

Clarion

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE: TO ENCOURAGE, EDUCATE, ENGAGE, AND UNITE

Failure of Classical Examinations?



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Issue 22 is led by Dr. James Visscher's article, "Classical Examinations." In this article he asks how our federation could review our current ministerial examination procedures and seek to improve them.

We also have an article from Rev. John van Popta, which was originally a "Chapel Talk" given at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

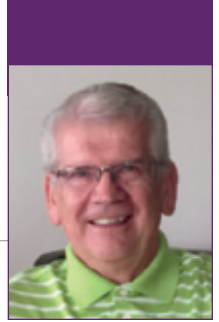
This issue brings readers a Remembrance Day mediation in Treasures, New & Old. There are also many of our regular columns, such as Clippings on Politics & Religion, Church News Review, Education Matters, and *Clarion Kids*. There is also a mission news article from MERF and a press release.

Laura Veenendaal

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Classical Examinations

*I am of the opinion that we need to review our
present procedures and ask whether or not
there is not a better way*

In every church federation there are usually some subjects that generate no small measure of discussion, even at times disagreement and outrage. In our Canadian Reformed federation, as well as in other Reformed federations, one of these subjects has to do with classical examinations. In particular, it has to do with examinations that grant men the right to preach in the churches (preaching consent), that declare men eligible for call (preparatory), or give them the green light to be ordained (peremptory). Even more specifically, it has to do with the fact that from time to time young men *fail* one or other of these examinations and are sent home to try again three or four months later.

Controversy

Now, what is so controversial about that? It may be disappointing and sad, but should it really be a topic of disagreement and outrage? What is it that is driving this reaction? A number of factors come to mind: (1) There is the fact that usually the young man being examined has just completed three or four years of study at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. (Are the examiners really wiser than his professors?); (2) There is the fact that he has been preaching in the churches and has often received positive comments on his preaching. (Are the examiners really better judges than the members in the pew?); (3) There is the fact that from time to time word leaks out that any number of elders at Classis were in disagreement with the decision to fail. (Are the deputy examiners really wiser than the elders?); (4) There is the fact that such a failure is very public, causes a considerable amount of embarrassment all around, leaves a graduate floundering financially. (Are the

examiners really sensitive to the dire situation that the student/graduate/candidate will be in?); (5) There is the fact that almost always he passes the second time around anyway. (Are the examiners just being difficult or are they perhaps inflated with their own learning?)

Embarrassment

From the above you can see that one of the things that really sets this subject apart is the amount of emotion it generates. Take the men who teach at CRTS. Before my brother became a professor and I served as a governor for many years, I saw firsthand how every failure of a student at Classis cut deeply into the morale at the seminary. Often the professors were left shaking their heads and wondering what they had done wrong. At times they doubled their efforts to avoid such outcomes in the future, and still they did not succeed. Since that time, not much has changed. One classis after another continues to fail students, graduates, and candidates.

At the same time, the embarrassment is not limited to the Seminary; it is also felt by the calling church. Here the church is waiting with a letter of call to hand out and the graduate fails, or it is waiting to ordain a candidate and he fails. Questions arise: "Did we call the right man or not? Will our future minister be able to cut it?" And then there are those questions from neighbouring church members, "What's the matter with your graduate? What happened to your candidate?"

Still, the Seminary and the calling church are not the only ones under a cloud; in a sense, the whole federation feels the chill. Every failure at a classis is seen as a

black mark on the reputation of the federation as a whole. “What’s wrong with our Seminary? What’s wrong with our students? What’s wrong with our major assemblies?”

Oh, and lest we forget, there is also the student or graduate. Perhaps if the examination was not so public it would not hurt so much. Yet the reality is that many of my colleagues get deeply discouraged when this happens to them. Some of them spend the rest of their lives carrying around the burden of this failure.

Is it worth it?

In light of all of this debris, I am of the opinion that we need to review our present procedures and ask whether or not there is not a better way. Of course, some may think that abolition is the way out. In other words, get rid of all classical examinations – period – and leave it to the Seminary. If the CRTS faculty decides to pass someone, the churches should merely acquiesce.

I do not share that sentiment. Indeed, I continue to believe in the principle that the churches need to remain in control of access to the ministry of the gospel.

Whether or not it should continue to do so as it is presently done, however, is another matter and is surely open for discussion. Do the readers realize that at present theology students are examined *four* times? They are regularly examined at Seminary. They are examined when they request permission to speak an edifying word (preaching consent). They are examined again when they apply for eligibility to receive a call. They are examined once more before they can be ordained. In short, there is a virtual parade of examinations.

Speaking personally

On a personal note, I will always think back to the year 1972 as a milestone year in my life. In April of that year I had to pass at least seven seminary exams. Thereafter in June I went before Classis to be examined for eligibility (three to four hours) and then in October I was examined again for ordination (seven hours). In between that I had to visit the churches that had called me and come to a decision about which one to accept. In addition, I married and went on a honeymoon that was cut short by the death of my father-in-law. My wife and I said goodbye to all of our family on both sides and moved out West where we did not know anyone. Is it any wonder that for months after my ordination I would wake up in a sweat in the middle of the night because I dreamt that I had to prepare for yet another exam?

So, is there a way to streamline the process? No doubt there is more than one way. Personally, I am more and more leaning in the direction that the matter of eligibility should be left up to the Seminary to decide and that the churches should be the ones who decide on ordination into the ministry. This means that the churches would still have the final say.

Changes

Yet change comes about slowly in the church, and that raises the question about the interim. What can be done about the present situation?

Text choice

There are a number of suggestions that come to mind. For one, the deputies for examinations that every classis appoints need to consider their role carefully when it comes to assigning a Bible passage for the sermon. On more than one occasion graduates have been given a text to preach on that even more experienced preachers would rarely touch. At other times the deputies assign a passage on which there are legitimate but different lines of interpretation, thus forcing the student or graduate to make a choice. And then, no matter what choice he makes, he is criticized. If he opts for interpretation A, some members of Classis take him to task and if he chooses for interpretation B, other members of Classis are critical of him. In short, he cannot win. Hence text choice is important, and deputies have a duty to make sure that it is fair.

