

Clarion

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AIDS patient Blondie at Nakekela hospice

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Opportunities for Mission Work in South Africa

Beautiful South Africa suffers under crime, HIV/AIDS, corruption, greed and racial tensions

South Africa is a country of spectacular landscapes, sheer beauty, rich resources, and friendly people. However, South Africa also has a tainted history. When white settlers arrived in this land, they gained positions of prestige and power while the black majority was poor and underprivileged. A system developed known as apartheid. Apartheid was abolished in 1994 but racial tensions still exist. White people feel marginalized while black people feel that the white minority is still in control of money. Beautiful South Africa suffers under crime, HIV/AIDS, corruption, greed, and racial tensions. Other places in the world have similar problems but few will deny South Africa's unique and difficult situation.

Free Reformed Churches in South Africa

The Canadian Reformed Churches have a longstanding ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Reformed Churches in South Africa (FRCSA). On October 8, 1950 the Free Reformed Church in Pretoria was instituted. More information can be found at www.vgk.org.za/vgk which offers an English translation. Initially there were three congregations within the FRCSA; today there are five congregations in white areas. But there is more to this small church federation. Members of the church in Pretoria started to bring the gospel to the black township of Mamelodi in the 1960s. Black townships existed because of apartheid. Soon a missionary was called and God blessed this mission work richly. Mission work was also started outside the city of Cape Town among those of mixed Khoikhoi and white background. In recent years three mission churches have been instituted; eight more mission points have been started; currently there are seven missionaries in the field. Five of the missionaries were born in South Africa. Three of them are black. The gospel of Jesus Christ is breaking down the dividing

wall of hostility between white and black, rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged. This is not without challenges. Our brothers and sisters in South Africa speak freely of the struggles that arise within a racially-mixed federation. However, they recognize that they are fulfilling Jesus Christ's great commission and that Jesus Christ will grant his blessing. For someone looking from the outside it is breathtaking to see how the gospel conquers barriers and brings salvation to people of all nationalities and colours.

Financial challenge

Of the eight congregations in the FRCSA, three are needy. The fact is the remaining five congregations cannot financially support seven missionaries. The churches are also losing financially strong members. Young families are leaving South Africa for Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands, England, and Canada because they are seeking safer places for raising a family. Therefore, while mission work is growing and



Church building in Bethal (needy church)

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Women in traditional dresses on a Heritage Day celebration

flourishing, there is less financial support for this work. Thankfully some of the Dutch churches are partners in South African mission, and the Australian sister churches are supporting one of the needy churches.

Synod Smithers 2007 of the Canadian Reformed Churches decided “to recommend the FRCSA to the churches as worthy of continued and increased prayerful and financial assistance, to help them with their extensive mission work as well as the compassionate pursuits among the disadvantaged.” Synod Chatham 2004 made a similar decision. Letters were sent to all Canadian and American Reformed Churches outlining opportunities for supporting mission in South Africa. An article was also published in *Clarion* urging the churches in North America to provide help to the brotherhood in South Africa.

In 2009, the church at Coaldale agreed to take on the project of being the coordinating church for aid to needy churches of the FRCSA. Via a committee the local churches were contacted and as a result, collections have been held for the work in South Africa. We thank God that brothers and sisters in North America have generously contributed to the financial needs in South Africa. This will serve the spiritual need of getting the gospel out to the people of South Africa.

Rev. D. M. Boersma was present at Synod Burlington as a fraternal delegate from the FRCSA. He mentioned the following during a speech to Synod:

We are grateful for the hand you stretched out to us at your previous Synod. We pray that this support may be such that it will keep the missionaries in the field. The bulk of the missions budget is taken up by personnel cost: stipends and support structures for the missionaries. We are thankful that the committee at Coaldale has informed the churches of the need we have.

Our churches would be best helped by structural instead of incidental giving. I would like to use this opportunity to bring our need to the attention of your churches. It would be wonderful if a number of churches would be willing to promise support for a certain amount per year. This would relieve much of the pressure on our missions budget.

Synod Burlington 2010 decided:

To recommend the FRCSA to the churches as worthy of continued financial assistance, to help them support the needy churches in the federation,

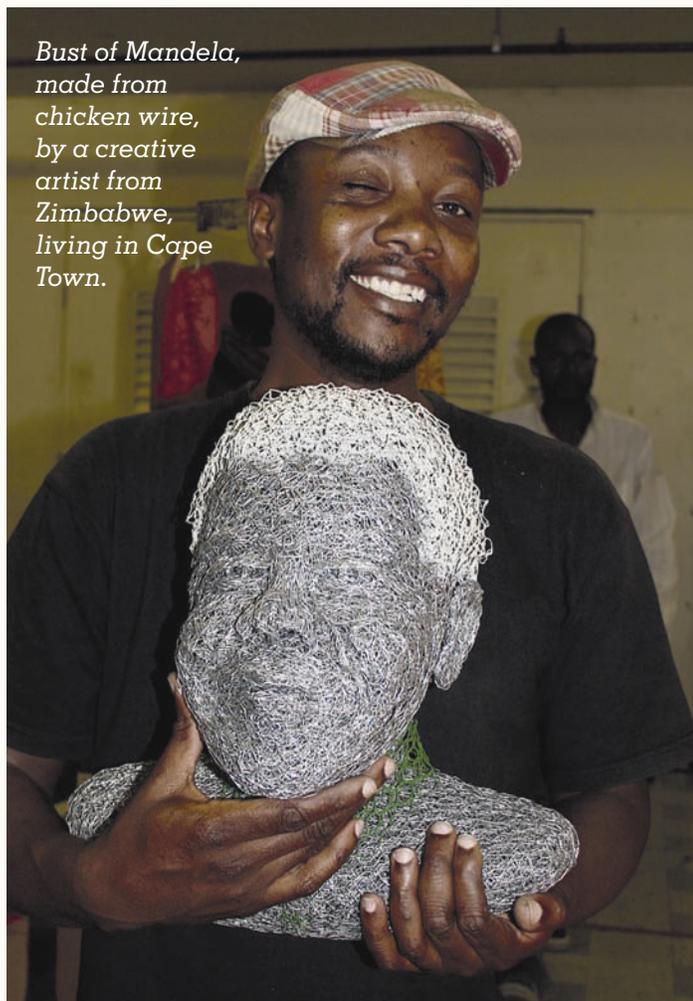
and to assist them with their extensive mission work and relief efforts among the disadvantaged and sick in South Africa.

