committee by March 1, 2009. Church members are asked to submit their reactions through their consistories.

Later in the day various other matters relating to the *Book of Praise* were decided on: overleaf notation, business matters, phrasing changes, and correction of misprints.

Moving from liturgical matters to inter-church relations, Synod also received requests from two churches in Indonesia to enter into an official relationship. After ample discussion, it was decided to delay such a decision and to ask the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad to gather more information with a view to obtaining greater clarity. Two of our churches that are involved with these Indonesian churches, namely Smithville and Edmonton-Immanuel, will be asked for assistance.

Synod decided not to renew the mandate of the CRCA with respect to the Korean Presbyterian Church in North America due to contact problems. A letter from one of the churches asking for the Guidelines of Synod to be altered to allow for material to be sent in digital format instead of hard copy was not adopted. Various appeals were decided upon. A proposal from Regional Synod East to change Article 63 of the Church Order to include the words, "The Word of God teaches that marriage is a union between one man and one woman" was adopted.

Synod also decided to continue the existing relationship of

ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. These churches were specifically thanked for their ongoing support of the Theological College in Hamilton.

Finances also had the attention of Synod as a report was received on Synod Chatham 2004. The total cost of that Synod came to \$30,221.50. A request from one of the churches to convene the next synod in July instead of May was rejected. The Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas was mandated to seek further information on the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America and to report to the next synod.

A proposal regarding committee appointments was discussed in closed session and adopted. Some committee re-structuring was also discussed and adopted. The last Acts were also adopted.

Finally, on the evening of May 22 all of the agenda items were completed and it was time to bring Synod to a close. The Chairman reflected on the decisions made, the cordial atmosphere of the meetings, and the exceptional hospitality of the local church. The ladies in charge of the meals were thanked profusely and given a present for their new church kitchen. The church at Smithers was presented with a token of appreciation and remembrance in the form of a beautiful framed print.

The Vice-Chairman then took the opportunity to thank the Chairman for his most able chairmanship. Rev. Agema showed himself to be well-organized, fair, and judicious in all his dealings. His morning devotions were also most appreciated.

The Chairman then read from Ephesians 3:14-21, proposed that Hymn 1B be sung, and led in prayer. General Synod 2007 was closed.

For the Synod,
J. Visscher, vice-chairman