Elders first, ministers second

Another suggestion that is often followed in a certain classis is that when the sermon comes into discussion, the elders should be asked for their evaluations first. Why should this be done? It is because experience teaches that when the ministers go first, the criticism can get out of hand.

What do I mean? Well, the reality is that elders and ministers listen differently. The elders listen as members of the congregation and look for a message that speaks to them and to the members of their ward. On the other hand, the ministers (and here I include myself) tend to check boxes. What this means is that ministers have a whole bunch of boxes in their heads when it comes to sermon evaluation: Is the introduction relevant, attention-grabbing, and does it lead naturally into the text? Do the theme and points

properly reflect the text? Is enough attention paid to the context? Is the sermon Christo-centric? Is it redemptive-historical? Is there application, what kind, and does it arise out of the text? Also, does he speak clearly? Is his sermon proposal easy to follow? Are his gestures appropriate? The list is long. Beside each of these questions there is a box and you need enough check marks in the boxes to make the grade and pass the exam.

Is it biblical?

It would seem that gone are the days when the basic question was: is this sermon biblically faithful and confessionally sound? I remember very well an older colleague schooling and scolding us younger colleagues after an exam went off the rails. He said that we went way too far in our criticism. To him it sounded like a seminary sermon criticism session. He also added that no student or candidate knows how to preach. It all takes time and a lot of practice. Yes, and – even then – we do not always get it right.

A little creativity goes a long way

While in active service, I served as a Deputy ad Article 48 C.O. for many years. As such a deputy you are supposed to sit in and judge a classical peremptory exam. In the end, you even have veto power. Together you and the other deputy with you press either the green or red button. If as deputies you decide that the student or candidate has done poorly, you push the red button and he fails. Even if Classis disagrees, he still fails.

Our examinations always need to be coated with a good deal of humility

Thus on one occasion my ministerial colleague and I sat in on an exam and the sermon was up first. It was weak and it was in the red, to say the least. What to do? Fail him and send him home for a three or four month refresher? No, we recommended as deputies that Classis proceed with the exam and then evaluate the whole thing at the end. The result was that the rest of the exam went well.

What to do now: pass him or fail him? After ample discussion by Classis and between the deputies, we, as deputies, recommended to Classis that the candidate be given the green light for ordination provided that for the first six months of his ministry he would agree to work together

with a senior minister in the Classis who lived nearby. The recommendation was accepted by all, the candidate was ordained and in no time at all he found his sermon footing. A little creativity and flexibility can go a long way.

More than one sermon

One more thing is pertinent to this discussion and that has to do with the preaching part of the exam. Normally, a graduate has his text assigned by the deputies, while the candidate gets to choose his own text, as long as it has not been evaluated previously. When he then comes to Classis, he has his one sermon with him and that is what he preaches or presents.

Now, in Classis Pacific West, for many years the requirement has been somewhat different. The candidate is expected to present a sermon, but he is also asked to take some other sermons along (two, I believe). Why that? You might say that it is to give the candidate the benefit of the doubt. If his sermon is really bad, then the deputies and members of Classis may request to see his other two sermons. They can then ascertain whether his weak sermon is the norm (in which case, we have a serious problem) or a fluke (in which case, mercy can be extended).

Concluding

In conclusion, it may be beneficial for a classis to take a good hard look at its procedures and build in some more flexibility. There is more than one way to evaluate the competence of a student/graduate/candidate. At the same time, it is questionable whether failing a student for a weak sermon and telling him to come back in three or four months solves anything.

In addition, our examinations always need to be coated with a good deal of humility. Over the years I have sat in on many examinations and heard many a sermon. Very few of those sermons checked all the boxes and most of them had glaring weaknesses (including my own), but the members of Classis were compassionate and understood. A good preacher does not fall out of the sky; he becomes that way as a result of much study, sweat, and prayer. We are all, in the words of the apostle Paul, “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7) who need much help from above, and that goes for preachers in particular.





Remembering Jerusalem

"Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!" Psalm 137:6

At this time of year, we remember with much gratitude the sacrifice which many have made in past wars to preserve our freedom. Many soldiers in our armed forces suffered injury and gave their lives so that we would be able to live in safety and prosperity. At cenotaphs around the country, we gather in respectful silence to remember their sacrifice.

Psalm 137 is a psalm of remembrance. It seems to have been written by a temple singer who was looking back, remembering the time when he and other faithful Israelites were in exile in Babylon. By the waters in Babylon, they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion. They were overwhelmed by sorrow when they remembered the destruction of Jerusalem. The temple on Mount Zion was now in ruins, destroyed by the Babylonian army.

For the faithful Israelite this was the ultimate disaster that could happen. The temple was where God had dwelt among his people. Mount Zion was where the sacrifices were offered, where the blood of animals was poured out, foreshadowing the perfect atoning sacrifice to come. It was in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, where reconciliation with God would happen but

now it seemed that this was no longer possible. It seemed that God had rejected them forever. Now by the waters of Babylon, they were cut off from Jerusalem and were suffering the consequences of their sins against the Lord.

Their Babylonian captors had made their situation worse by taunting them to sing the songs of Zion. But how could they sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land? How could they sing songs of joy of fellowship with God when they were banished from his dwelling place on earth, when his house was in ruins?