Clearly there is a substantial and ongoing need for financial support.

The Great Commission

At Synod Burlington I made a personal promise to Rev. Boersma that I would write an editorial in *Clarion* about the need and opportunities for local congregations in Canada and the United States to support the mission work in South Africa. It would be wonderful if some churches would make a commitment to give regular support to the mission work in South Africa. Please give this some careful, prayerful thought.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between white and black, rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged



Bust of Mandela, made from chicken wire, by a creative artist from Zimbabwe, living in Cape Town.

As Christians and churches we speak a lot about our evangelistic and mission task within the world. We should seize opportunities and open doors that our Lord Jesus Christ places before us. We are familiar with Jesus Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 where he said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Many individuals and churches have taken up the challenge to bring the gospel to the world. Let us also consider the needs of the South African churches in bringing the gospel to all people of South Africa. This will allow us to participate in the glorious work of Jesus Christ to "go and make disciples of all nations."



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MATTHEW 13:52

The Great Mercy of God

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

1 Peter 1:3

Peter writes his letter to Christians scattered throughout much of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Many of them are Gentiles, new to the Christian faith. He writes to encourage them, for they were going through a time of suffering and persecution.

In this day and age such suffering is hard for us to imagine. Generally speaking, we lead a good life. We have bread on the table, a roof over our heads, and we earn a decent living, which even allows us to have some luxuries that our forefathers would never have dreamed of. We can also worship the Lord our God in freedom. But for these Christians in Asia Minor, it was quite different. They suffered many hardships.

In light of this, it may seem surprising that Peter starts off his letter in the way that he does. You would think that he'd begin by coming with some words of sympathy and by drawing attention to their plight. Instead, Peter focuses on the Lord and on what He has done.

He refers to the great mercy of God the Father. His mercy is great in comparison to man's mercy. For within our own human experience, mercy is something that depends on the arbitrariness of the one who is in a position to extend or withhold it.

For example, in the United States when a criminal is sentenced to death, the final appeal for mercy can

be made to the governor of the state. And then it depends on the whim of the governor whether or not that person will go to the electric chair. Many external factors will play a role. A condemned person will have greater success with a governor who is principally opposed to capital punishment than with a governor who has no such scruples. But there is more than that, for such a decision also depends on the circumstances. If there has been a rash of murders just prior to the appeal, there will be great pressure on the governor to allow the execution to take place as a deterrent for others.

We should not think that God operates in a similar way. When we think of God's mercy, we should do so within the framework of the covenant. His mercy means that He is faithful to the covenant promises to which He has bound Himself. He does not go back on his word. When He makes promises, we can be sure of the fact that He will keep them. His mercy doesn't depend then on the kind of mood He is in, or on the pressure exerted by some outside influence such as the devil, who makes his accusations against us, telling God how sinful we really are, and how we don't deserve his mercy.

No, God's mercy depends on his great love for Himself and for those who belong to Him. He gives us the forgiveness of sins unconditionally. He tells us that we will not suffer the death penalty because He has

visited that sentence on his Son, Jesus Christ.

That is why Peter in this text also mentions the resurrection. Through the resurrection of Christ from the dead we have been born anew to a living hope. That is the joy and the blessedness that the recipients of this letter may have.

With such a perspective, their hardships through persecution ultimately do not matter. These circumstances fade into the background. For they are alive – they are alive in Christ. They do not have to doubt that for a moment, because God's promise is sure.

And thus we too, when we struggle with our faith, wondering whether or not God's mercy also extends to us, shouldn't focus first of all on our personal circumstances, but on the promise of the covenant; namely, that we have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. God gives these to us without us having to earn any part of it. All He wants us to do is embrace his promise, to believe that Christ died for our sins. This doesn't depend on the worthiness of our faith, nor on whether our sin and guilt are greater than somebody else's. No, it only depends on his great mercy in Christ.

And then also our temporal circumstances fade into the background. We can be joyful in the midst of both prosperity and adversity. Thanks be to God and his great mercy!

C



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The Challenge of Being a Church Kid

(Part 2 of 2)

This article was originally a speech for the May Long Weekend organized by the Fraser Valley Young Peoples' League of the Canadian Reformed Churches in BC, held on Sunday, May 17, 2009.

Stand up

But then add another thing to this, namely stand up! What do I mean with this?

Well, it is one thing to train hard but one can never leave it at that. There comes a day when you have to practice what you've been taught and learned. Think of all of those Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. Back home they trained and trained. They were taught how to handle their weapons, how to deal with dangerous situations, how to respond to crisis. In other words, they learned all of the tools of the trade.

But they learned them for what? They learned them to cope and to handle the real situations of war. Today these same soldiers who trained hard are learning what it means to put their training into practice.

Much the same applies to you. Your Bible study, prayer, worship, service, and I might add what you learn in Catechism class, in young people's society and in the Christian school are all meant to be applied. Its no good if you learn it all but never use any of it in concrete ways and in the situations of life.

Nevertheless, this does happen. I know young people who learned all of the doctrines of the faith. They were faithful Catechism students. They assured me that they read their Bibles regularly and prayed every day. Some of them even came before the elders of the church with a view to professing their faith, and they were approved. So they stood before the congregation and gave their "I Do."

But what came of it? Nothing! They never really bothered to apply what they had learned. They were theoretical believers. They knew the doctrine. They employed the language. They made all of the right noises. However, when it came time to live it, practice it, employ it, they threw it all overboard. They refused to stand up and be counted.

What happened? In most cases head knowledge never really translated into heart knowledge and hand knowledge. They went through the motions. They were really what the Belgic Confession calls in Article 29 "hypocrites." Do you know the origin of that word? It comes from the Greek language and from a word which means "actor" or someone who plays a role in a play. It's all about "let's pretend."