In the midst of this sad remembering, the psalmist confesses his faith in the trustworthiness of God's promises. Even though Jerusalem has been destroyed and is still in ruins, he calls down upon himself a curse if he forgets Jerusalem. For a temple singer he calls down upon himself the worst possible consequences if he fails to remember Jerusalem. These consequences are that his right hand wastes away and his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, making him unable to sing. If he forgets Jerusalem, then he is not worthy of singing to the Lord ever again. He knows that God is faithful, and that Jerusalem will be restored. He knows that God's Word is trustworthy. He re-

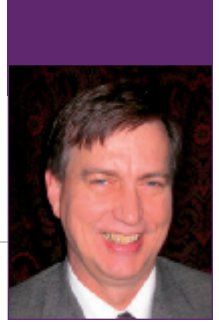
calls the prophecies of Jeremiah which promised the restoration of Jerusalem (e.g. Jer 29:14). He clings to God's promises and therefore continues to set Jerusalem above his highest joy.

May the faith expressed in this psalm also resonate with us in our time. We may feel overwhelmed with sorrow at the godlessness around us and the sin in our own heart. We may be mocked about our faith in Jesus Christ and our trust in the truth and reliability of God's Word. Let us never waver in remembering our loving Saviour, who gave his life in order that we might inherit eternal life. May we always set Jesus Christ as our highest joy. In him all God's promises find their definitive "Yes" (2 Cor 1:20)! We cannot live without him. We live by faith, trusting in his perfect work on our behalf. Let us always set before us the final destination of the heavenly Jerusalem. May we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, which we will be able to enjoy for all eternity with Jesus Christ our Saviour. He is coming soon to vanquish and completely destroy the kingdom of darkness. Then we will be able to sing songs of praise to the triune God forever in all perfection and bliss.



For further study

1. How did the exiles remember Zion?
2. What is your highest joy in life?
3. How are we able to stay focussed on the heavenly Jerusalem as our final destination?



Why Preach?

This article was first presented as a “Chapel Talk” at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in March 2017.

Simon Sinek, in his TED Talk, “Start with Why – How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” can help us today. Sinek speaks of the what, the how, and the why of organizations. But it can be applied to preaching too. That’s what I want to speak about today: preaching.

You are seminary students and faculty, and I’m sure you can tell me what you do here. Sinek points out that every organization knows what they are doing, or at least what they are trying to do. You might even be able to tell me how you do it. How you do what you do. But do you know *why* you do it? You come here year by year, semester to semester, week by week, to prepare men – or to be prepared – for pastoral ministry. That is “the what.” You do that with rigorous, confessionally-sound academic work: “the how.” But what about “the why”? Why do you do this? You young men want to be preachers; that is the what of your education. The how of your education is described by the syllabi of your courses. But why do you want to be preachers? Or, more pointedly: “Why preach?”

Lessons from Paul

Let’s turn to Acts 20:13-31. There we read of how Paul is on his way to Jerusalem with the collections from the churches in Macedonia and Greece. On his way, he stops by at Ephesus. As far as we know, Paul stayed longest in this city during his missionary years. There is a close bond between him and this church. He is passing through on the way to Jerusalem, but he knows that this will be his last visit. Through the Spirit, it has become clear to him that after Jerusalem comes Rome, and then likely martyrdom. He doesn’t come directly to the city lest the church there attempt to compel him to stay, but sails by to the next harbor, Miletus, and from there summons the elders of the church. He has final instructions for the elders who have come out to meet him. I want to reflect on a few things that Paul says here.

Paul wants elders to be sound teachers. He reminded those elders that he had proclaimed the whole counsel of God to them: the whole will of God, all that God has planned. His eternal counsel and providence, as the catechism puts it in Lord’s Day 11. Or as we read in Lord 12: “The secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption,” as revealed in and by Jesus Christ. Implied here is that those elders should do the same. And then we as preachers and aspiring preachers should as well. But to do that, you need to know and understand what the will and counsel of God is! What is his plan? And where can you learn of it? In the Scriptures, of course. To discover and learn of it, means studious exegetical work.

One of the biggest challenges

One of the greatest challenges of pastoral ministry are the demands of sermon writing. Being ordained in our churches means that most of you will end up in “one-man ministry.” This is the accepted common model in our churches: one ordained minister of the Word working with elders. That means you will need to write seventy-five to eighty new sermons per year. That takes a lot of focus and energy. There will be, however, many forces at work in your ministry that will take you away from your desk and study. (Don’t call it your office, but your study. The vocabulary you use will also define how you use your room. Let it be your study, where you study God’s Word. Not your office, where you deal with the business administration of the church!)

Hunting for what’s new

Never have preachers had such a wealth of exegetical tools to use. You might get a call to a congregation in a small prairie town, like I did. However, with powerful Bible software, the Internet, and Amazon’s next-day delivery, you have whole theological and biblical study libraries at your fingertips. There is no excuse for poor exegetical work. Yet, upon reflection, too many sermons I’ve written were written by someone whose work was like someone exegeting a rose. A most beautiful thing, but the exegete in me plucked

off the petals, cut off the stamen, scattered the pollen, severed the sepals, and all that was left was a stem and a mess of organic material. The rose itself was no longer living. (As a former professor once said to me of a colleague's Sunday morning sermon. "It was very well researched!") It was interesting to learn something about the text, and to teach something interesting about the text, but the vitality of the text was sapped. And why was that? Because I thought that the flock needed more information. I thought that preaching, to be faithful to the text, had to be informative. Experienced preachers in our midst will tell you of the many times when a parishioner will say something like, "Reverend, that was a great sermon: I never knew that about – (fill in the blank)." The listener had received new, interesting information and so judged the sermon to be a great one. In that context, sermons without new information are considered then "same old, same old." Therefore, the preacher will always be on the hunt for new information to share. Good preaching, in that way of thinking, should be informative; give new insights; present new angles.

Preaching to transform

Over the years, however, I have learned that preaching must be much more than that: it must also be, even primarily be, transformative. Paul says that he did not hesitate to proclaim the whole will of God. That's not just information. The will of God is transformational. The counsel of God, the will of God, is that Christ's redemptive and restorative work be made effective in the lives of sinners. As your homiletics professor will say: the text has an indicative, and an imperative. For example, in Romans 1 we hear the indicative: "The gospel is the power of God to salvation." In Romans 12, the imperative: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind!" Information leading to transformation!