Hence these people pretend to be something that they are not. They pretend to be religious. They pretend to be Christians. And it comes out when they have to put what they learn into practice. It comes out when temptations arise and they are not able to stand.

Again, it often comes out too in connection with relationships. Believing boy meets unbelieving girl. He is going to convert her. Only he fails and he surrenders. Instead of her coming with him, he goes with her into the land of unbelief, disobedience, and unholiness.

So in the end, you either stand up or you will surely fall down.

Do battle

But if we are to train hard and stand up, we are also to *do battle*. The Apostle Paul does not describe all of this armor without a purpose. Ultimately, it is all to be used – the belt, the breastplate, the sandals, the helmet, and the words. These are the instruments of war and they remind us that being a Christian means entering the battle zone. It means that there is a war on.

And as for the enemies? They consist of philosophies and ideas employed by people. Only you and I need to realize that behind godless, immoral people, there always stands someone else. Who? Paul calls him the "devil." For he reminds us that our struggle is not "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). So as you confront you enemies, realize well who is the real and main enemy.

In addition, realize that the devil uses many devices and many tactics. I would say that today his biggest tool has to do with the media. He has all of these allies in Hollywood South and Hollywood North. What do they not spew out but a steady diet of movies and videos filled with violence, mayhem, foul and blasphemous language, nudity and immorality?

Music

Also, there is the music industry. Every time I listen to rock, hard rock, rap, or what have you, I hear all of this filth and nonsense. For a while we had a boy across the street who, whenever he was washing his car or truck, or fixing it, would crank up the stereo and fill the neighborhood with rap and its f words. On more than one occasion I confronted him and told that he was offending my faith and my taste. I was also sorely tempted to take my big living room speakers, turn them to the window and drown him out with Beethoven and Rimsky Korsakov. Thankfully, he has since matured somewhat and no longer pollutes us with his sound waves.

Pornography

Oh and while we are at it, let me also mention pornography. Indeed, here is perhaps the biggest problem attached to our computer age. I have had it happen that I did an innocent computer search for something, not realizing that a certain word had a double meaning and there before my eyes my nineteen inch monitor was filled with pictures of naked ladies. In spite of the fact that the parental controls were activated, I still got a free dose of smut.

*You either stand up or you will surely
fall down*

These days smut comes at us from all sides. You can even get it on your cell phone or on your PDA. I happen to have an Apple iPhone and it is connected to the Internet, so guess what? Again, all of this dirty stuff is close at hand.

Young people, church kids, I do not exaggerate when I say that you are growing up in a world filled with verbal and visual pollution. It reaches out to you and seeks to entrap you and ensnare you.

Hence the call to do battle is no exaggeration. If you are going to live a healthy, Christian life in this high tech age you are going to have to practice self control. You are going to have to say "NO!" to pornography, to masturbation, to pre-marital sex, to homosexuality, to filthy jokes. At the same time you are going to have to stick close to what we quoted previously from Philippians 4. Do you remember it? "Whatever is true, whatever is noble. . . right. . . pure. . . lovely. . . admirable. . . excellent. . . praiseworthy – think about such things." Put them into practice!

Look to your commander

So train hard, stand up, do battle, and one more thing – *look to your commander*. Who is your Commander? None other than Jesus Christ, your Saviour and your Lord!

*The devil uses many devices and
many tactics*

Now we don't usually think of our Saviour in military terms. We think of Him as a true shepherd, as a wise teacher, as a most powerful doctor or healer, but as a general or a commander of an army? Not usually! We like to identify Him with the soft and gentle and kind side of life and not with conflict, blood, death, and battle.

Nevertheless, such a prejudice just shows that we need to read our Bibles better. For consider how the Apostle John portrays our Lord in Revelation chapter 1. In a vision John recounts that

When I turned I saw someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest (so far so good but then I saw that). His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (v 13-16).

Notice especially what comes out of his mouth. It is "a sharp double-edged sword." Try to imagine that!

Try to reconcile that as well with all of those sayings of "Jesus, meek and mild." Of course, in so many ways He is. To those who love Him, cling to Him, call upon Him, He is gentle and lowly in heart. But realize, and realize well, that to all those who promote evil, who hate and murder and cheat and steal and fornicate and stick up their long noses at God, He is a Man of War. He is a King of Justice and Vengeance. He is someone to be feared, respected, served, and worshipped.

Trust

In addition, He is someone to be trusted. He is to be trusted because He is perfectly wise, good, and all-powerful. He is to be trusted because He is faithful and true. He is to be trusted because He rules all things. He is to be trusted because his Word will be fulfilled.

If you are going to live a healthy, Christian life in this high tech age you are going to have to practice self control

Now trust is not always something that comes along easily or automatically. It needs to be prayed for. It needs the Holy Spirit to work it in our hearts and lives. I am sure that Joseph did not trust God automatically or easily. I am sure that he wrestled in prayer with God when it came to his brothers, to his being sold to the Midianite traders, to his encounter with Potiphar's wife, to his long stay in jail. Yet through it all and with God's help, he learned to trust, to trust in the providence of God and in the God of all providence.

It behooves us to do the same. Living as a church kid in today's world requires lots of close living and lots of running to Christ and trusting in Him. I would urge you over and over again to do that. Do not try to fight the spiritual battles of this life in your own strength. Do not think that little you all by yourself can whip the devil and put him in his place. Do not assume that you can stand up to the forces of smut and filth all alone.

Benedictions

You and I need Christ. This becomes clear too when we have a close look at any number of biblical benedictions. What is a "benediction"? It's Latin for "a good concluding word," "an encouraging word," "a good word of power and blessing." It always comes at the end of an apostolic letter.

In this connection let me encourage you with not one of them, but two of them. The first is found at the end of letter to the Hebrews and it goes like this:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing in him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (13:20, 21)

In short, your Commander will equip you to resist this world and its evils. He will also make sure that his holy will shall be done through you. Just look to Him in faith every day.

Oh, and one more thing. One more benediction. This time it comes from the short letter of Jude and it goes like this:

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24, 25)

Living as a church kid in today's world requires lots of close living and lots of running to Christ and trusting in Him

Did you hear that? What will God do for you who trust in Him? He will preserve you throughout this life. He will also usher you into the life to come and into his glorious presence. And that's not all, for you will be there "without fault," thanks to Christ and "with great joy," thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Look to your Commander everyday and He will guard you, keep you, lead you, and bless you with victory and glory.





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“Let’s Just Be Friends for Now:” A Personal Assessment of the New CanRC-URC Relationship

Often in the world of inter-church relations, the metaphor of courtship and marriage is used. Churches are said to be “getting to know each other,” “courting,” etc., with a view to an eventual union. In our relation with the United Reformed Churches of North America, such terms have also arisen. While metaphors of this sort are certainly limited, they can be helpful. In that vein, while the Canadian Reformed General Synod of May 2010 wrote to the URCNA synod and expressed its commitment to the eventual union, the URCNA General Synod of July 2010 responded and basically suggested that the two federations should “just be friends” for a while. There was no clear commitment to eventual union, neither was there a clear breaking off of the relationship. That’s the way it goes when a courtship breaks down. People are not really sure where to go from there.

Now let me point out that no synod ever put it quite like that. This is only my interpretation. Let me also point out that I am writing this purely as private opinion. I had some official roles to play in the last while and therefore was present at this last URCNA synod for several days; I will explain those below. Still, the opinion expressed below is my own. The official report will be written later by our official fraternal delegates. The issue however is weighty and urgent enough for me to voice an opinion already now.

A role

In various ways in the last number of years, I have been involved in the process. As a professor of the Theological Seminary and as a minister without

pastoral responsibilities, I regularly preach on URCNA pulpits and have as a result certainly become acquainted with many fine URC brothers and sisters. I rejoice in them and their commitment to the truth.

Last January, I became more involved when our Committee for Church Unity asked Dr. Jason Van Vliet and me to travel to California and appear before the Classis Southwest of the URCNA in order to answer specific questions that the Classis had about the Canadian Reformed Churches. Most of these questions had to do with our understanding of the Federal Vision controversy, the views of K. Schilder, and our general theological approach. Those questions and answers have since been published and can also be found online at <http://www.pupilsofchrist.com>. The response to the answers given, by the way, was all very positive. The visit went a long way towards removing misconceptions and wrong impressions of the CanRC. It is noteworthy that subsequently there were no formal objections raised by this Classis.

More recently, the CanRC Synod mandated Dr. Jason Van Vliet and me to attend the URCNA Synod and, if invited, answer on their floor questions that the URC churches might still have. This was a reciprocal arrangement, as members of the URC CERCU committee were also given the same privilege at the Canadian Reformed Synod in May 2010. The questions that Dr Van Vliet and I were asked to answer were considerably less weighty than the questions raised in California; the issues had to do with views on creation, degree of uniformity, nature of preaching, approach to communion and discipline, admonition of youth. There

were also questions that had to do with perceptions about excessive drinking, immodest dress, and lack of Christian behaviour on the hockey arenas. Judging by the response thereafter, however, many URC delegates were clearly uncomfortable with these last questions as a great number of delegates apologized to us as they felt that the same kind of charges could be levelled at them. Our response to these questions, by the way, was that while we recognized that these things happen, do not condone them, continue to preach and admonish on these points, we should not be surprised. The nature of a covenantal community is such that those who are weak in the faith and less eager to put it into practice are also among us in the hope that sometime in the future the Lord will cause them to work out all the consequences of the Christian faith more fully. The challenge in our day, I suggested, was to remain faithful to the justification by faith alone as well as to the Reformed position of children and youth in the covenant. Let us not, in reaction to the former point, move in a baptistic direction on the latter.

Also in another respect, I was involved with the last URC Synod. For the first time in the history of the Theological College, we were invited both to put up a display table at the URC Synod and to speak some words of introduction about the seminary to the Synod. We gladly accepted and made use of both invitations. Hence, some of our seminary professors were also at the URC Synod. Since there was no one to speak with at the display table during sessions of Synod, we availed ourselves instead of listening in on the sessions. It meant several busy days of catching the flavour of the URCNA through interacting personally, speaking, and listening to the debates on the floor of Synod.

Again, it is important to realize, this is not a report from the principal of the seminary to the Board, nor from a professor to a synodical committee. Nor does this view necessarily reflect that of any Board or committee. It is just my personal opinion and reflections for the benefit of members of the Canadian Reformed Churches. The question that will be large on our minds will be: *where do we go from here?*

Nine points

Besides asking the URCNA whether they were still committed to the relationship, the Canadian Reformed Synod also asked the URCNA about the status of the nine points of Schererville 2007. While I doubt that the URC Synod actually answered that question in a formal letter to us, it was the subject of lengthy debate since the Hills URC sought the rescinding of the nine

points on procedural grounds. Hills URC argued that the nine points did not come from a specific church and therefore was not lawfully on the table of the 2007 Synod. After a heated debate, the Hills URC appeal was defeated and the Nine Points stood. Some will ask, "What do I think about that?"

Two points here regarding the nine points. First, it is necessary to understand that while I think the nine points should have been more carefully considered and presented by Schererville, I have no significant objection to them. There was considerable concern raised about them initially when they were first published because many Canadian Reformed persons understood them as a critique of the theological positions they had learned from K. Schilder and others. When one reads them against the backdrop of what is being said among Federal Vision proponents, however, they become much clearer and even quite acceptable to us. For more on this, see the article "CanRC Answers to URC Questions" on www.pupilsforchrist.com.