The Canons of Dort in III/IV 1 describe the result of the fall of man thus: blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections. The preacher must aim his preaching and focus on the target of the arrow of the Word: a muddled mind, a wicked will, and adulterated affections.

Hebrews 4:11 says the Word of God is a sharp two-edged sword, dividing joints and marrow, soul and spirit. "For the Word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Even as the ancients dissected the whole burnt offering (Lev 1) with sharp knives, preparing

the sacrifice for presentation to the Lord, so your preaching should be preparing the listener to be a thank offering. Even as that sharp sword cut through joints – just think about carving a turkey, how important it is to cut correctly through the joint of the leg or wing to have a nice drumstick – so the ancients needed sharp knives and proper bio-mechanical knowledge to dissect the animal. The apostle to the Hebrews says God's Word is like that: living and active and sharp. Used properly it will dissect the listeners. Preparing them for sacrifice to the Lord. Cutting now not just joint and marrow, but soul and spirit. Not a physical burnt offering, but now the spiritual thank offering. The preached Word is to prepare the whole life and being of the sinner to be a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Preaching must be transformative

Notice that the writer of Hebrews doesn't say, "The living and active Word teaches people new information about God." No, he writes, "it judges thoughts, it judges attitudes." That's what your preaching must do! Not simply inform, but actively transform the hearer. The sinner in the pew doesn't primarily need new information to think about; rather, he needs to get a new way of thinking. The living Word judges his mind. The listener needs to have the preached Word judge what he thinks, and how he thinks, and why he thinks in certain ways. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:5, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." This is not just new information to think about, but a new way of thinking! The darkened mind enlightened.

The living Word

The sinner doesn't primarily need more information or suggestions how to live a Christian life. The sinner in the pew needs the living Word to lead him or her to examine and judge the attitude of his or her heart, his or her will! The Word judges the will! What kind of master does he obey? How does she make her decisions? Why does he choose to do certain things? As Paul concludes his letter to the Romans about his preaching: "In accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ. . . [was] so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith." His preaching wasn't so that the Gentiles might know some things about Jesus Christ, but that knowing him, their wills would be transformed, and

that they joyfully obey Jesus Christ, bending their wills to be like the saviour's. The stubborn will become pliable and obedient; the dead will become enlivened.

The sinner doesn't primarily need more information, learning something more about God's love; rather, the Word judges his affections. The sinner in the pew needs to analyze and have the living Word judge what he or she loves. How does he show his affections? Why does she love what she does? What is his attitude? As Paul writes to the Ephesians. "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." The impure adulterous affections become pure and godly. Now not just knowing of God's love but having come to personally know and experience God's love, the sinner's love itself is purified.

The why of preaching

That's the why of gospel preaching! Why preach? To bring God's living and active Word to bear into the lives of sinners so that it might judge their thoughts and hearts. The whole person: mind, will, affections. As Luke tells it in Acts 2, Peter preached at Pentecost and the people were cut to the heart! "What must we do?" they cried out. "Repent!" Peter said.

Gospel preaching, the Canons say, accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit, enlightens the darkened mind, brings to obedience the recalcitrant will, and cleanses the impure affections so that the believer knows, obeys, and loves the Saviour. Preaching is more than sharing of information. It concerns transformation. It is more than in-

formation, it is concerned with the spiritual formation of God's people, and the reformation of fallen people.

One of the struggles you will face as a preacher is that you will be exegeting text. Words on paper. A dead text, it may seem. Information about God and his work, you might think. But the Bible is not just a book among books. It is not a text among texts. It is not simply a special item of a certain class. No, it is the Living Word of God. And so, your preaching must be living preaching (HC, Q/A 98) of the living Word. And living things do things. Living things are active.

Bring God's living and active Word to bear into the lives of sinners

Your preaching is to be the very voice of Jesus Christ. Leon Morris, in his commentary on Romans, says at chapter 10:14, "The NASB has got it right: 'How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?'" Morris continues: "The point is that Christ is present in the preachers; to hear them is to hear him, and people ought to believe when they hear [the Christ]." To underline my point: The Lord Jesus Christ is not just disseminating information about God; he is calling for the transformation of sinners. His Word is living and active. It cuts to the heart of sinners. And your preaching must be too. But who is equal to such a task? Let's pray about that.





Trans cultism?

In the journal of the Witherspoon Institute, called *Public Discourse*, Jane Robbins published a very informative article called, “The Cracks in the Edifice of Transgender Totalitarianism.”¹ She opens the article by stating that many have compared the transgender movement to a “cult.” The enforcement of its ideas is certainly very strong and the ideas are powerful enough to fundamentally alter a person’s view of self and the world – like a cult.

The speed and power of the spread of these ideas also might lead one to characterize transgenderism as a form of “social contagion.” The power of suggestion and imitation certainly appear to be playing a significant role in its spread. People who declare that they are transitioning to some other gender (or no gender at all) have been able to get a lot of social attention.

She also suggests that transgenderism is an “ideology” because of the way it deals with those who oppose it. They must be defeated at every turn. This is true: we know that transgenderism portrays itself as the equivalent of the nineteenth century fight against slavery and the twentieth century fight against racism. It is about freedom from discrimination. The comparison is false, but this gives the movement the feeling that it is acting for some “good.”

Robbins, however, states, “And yet these descriptions—cult, social contagion, ideology—fail to capture the uniqueness and enormity of what is happening with the transgender movement. . . we are facing something different.” There appear to be no limitations to transgenderism’s spread and power.