Second, concerning the procedural question, there was a very interesting debate on the floor of Synod. It was a rare moment when the chairman and the vice-chairman asked for the floor shortly after each other. The chairman, Rev. Ralph Pontier, rose first to warn about the danger of matters being discussed at synod that did not adequately come from the churches. No minor assembly discussed the Nine Points before Synod did; they did not come from there. Later the vice chairman, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, rose to argue that the matter of Federal Vision was legitimately on the agenda of Synod having been placed there by the churches, and that the Nine Points were nothing more than an answer to the Federal Vision questions. What do I think? I think both of these fine brothers were correct. Synods may not make up their own agendas, but the Federal Vision matter was placed on the agenda in a proper manner, and the Nine Points were an answer to the Federal Vision question. Just as our synods often write lengthy observations and considerations in response to matters and those observations and considerations are not derived directly from the churches, so here. Frankly, the existence and confirmation of the Nine Points does not, in my judgement, need to pose any significant problems to the Canadian Reformed Churches. Similarly, it should be noted here that without dissent, the URC Synod accepted the more lengthy report on Federal Vision and Justification. Again, I have no significant problem with that. While I am not sure that the body of the report accurately reflects the views of Federal

Vision writers, that is something that such persons will need to address themselves. The conclusions of the Justification report however are largely quotations from the Three Forms of Unity and hence ones with which Canadian Reformed people would wholeheartedly agree. The only criticism I have is that, given the nature of the areas of the final fifteen recommendations, it would have been good to affirm that the covenant promises are extended to all covenant children and not just to those who respond in faith; this, however, is not something Federal Vision people deny but it would have been a helpful affirmation of the teaching of Lord's Day 27.

In any case, I believe that if we have not adequately done so thus far, the Canadian Reformed Churches would do well to express solid agreement with the URCNA on the matter of justification. There should be no doubt about the fact that we stand shoulder to shoulder with these brothers on this most significant doctrinal point. Justification is solely through faith alone on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.

Three Committees

This URNA Synod also had on its agenda Overture 13 which urged Synod to conclude the work of the URCNA's Phase 3 Unity Committees.

Let me quote from Overture 13 at length. The Classis wrote:

This overture calls us to express appreciation for the work that has been accomplished by these committees while acknowledging that our federations are not yet ready to enter into Phase Three of our Guidelines for Ecumenicity and Church Unity. . . . We wish to set forth two principles with absolute clarity.

First Principle: We believe that the Lord of the Church does call His people to pursue unity of heart, mind and purpose (Eph. 4:1-6; John 17:20-23). However, a combination of sinfulness and cultural distinctions sometimes prevents or indefinitely delays *complete* unity among like-minded groups of believers. *We should never be satisfied with such a situation.* But neither should our longing for fuller expressions of unity cause us to sacrifice the unity the Lord already has granted within our existing federations.

Second Principle: We love and respect our Canadian Reformed brothers, and we regard their congregations as like-minded sister churches. *Please do not read anything in this overture as*

a contradiction of this. Since the inception of the URCNA, we have appreciated the encouragement, fellowship and example of our brothers in the Canadian Reformed Churches. We consider the Canadian Reformed Churches to be a federation of true churches which serve the Lord faithfully and admirably. We desire to continue serving the Lord alongside of them, just as we serve alongside our brothers in the Reformed Church in the United States and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (with which we also enjoy Phase 2, or "sister church," relationships).

Division in the process of uniting

But, after nearly a decade of struggling to find a way to merge the URC and the CanRC into a single federation, we believe that the process is having a detrimental effect on both federations, as well as on their relationship with one another. In fact, we have become convinced that continued efforts to merge *at this time* will result not in one federation, but *three* – because a substantial number of congregations from both existing federations seem almost certain to refuse to remain in a merged federation.

Surely, that unwillingness to manifest a greater degree of federalational unity is due *in part* to our sinfulness. But whose sin is it? Time and again, we find ourselves unable to answer that question. We believe the question is unanswerable because many of our differences are rooted not in sin, but in historical and cultural differences. These differences have left both federations with perspectives to which we hold tenaciously – not because of sinful pride, but because we truly believe that our perspective reveals the proper course for the churches to follow.

Overture 13 then went on to suggest that the work of three significant committees be concluded.

A common songbook?

Whereas there was a time in our relationship wherein we had one joint committee to work towards a common songbook to be used by a new united federation, Synod Schererville 2007 already moved away from that direction when it shifted their committee's focus away from a common songbook and towards a new URCNA *Psalter Hymnal*. London 2010 went only a small step further when it decided "to conclude the mandate of the Songbook Committee to produce a common songbook" (Press Release, July 30, 2010).

Personally, I am not surprised. From my experience on many URCNA pulpits I know that the brothers and sisters there have a deep love and appreciation for many of the psalms and hymns. The same is true of the brothers and sisters in the CanRC with our *Book of Praise*. To combine these two books into one book that would adequately satisfy the wishes of both groups is a monumental, if not impossible, task. Clearly, *if these two federations ever do get together, they will have to be willing to sing out of either or both books*. Maybe it's a moot point. As all these songs will undoubtedly be scriptural, our only real concern may be how to carry all these books to church; but by the time we all get together we might just be singing collectively by means of a projector screen anyway. Our electronic age will present us with unifying possibilities!

Theological education?

Overture 13 also suggested that the Theological Education Committee be dissolved. Again, one need not be surprised that London 2010 agreed. The committee had a mandate to resolve the tension between the position of the URCNA which was against a federational seminary because of bad experiences in the past with the position of the CanRC which is very convinced that a federational seminary is the more biblical and proper approach. Burlington 2010 and London 2010 both rejected the committee's final proposal that would allow entrance to the ministry through independent seminaries and place a federational seminary under the jurisdiction of a regional synod. London 2010 declared that the committee had fulfilled their mandate (Press Release, July 28), rejected the model proposed, and suggested that churches that came up with a better model could address a subsequent synod by overture.

Obviously, I have an opinion in this discussion. A federational seminary is not just a Canadian Reformed preference; this has been regarded as the proper route ever since the Secession days in The Netherlands. Training future ministers is not the business of private enterprise or independent boards; it is obviously the business of the church to prepare future ministers of the Word. Bad experiences with previous seminaries is no reason to reject the principle; when a seminary goes bad it is also the federation which is responsible for failing to properly govern. In Hamilton we are blessed to have both a federation that does govern and a seminary faculty that is willing to be governed and respects the wishes of the federation.

Having a federational seminary certainly has its benefits. In the present we are enjoying a high degree of unity in the CanRC federation and much of that is due to the fact that almost all our ministers have received the same seminary education. A federational seminary with a high degree of academic rigor also bodes well for the future of the federation. As of 2011 the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary will have seen a complete change of faculty over a process of no more than ten years, and, under God's wonderful provision, that has happened without the sense or the charge that we have changed direction.

Is it entirely impossible to unite these two approaches to seminary education? I continue to believe that an approach that I have defended before is the most viable option. If there is a willingness to have a federational seminary, a federation could establish a board which would both supervise the federational seminary as well as evaluate the seminary education of those who attend non-federational schools. Such a board could hold seminaries that want federational approval accountable to agreed upon standards and ensure that the final outcomes are as similar as possible. Such a board could even insist on representation in boards of seminaries seeking support. But that is undoubtedly a discussion for another day.

Joint church order?

Overture 13 also asked London 2010 to "declare that the mandate of the Proposed Joint Church Order Committee has been fulfilled." Overture 18 likewise asked that this Committee be disbanded. London did not quite do that, however. It continued the committee but at the same time decided that any changes to the Proposed Church Order should now be directed to the synod by overture rather than to the committee. While this is an interesting development, it is also quite problematic. It means that the Proposed Church Order would no longer be a jointly agreed upon document as one federation may make changes which might not be agreeable to the other federation. Is the URCNA getting prepared to go to the bargaining table on aspects of the Joint Church Order in case the churches do warm up to the idea of federative unity at some future date?

While I am not sure what all the issues with the Proposed Joint Church Order might be for the URC brothers, I have certainly observed one during the time I spent in London. A Canadian Reformed person sitting there listening to over 200 brothers dialogue together in a large assembly will often be struck by the great contrast with the smaller delegated bodies

Church News

Declined the call to the American Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan:

Candidate Tony Roukema

Accepted the call to the St. Albert Canadian Reformed Church of St. Albert, Alberta:

Candidate Tony Roukema

of the Canadian Reformed synods. It became apparent to me that this Synod could complete its agenda in a quicker fashion (one week) than a CanRC synod (two-three weeks) also because it has a larger number of committees. But how well will this continue to function if the number of churches and hence the number of delegates continues to grow? Clearly, there was a sense too that every church and every varying opinion wanted to be heard and heard clearly. Perhaps the fact that the larger percentage of the URCNA is American has had an influence on the representational nature of this body. One leaves then very doubtful that any committee will ever manage to convince this federation to operate its broader ecclesiastical assemblies in a delegated rather than representative manner.

Two new problems?

Of particular interest to the Canadian Reformed federation are a couple of other points.

One was a proposal to define more carefully several terms and the authority given to them. Synod London was presented with terms such as "doctrinal affirmation," "pastoral advice," "study committee reports," and "synodical judgements." Clearly this was an attempt to define both the nature and the authority of a document such as the Nine Points of Schererville 2007. The discussion was quite extensive, however, and the emotions ran high. The proposal suggested, for example, that while "doctrinal affirmations" could not be used to bring disciplinary charges against anyone, such affirmations should be respected and upheld by all office bearers. To Canadian Reformed ears, this sounded too much like extra-scriptural binding which has caused many a division in the past. In the end, it was referred to the standing Synodical Rules Committee for further study and reflection. A federation such as ours would do well, however, to scrutinize very carefully the document that eventually evolves from that process.

Another discussion that took place was about the level of doctrinal commitment expected of the communicant membership of the churches. Is it full assent to all possible doctrines? Is there room for exceptions or stipulations? As the Canadian Reformed have had these kinds of discussions as well, with varying answers, it will be beneficial to observe also the results of this discussion.

So what will it take?

Many a young man or woman faced with a broken relationship has asked the question of the other person, "So what will it take to get us together?" A federation might ask the same of another federation.

For one thing, it will take a strong desire for such a union. Do we really want it? Is it even necessary? While our Synod expressed the sentiment that lives within our federation, namely, that we should move forward with the unification process, I am not convinced that anyone in the Canadian Reformed Churches is ready *at this point* for union with the URC. There are still obstacles, as mentioned above. There is a perception of division within the URCNA. "Better no marriage than a bad marriage," we would say. Perhaps it's time to re-think our ecclesiology. Maybe it's not everything to be one federation. When we joined organizations like NAPARC and ICRC, were we not saying that the Church of Jesus Christ is wider than one or even several federations? We do not feel pressure to become one with the OPC; so why do we exert pressure when it comes to the URCNA? But still, when all things are equal and union with another federation seems almost natural and can happen without much controversy, we ought to unite. Such union is still biblically mandated. But, as Overture 13 suggests, if we try to merge two churches into one but in the meantime actually create three we have lost much and probably gained nothing.

But in case things change and we want to court this sister again, what should we do in the meantime? Several things, it seems to me.

First, *be prepared to sing out of more than one songbook.*

Second, *be prepared for an extensive discussion about the possibility of having major assemblies that would be representative rather than delegated bodies.*

Third, *be careful as to how one writes about Federal Vision material.* This sister of ours is sensitive on this issue because of the lack of clarity on justification, and that sensitivity is not unjustified. If we care about our relationship, blanket statements of approval of Federal Vision material are foolhardy.

Fourth, *be creative and prepared for a new discussion on theological education.* The idea of a seminary under a regional synod has been rejected, as has the concept of regional synods. The idea of a synodically mandated board for theological education is worth pursuing.

Fifth, *be content to continue to preach on each other's pulpits and exchange attestations.* Turning the clock back on these points will only be considered offensive and will be a sure way to break off the relationship for good.

Let us remember: just because the URCNA is not ready to unite with us, that does not make her our enemy. We are still good friends, brothers in our wonderful Lord, members together of NAPARC and ICRC. The enemy is the devil and the times are evil. There just may be another day when we need each other more than we do today. If our Lord tarries long, there just may be a day when we unite.

To quote from Overture 13 again:

We believe the churches of both federations would be better served *at this time* by removing the pressure of our attempts to develop the formal structures of a united federation, which attempts belong to a later stage of the unity process.

Meanwhile, we already acknowledge one another as faithful churches of Jesus Christ. Let us

be intentional about assisting one another in the maintenance, defense and promotion of Reformed doctrine, liturgy, church polity and discipline. Let us continue accepting one another's members at the Lord's Table; opening our pulpits to each other's ministers; receiving ecclesiastical delegates to our broader assemblies; and encouraging our members to interact with one another. Let us find ways to help one another to pursue the lost, disciple the found, and encourage the saints. And let our CERCU members continue to assist the churches to find ways to dispel fears and increase our mutual recognition of the unity our federations already have, so that future efforts to enter Phase Three might be received with the enthusiastic support of the churches.