Western civilization is now gripped by a cultural cyclone that is blowing through such limitations with totalitarian force. . . Scientific knowledge is rejected and medical practice co-opted in service of a new “reality”—that “gender” is independent of sex, that males and females of any age, even young children, are entitled to their own transgender self-identification based only on their feelings, and that literally every individual and every segment of society must bow to their cho-

sen identity at risk of losing reputation, livelihood, and even freedom itself.

After explaining how completely unscientific is the idea that gender is based only on feelings, Robbins also reviews the history of “gender identity” and what is now called “gender dysphoria.” She shows that language itself is being twisted and misused in order to advance the transgender agenda. Her conclusion is that “history offers no parallel” to the spread, power, and comprehensive success of the transgender agenda. It has captured all categories of government (legislative, judicial, and executive), social media, schools, businesses, liberal Protestant churches, interpretation of the law, research funding, language, religious freedom, and perhaps “most seriously, it has bulldozed the ancient, fundamental rights of parents to protect and guide their children.” At this point in the article she calls transgenderism a “mania,” in addition to a cult, social contagion, and ideology.

All of this might lead biblically-minded Christians to despair. If history offers no parallel to this movement then history also offers no parallel story of successfully opposing such a movement. Is Western culture as we know it finished? Robbins doesn’t answer this question, but she does think that we are seeing cracks in the edifice of the transgender movement. More about that next time.

For us as Christians, our Saviour Jesus Christ is our hope and truth and strength. First, he is the resurrection and the life, as he said in John 11:25, and no one can take this from him or from us. Second, we celebrate God’s design of male and female as something delightful. Finally, Jesus calls to himself those who struggle with their personal identity and sense of worth, to let them know that he has actually taken away their guilt and shame before the Creator God, and that his Holy Spirit is ready to make them new from the inside out (not from the outside in). How our world needs the Saviour!

¹ See <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/07/54272/>. Accessed 26 September 2019.





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Caring for Muslim Neighbors

In the past, the vast majority of Muslims lived in closed societies with almost no opportunity to hear the Gospel. Air travel and technological advances, especially the internet, have made the world a smaller place. In the providence of God, this along with educational opportunity, oil wealth and regional conflicts, causing large population movement, have increasingly brought the mission field to the doorstep of Christians around the world. How do we fulfill our calling to point them to Christ? Are there helpful bridges for our efforts?

Cultural Bridges

Despite the corruption of the image of God in all Adam's descendants, Muslim cultures still have many praiseworthy features: generally marriage is esteemed, children are treasured, and the elderly are honored. Hospitality is a prized virtue.

Families are generally close-knit, usually with strong communal ties. Family, neighbors and friends spend much of their free time visiting back and forth, socializing and sharing meals and celebrating special occasions together. Friend and stranger are graciously received with a hearty, generous welcome. This cultural trait provides many opportunities for gradually building



For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Matthew 13:17

friendships with Muslim neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances, often far from their home communities and lonely.

Cultural Blocks

At the same time, one must be sensitive to Muslim fear of incurring family wrath by taking interest in another faith. So, it is best to begin by praying for the ones with whom we can make friendly connection, as we openly

live out our faith. This could rapidly bring the opportunity to graciously gift them with a Gospel or New Testament. Also, in conversation there are always opportunities to throw in a word about human sin and the need for God's grace. Yet, it is wise to wait patiently for Muslim friends to show serious interest in spiritual matters at their own pace. Most likely, they will only feel safe to do so when no other Muslim is around.

Listening

To share the gospel with Muslims, it is NOT necessary to read or understand the Koran. Translating or even modernizing its archaic medieval Arabic is not authorized, so most Muslims only know a few fragments. It is sufficient for Christians to just be aware of major themes.

The Koran and its prophet, Mohamed are highly revered in Islam. Thus, it is best to avoid creating obstacles by commenting on either. Sometimes that means just listening without response. Our calling is to respectfully listen and prayerfully ponder what is being said. We should patiently waiting to be invited to share the hope that is within (1 Peter 3:15).

Bible Stories

Islam recognizes major Old Testament figures as prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses and David. This opens doors to relevantly share how Bible figures received God's promise of the Messiah and prepared for His saving grace for sinners. With Muslims, as with religious Jews, it is vital to press the fact that the Old Testament prophets had one central message -- the coming of the promised Savior.

Christ is highly regarded as a unique prophet in the Koran. It even recognizes His virgin birth and sinless life. Although his divinity

**For if you love those
who love you, what
reward do you have?
Do not even the tax
collectors do the same?
And if you greet only
your brothers, what
more are you doing
than others? ...**

Matthew 5:46-47



**إِنْ أَحْبَبْتُمْ فَقَطِ الَّذِينَ يُحِبُّوكُمْ، فَأَيُّ أَجْرِ لَكُمْ؟
أَلَا يَفْعَلُ الْفَاسِقُونَ ذَلِكَ؟
إِنْ سَلَّمْتُمْ فَقَطِ عَلَى إِخْوَتِكُمْ، فَأَيُّ فَضْلِ لَكُمْ؟
أَلَا يَفْعَلُ الْحَاقِدُونَ ذَلِكَ؟
كُونُوا كَامِلِينَ كَمَا أَنَّ آبَائَكُمْ السَّمَاوِي هُوَ كَامِلٌ.
(عيسى المسيح)**

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is vehemently denied, Jesus Christ is still revered higher than all other prophets. Most thoughtful Muslims are impressed by the life and teachings our Savior. This too creates openness to the gospel.

Good Works

Muslims are unaware of the deep pervasiveness of human sin. Without the light of the true gospel all religions deceive their followers into believing that it is possible to appease God by "good" works.

In the Koran, Almighty God remains distant and unfathomable. He calls on people to submit to his law

and earn his favor by good deeds. Tragically, the church back in Mohamed's day had drifted away from proclaiming the true gospel of God's grace in Christ. Without conviction of sin, humans do not sense their need for the Savior. Until the hopelessness of sin is recognized, religious people vainly look for a prophet or a saint to guide them to God. They are blind to their real need -- divine rescue by the one and only qualified Savior. Muslims need to be expose to God's self-giving, saving initiative in Christ.