And may the Lord use these informal, face-to-face contacts to bind together our hearts, such that our eventual unity of federations will arise as a natural product of our knowledge of and love for each other.

Personally, I believe that those are fine words that we do well to heed. Let us press on together because regardless of the names of our federations, we are one. When we follow the path sketched above, we may just come to a day when we believe that it is possible, wise, and obedient to unite after all.

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Address at Synod 2010 URCNA – London, ON

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Esteemed brothers in the Lord, delegates at this General Synod of the URCNA

When I bring to you formal greetings in the Lord, it is in deep gratitude that I do so for the fact that by our unity in the true faith we share in his work of atonement and in his resurrection from the dead through which He obtained his Holy Spirit for us that we may live in newness of life with our Triune God. He is our common Saviour, our Risen Lord, and Exalted King! He is the Head of his Catholic Church and it is in his church-gathering work that we have the privilege of serving Him. He gave us the means of grace and the precious promise that his Holy Spirit would lead us in all the truth. Our common bond of faith, love, and unity in the truth, therefore, incites us to seek you, greet you, and appeal to you that we may continue to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace! Yes, we pray with our only High Priest, that we may continue to grow together in the Lord, in the truth, and in the manifestation of the unity of the Triune God as He has revealed Himself in truth in his Word!

It is a real privilege and honour for me, personally, to be here and represent our Canadian Reformed Churches. When I express the prayer and desire that we may continue to grow together, I do this gratefully observing that we *have* grown together in the Lord a lot since the mid-1990s. Among the highlights in my life definitely have been the twelve years I served our churches in the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity from 1992-2004. I was blessed richly as I attended your alliance meetings at first and later on your synods in Lynwood, St. Catherines, Hudsonville, and Escondido. I attended meetings of Classis Ontario. While closer to home I've seen the bonds grow and deepen with your ministers in the GTA. Most special, however, were the occasions at which I was privileged to fill the pulpit of one of your URCs! Looking back over this process, therefore, I am very encouraged by the grace of God and the power of his Holy Spirit as we increasingly see Christ's prayer come to fulfilment and reality as He has been bringing our

churches together more and more closely towards true church unity!

At the same time, brothers, I realize and am aware that much has changed in the course of those years. Even in the way of an increase in numbers, I have seen your federation grow from some thirty congregations at first to more than 100 today! You have become spread out geographically and the balance between congregations in Canada and the United States has changed as well. At the beginning of this development our Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity worked closely and intensely together with your CERCU brothers and the results were very encouraging: we moved from Phase 1 to Phase 2, laying the basis for the next move with the establishment of Statements of Agreement, which were received by your General Synod and ours in 2001. I believe that we owe it to each other that we do not only observe and receive these Statements of Agreement but also *uphold* and *honour* them as part of our unity in the truth. Yes, for those churches that joined in the course of the years it should be an incentive to assess the situation at their time of merger, taking ownership of the (brief) history of the federation of churches they desire to join. They may be expected to take note and interact and work with these Statements. The onus is on all other churches as well, though, to remember what was stated and to be committed to taking this course of action!

During this time of growth and development, you have dealt with various issues and matters that came your way, which indicated that there were ongoing dynamics of unification going on among you. As Canadian Reformed Churches we have observed these developments and dynamics and we rejoice with you in the continued unity you enjoyed in spite of difficulties and challenges that arose, in spite even of diversity of practices and of theological perspectives among you. Wherever applicable and appropriate we became part of the discussion, yes even subject to scrutiny and/or suspicion ourselves! Yet, we saw it as the normal and natural process of churches living

together in a federation of churches that deal with all matters according to the same standards: God's Word and the Reformed confessions. The history of the church of Christ in general, and the history of the churches of the Reformation particularly, show us that there will always be questions, concerns, and critical issues that the churches need to deal with. As the leaders of the first Secession expressed it, "Unity in necessities, freedom in what's not of necessity, and love in all!" It's one of the blessings and purposes of a federation of churches to deal with them. Hence, if and when there are matters that give rise to discussions and even disagreements, these should not be or become obstacles in the way to ecclesiastical unity! On the contrary, as we have witnessed over the past year, it should be encouraging when we deal with those questions in the proper scriptural and spiritual way. It testifies to the fact that we are one, not only in word, or not just in name as Reformed churches with the same confessional standards, but also in deed! This is how we may and should live and work together in a federation of united Reformed churches!

Dear brothers, your churches are precious to us and the aspiration and anticipation of church unity in one federation of united Reformed churches is high among our ecclesiastical priorities and pursuits. Of course, we are realistic enough to note, as your representative at General Synod Burlington put it, that "we are at something of a delicate time with regard to the unity process. We are at the point where we see many practical difficulties, where there is fatigue, frustration, and sometimes disillusionment." Therefore, indeed, with tenderness, patience, wisdom, and with firm resolve, fortitude, and commitment we must walk on in obedience to our Saviour, walk on *together* that is! We are not of those who shrink back but of those who believe and are saved! Therefore I would like to urge you to move ahead without hesitation or reluctance! I would plead with you to take the letter of appeal seriously, which General Synod Burlington 2010 wrote to you. I do not now need to repeat the sentiments and concerns expressed in that formal letter. Yet, I do want to ask you urgently and sincerely: heed our appeal for continuity!