Right With God

Although Muslims desire to be made right with God, they have no assurance that their good works will outweigh the bad at the final judgment. Muslims realize God's wrath against man's disobedience, but do not know His love in taking that wrath upon Himself in the place of sinners. Jesus commissioned His people to diligently share this good news with all. It is the Holy Spirit who provides us with the opportunities and guides us to wisely use them. He also

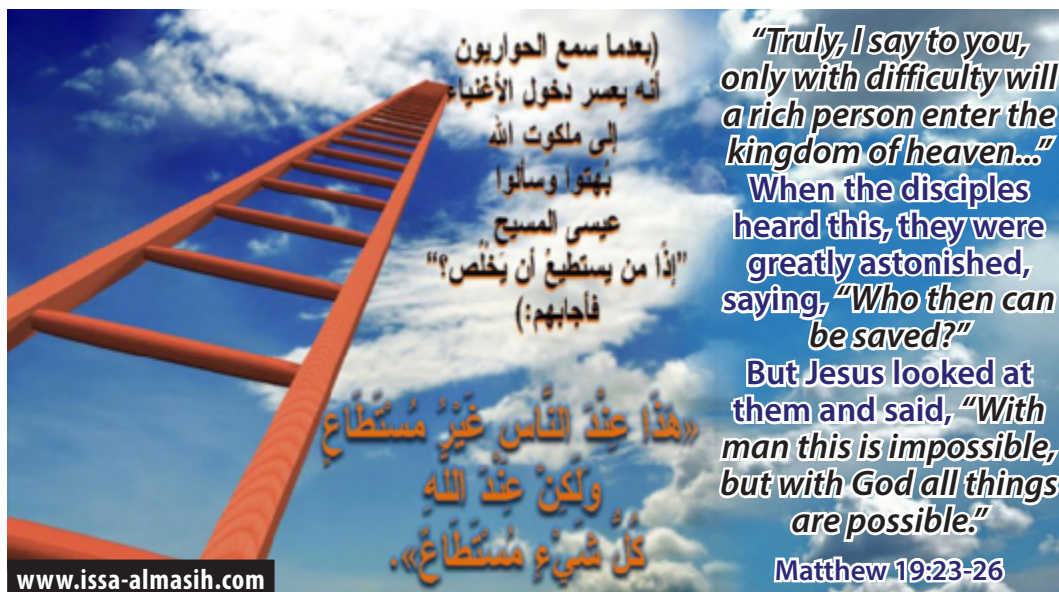
prepares the ears, minds and hearts to hear, understand, embrace and follow the true Messiah of Scriptures. Let us confidently and relevantly reach out to the mission field that He has brought to our doorstep.

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FRCNA Synod and OPC General Assembly 2019

FRCNA Synod 2019

The July/August 2019 issue of *The Messenger* (the official publication of the Free Reformed Churches of North America, hereafter FRCNA) reported on Synod 2019. The FRCNA Synod was held in the Dundas Free Reformed Church and met at the same time as the Synod of the Heritage Reformed Congregations. While they usually met separately, they did have some joint sessions when discussing matters of common interest such as unity and Psalter revisions. The FRCNA church unity committee (unity with the Heritage Reformed Congregations) reported, “we continue to experience a growing relationship with the HRC, although we do wrestle with how to gauge this growing relationship and how to encourage this growing relationship in visible and tangible ways.” The wish was expressed that the Lord would “bring together what belongs together and strengthen the biblical, experiential Reformed witness in our day” (19).

Thankfulness to the Lord was expressed for the mission work which is being done in Guatemala. The Achi people of Guatemala could receive a complete translation of the Word of God in their own language this September, completing a project which was started twenty-five years ago. In other missionary news, Rev. Young Jae Lee was ordained last December to proclaim the gospel among the Korean people west of New York City. May the Lord richly bless this work.

At the Synod, student Mark Wagenaar was examined with a view to becoming a candidate for the ministry in the FRCNA. Aside from the usual examination topics, it was reported that “a new examination format took place this year, consisting of an examination on his soundness in the faith and his readiness for ministry.” The Theological Education committee also reported on its work of overseeing the theological instructors and the five students presently studying at the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids.

OPC General Assembly 2019

The August/September issue of *New Horizons* (the official magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, hereafter OPC) reported that for the first time in its history, the OPC held its General Assembly in the state of Texas in the Dallas area.

Various reports were given on the present state of the OPC from various committees. It was noted with thankfulness that Jesus Christ continues to build and maintain his church. The reality of life-time eldership in the OPC was highlighted at the General Assembly in a special way in the sixty-third anniversary of ruling elder Garret A. Hoogerhyde. What a blessing that he was able to serve in the church for such a long time!

The Committee on Christian Education noted that the sales of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal were going so well that a third printing is scheduled for this fall.

Regarding ecumenical relations, the assembly decided to “invite several fellowships into corresponding relations: the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Central and Eastern Europe, the Presbyterian Church in Uganda, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Peru” (4-5). It was also decided to send a letter to the 2020 Synod of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands “urging them to reconsider their decision to open the special offices of minister and ruling elder to persons who are biblically disqualified from such offices” (5).

Reports were given on the work of home missions and church planting as well as foreign missions. Special attention was paid to the situation of the persecuted church. A brother from a persecuted Presbyterian church in Asia gave a presentation in person and spoke stirring words about how the persecuted church is thriving because Jesus Christ reigns on high. He “boldly urged us to look beyond political persecution into heaven itself, that we might see Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father. He declared that the persecution the church experiences is the world’s rebellious response to the risen, ascended, victorious King Jesus; and though the church is outwardly persecuted, it is in fact the invading, victorious army” (5).





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School Sport Success: What does it look like?

Every parent, without exception, wants his or her child to succeed at school and at school sports. Likewise, every educator wants to feel that they have been successful in teaching the students placed in their care. Athletic directors and coaches, without exception, want that too. But what is success? John Wooden, one of the greatest coaches of all time, defined success as “peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” The goal of an athletics program must be to gain this peace of mind among students, staff, and parents by developing Christian character: “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim 4:8).

Student success

Professional sports place a high value (literally and figuratively) on winning. In *Quiet Strength*, Tony Dungy, former NFL coach writes,

Society tends to define success in terms of accomplishments and awards, material possessions, and profit margins. In the football business, winning is the only thing that matters. God’s Word, however, presents a different definition of success – one centered on a relationship with Jesus Christ and a love for God that allows us to love and serve others. God gives each one of us unique gifts, abilities and passions. How well we use those qualities to have an impact on the world around us determines how ‘successful’ we really are (143).

Too often, Christian school communities use winning as the primary factor in defining the success of their athletes and teams. Instead, success must be gauged by how well the coaches and student-athletes use their special interests and abilities to have an impact on everyone around them. A school’s athletics program should equip students with skills, not just physical skills, but also emotional, mental,

and spiritual; these skills will empower them to be faithful servants of God, as good husbands, wives, friends, siblings, children, church members, colleagues etc.

Character development must occur in a successful athletics program, or else the program will be characterized by entitlement and bad attitudes. Here are some ways that these negative characteristics can manifest themselves in your student-athletes: they feel above the law, ridicule those at school who don’t play sports, show disrespect towards officials, coaches, opponents, and teammates (hazing being an extreme example), exhibit a lack of commitment (including missing practices, classes, team required activities), or break the student code of conduct. Student-athletes need to be aware that they publicly represent Christ and their school; as such, their conduct should be exemplary. School sports are also a tremendous way to enhance leadership amongst the student body. Star athletes and/or captains should not get special privileges in a classroom, locker room, or on the court/field/track; in fact, it’s probably best for them if more was expected of them. Influence comes with responsibilities, not perks (Dungy 2007, p. 159).

Creating a successful program: the role of the school

For a school to have a successful athletics program, the athletic director must be actively involved in the program. This requires an appropriate amount of administration time, as well as the wisdom to know how to balance work and personal life. Too often athletic directors are young and inexperienced. Energetic and enthusiastic educators are highly valuable but are often given important administrative tasks without any training or experience, and their passion can sometimes blind them to how much their work is wearing them out. Personally, I look back on my first few years as an athletic director when I had no administrative experience or training; I took the job with a lot of enthusiasm but was ignorant of how much effort it was going

to take and the administrative demands that came with the job. I made many mistakes and had much to learn. I frequently felt worn out. Criticism was dispiriting. I have grown through my experiences and through education, but the process was often overwhelming. To have a successful sports program, athletic directors need an appropriate amount of administrative time and access to professional development, which requires support from the administration and board: take advantage of *the skill and energy* of these teachers, but don't take advantage of *them*.

Success must be gauged by how well the coaches and student-athletes use their special interests and abilities to have an impact on everyone around them

So, what is all this effort, energy, and enthusiasm put into? Hopefully your school has a written vision and mission statement. That statement can be foundational in creating documents such as parent handbooks (including parent/guardian and athlete contracts, spectator expectations, travel rules etc.), coaches' handbooks (including codes of conduct, observation procedures etc.), and other school-specific documentation. It is also wise to create playing time policies. Once these are in place, they need to be administered and maintained; one very helpful way to do that is to have regularly scheduled meetings with stakeholders (e.g. administration, parents, and coaches).

Athletic directors are also responsible for motivating and inspiring students with special interests and abilities to use and develop their skills to their utmost, and to God's glory. The program should inspire students to be uncommon through work ethic, not through skill (Dungy, 2007, p. 29).

A crucial task for athletic directors is in finding coaches who understand that their most important task is to teach, and that physical training has value, but godliness has more. Often, we want coaches who are experts in the specific sport, but most failings are spiritual, not tactical (Dungy, 2007, p. 87). Athletic directors need to be wise in choosing whom they work with; choose the best teachers over the best tacticians. An objective of an athletics program should be "to use athletics to build positive attitudes and provide positive experiences" (Brown, 2003, p. 27).

That is why enlisting great coaches must be a priority of a program. We shouldn't underestimate what impact a positive role model at a school can have on a child, and sports is a terrific way for teachers to build special relationships with students.

Respect is an important characteristic of a successful school sports program. We live in hyper-critical world, and a Christian school should not be contributing to this. A successful sports program will be known for the respect that players, coaches, and parents show towards officials, opponents, and each other. This includes coaches modelling respect in their communication with officials (including the fifteen-year-old scorekeeper who made an error) and talking respectfully about opponents. Modelling respect, however, needs to start at the home.

Maintaining success: the role of parents

Spiritual preparation is important for parents to provide a proper Christian perspective on sports to their child. Parents need to be intentional and reflective about how they view success for their child on the court/field/track; place value on physical training (or else don't sign your child up for school sports), but it should complement godly character (and certainly not come at its expense). I don't know of any schools that have too many volunteers for coaching positions. One of the reasons that often comes up for choosing not to coach is negative experiences with parents. This is troubling feedback to hear in Christian communities, especially when coaches in Canada are almost always volunteers (and that includes teachers who coach).

We shouldn't underestimate what impact a positive role model at a school can have on a child

In his video, *The Role of Parents in Athletics*, Bruce Brown specifies the four roles in an athletic contest: spectator, coach, official, and participant. He advises parents (as spectators) to release their children to the game. A successful sports program has parents who respect their children enough to let them play and have fun. They don't try to coach, officiate, or live vicariously through their child. They show respect for officials and their decisions, during and after the game. They support the coach when he/she makes decisions such as substitutions and game strategies. If they

disagree with a coach, they will follow the rule of Matthew 18 and not criticize the coach to the other spectators, or their children, but instead will approach the coach directly (but wait at least twenty-four hours so that the conversation is not emotionally driven). They might even empower their child to respectfully talk to the coach.