As one of the two Coordinators in the Committee for Church Unity, I also wish to affirm and appeal that you accept the requests that are contained in General Synod's letter pertaining to the four sub-committees. Some made progress, relatively speaking, while others became frustrated due to the lack of it, considering how much they had to do in coming together "on the same page:" living together under one Church Order, singing together from the same song book, and training

together our future ministers in their theological education. May you indeed come to the resolution to re-appoint the Joint Church Order Committee to finalize its work! May you also go back to the close cooperation between the two song book committees as it was enjoyed before the 2007 General Synod, so that we may as yet achieve what we expressed in our Statements of Agreement and "produce a song book that contains the Anglo-Genevan psalter. . . , while including hymns that also meet the standards of faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Reformed Confessions." And as far as the theological education of our future ministers is concerned, I would like to re-iterate our Agreement in 2001, as our General Synod Burlington did as well, that we should retain at least one federational theological school; thus preserving what has been such a tremendous blessing to our churches. It's, as our General Synod letter expresses, a principle that our churches hold dear! Accepting a federational seminary may not be a matter of scriptural *command*, as you have observed, yet it certainly is a *principle* rooted and grounded in its essence and existence in God's Word (2 Tim 2:2), the Confessions (HC, LD 38) and the Church Order of Dort (our Article 19). With such underpinnings, we should certainly treat it as demanding the highest possible priority and the strongest spiritual preference!

Beloved brothers, as Coordinator in the Committee for Church Unity and representative of the Canadian Reformed Churches, I wish to assure you of our continued commitment to the process toward full ecclesiastical and federational unity. I also want to offer our services and make them available to your churches and classes. We wish to further the process of acquaintance and serve the progress in acceptance, in whatever way we can, be that by attending your meetings and assemblies in the United States or Canada, by organizing conferences and theological debates, or by answering questions in one setting or another. At the same time I appeal to you that we keep our focus and vision on the calling from the Lord and on the pursuit of ecclesiastical unity in spirit and truth. Allow me to quote once more what we expressed in our Statements of Agreement, namely, "Churches of various backgrounds but one confession have the duty to pursue the highest forms of ecclesiastical fellowship possible in their context, in order to promote the unity of the church locally as well as in the federation of churches."

May you receive the blessing and commitment from the Lord to continue in this spirit and resolve! May our heavenly God and Father bless your deliberations and decisions, for the well-being of his churches and for the greater glory of his Name! Thank you!



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A Noble Task

Andrew Jacob Pol, *A Noble Task: The Work of Elders in the Canadian Reformed Churches in Manitoba*, 2009

Additional Information: 318 pages, about \$50.00, available from the author at ajpol@mts.net or Bethel Books (519- 351-4290)

This interesting study is a dissertation that Rev. Andrew J. Pol wrote for the degree of Doctor of Ministry at Providence Theological Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba. We congratulate our brother in achieving this milestone! His work shows that there can be some real benefits for the churches if ministers who are able and have the opportunity continue to study and do relevant research.

The purpose of this study is to determine how elders individually and as a body can be helped to understand more deeply their role and importance in preparing "God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12), with the focus being on the role of the elders "in overseeing the doctrine and life of the congregation members by means of informal contacts and official visits" (7).

To put the investigation on a proper footing, Pol first investigates what the Bible, both Old and New Testament, says about the offices, in particular the office of elder (16-73). This survey highlights some very interesting areas such as what constitutes a biblical office, women and the office of elders and deacons, and discussions in our Dutch sister churches about offices. From there Pol surveys how the Reformation sought to regain a biblical understanding of the offices (73-125), paying particular attention to the contributions of Martin Bucer and John Calvin. Their work is a legacy that also the Canadian Reformed Churches have inherited and is reflected to a great extent in our forms for ordination. Interestingly, Bucer wanted the ordination ceremonies of the different offices, including deacon, "to be essentially the same, including the laying on of hands" (85).

There is a special section on elders and home visits (125-137). This practice is an important part of the legacy of Bucer and Calvin. Both correctly emphasized its key importance for promoting the spiritual

development of the church and Pol therefore profiles especially this aspect of their work in his dissertation.

The second half of Pol's study has a practical focus. Through surveys and questionnaires (included as appendices) the author attempts to find out "how the office is functioning in practice in the Canadian Reformed Churches in the province of Manitoba. Are the elders and the church members they deal with satisfied that this office is functioning in a scriptural and upbuilding way?" (138). There was significant interest in Pol's work as he had a good rate of response to the confidential questionnaires directed to congregation members and a very high rate of response from the office bearers of the four churches involved.

The results of the questionnaires are interesting to read. They give an insight into what lives in the congregations, how they regard the work of the elders, and what areas elders can concentrate on. Some results are as follows.

- In their visits, elders should pay attention to the frequency of Bible reading, prayer, preparation for Sunday worship services, the frequency of church attendance, participation in church-related activities, and talking to fellow church members about the Christian faith since all these are factors that show a positive correlation with feeling connected as a church member. Even a little informal contact with the elders helps people feel connected to the church (257-258).
- "When elders discuss the matter of voluntary financial contributions with members, they tend to be more faithful in giving" (258).
- "Respondents enjoyed discussions with elders but indicated discomfort when questions felt more like an interrogation" (259).
- "Elders have a harder time connecting with children than with their parents. This is an area that needs attention" (259).
- "Most members are prepared to take the instruction, advice, or admonitions of an elder seriously if it is biblically sound, sensible, and brought in a humble way" (259).
- "Best experiences with elders arise when they show genuine interest and a loving attitude, especially during times of crisis. Worst experiences are caused by elders who are unprepared and impersonal. Members also regret not receiving attention during a crisis or when it is not given until much later" (259).

- "When arranging a visit, elders do well to ask members if there are special concerns they would like to talk about. They can also solicit feedback during their visits in order to minister to the needs of the members with increasing effectiveness" (261).
- "Members understand the importance of giving spiritual support to elders as well as helping them in other ways where possible. This involves keeping the communication lines open and fostering a supportive environment at home and at church. Various comments also made it clear that times of rest between terms of service are important for preventing elders from suffering from burnout" (261).

In his concluding remarks, Pol notes that one respondent verbalized a thought shared by many. "I

want all elders to know that their good work is very needed and much appreciated" (264). Assuming that the two rural and two urban congregations involved in this study are typical in the Canadian Reformed Churches, there is much in this work that will help elders to see how they are perceived by those they seek to serve. This feature, along with the biblical and historical section, makes this study very worthwhile and recommended reading for the elders. At the very least, it would be helpful for every consistory to order a copy and use it for reflecting on and evaluating their own work of shepherding the flock.

As Reformed churches, we have a tremendous treasure in the office of the elder. We do well to honour, use, and safeguard it. May this study, *A Noble Task*, function to that end.