As both an athletic director and coach, I have grown immensely through incredibly positive and thankful parents (who make up the vast majority of parents I have worked with) who offer constructive criticism in a positive, Christian manner. Negative feedback, however, can often be harsh – not upbuilding, but dispiriting. Even worse is when it is heard through a secondary source and the criticism is rash and unheard (see Lord's Day 43).

For a school sports program to be successful, parents need to speak positively about the coaches, officials, and players at the dinner table or during the car ride home, supporting administrative decisions, even if they disagree with them (again, following the rule of Matthew 18 if they do not). If the parents in our communities show disrespect to officials, athletic directors, coaches, and players, how do we expect to develop respectful attitudes among the students? A school sport program cannot be successful if any part of it is disrespectful.

Conclusion

It is important to always remind ourselves that kids want to play and want to learn. A successful program must facilitate both. Have you ever heard a baseball game start with an umpire calling, "Work Ball!" (Dungy 2007, p. 49)? Schools must ensure that sports are in the school for kids to play. Let's ensure that students hear, "Play Ball!" – and not just in words. For a sports program to be a success, directors, coaches, and parents must ensure that the students are enjoying their learning to play in a program that values physical training, but values godliness even more. If we stick to learning and having fun while focussing on Christian character, it's unlikely that anyone will feel like failures; instead, peace of mind will be for all.

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Clarion Kids

Love One Another

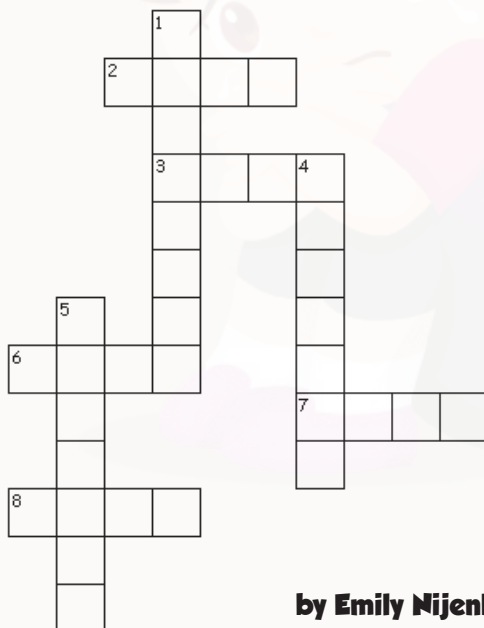
1 John 3:11-24

The Bible tells us many times to love one another, but what does that really mean? John talks a lot about love in his letters. We have the greatest possible example of love to follow – we know that Christ lay down his life for us out of love! We should follow this example in how we treat each other. If we are able to, we should always help anyone who needs it. We cannot love only in how we talk – we must show it! Loving one another is a commandment from God, not just something we should do if we feel like it. This is just as important for children as it is for adults. What are some ways you can show love in your life?

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Crossword Puzzle: Solve the clues to fill in the puzzle.



by Emily Nijenhuis

Across

2. We must ____ our love through actions.
3. ____ one another.
6. Who wrote a lot about love in his letters?
7. Christ gave his ____ for us.
8. We cannot only show love in how we ____.

Down

1. Love is just important for _____ as for adults.
4. Christ is the _____ for us to follow.
5. To love is a _____ from God.

Press Release of Classis Ontario West, Hamilton Providence, September 11 and 25, 2019

This classis began with the greeting of brothers, familiar faces, and new acquaintances. Classis met concurrently with the South Western Ontario Classis of the URCNA. Convened by Providence CanRC of Hamilton, the delegates met in the facilities of the Zion URCNA in Sheffield. Rev. Steven Swets, chairman of URC Classis, welcomed the delegates. Rev. Tony Zekveld lead in devotions meditating on 1 Thessalonians 1:8, which impresses upon us the “outgoing” nature of the gospel.

The delegates from the CanRC and URCNA then began their work separately. The credentials being in order, the executive was appointed (Rev. J. Poort – chairman, Rev. A. Witten – Vice Chairman, Rev. K. Kok – Clerk). The chairman opened in prayer remembering the needs of our churches and the wonderful blessing of fifty years of faithful teaching at CRTS. The questions according to Article 44 were asked. With thankfulness all churches affirmed that the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, the decisions of the major assemblies are being honored, and at that time no consistory needed the judgment and help of Classis for the proper government of their church.

A letter was received from the church of Ancaster, reminding the delegates of Classis of the importance that matters dealt with in closed session be kept in strictest confidence. This was noted. Providence CanRC of Hamilton wrote asking that Classis reconvene on September 25th for a peremptory examination of Dr. J. Temple. Classis agreed. The Classis treasurer reported, suggesting that the assessment for Classis expenses remain at \$6 per communicant member; this was adopted.

Rev. J. Ludwig wrote to Classis requesting release from this classis since he has accepted the call to the church of Neerlandia South. Having viewed the relevant documents, Classis decided to provide the certificate of release and expressed thankfulness for the long and faithful service of Rev. J. Ludwig among the churches of this classis.

At the request of the church of Chatham, Candidate Arjen Vreugdenhil presented himself for examination with a view to ordination. He presented a sermon proposal on 1 Samuel 25. After discussion, with sadness Classis decided that the sermon was not sufficient to continue with the exam. Candidate Vreugdenhil was informed of this decision.

After lunch, in combined session with the URCNA Classis, the delegates were addressed by Rev. D. Bylsma from the Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Rev. Bylsma shared the recent sorrows and struggles the churches have endured. He gave the delegates heartfelt encouragement to care for one another. Rev. Harry Zekveld of the URCNA responded and lead the meeting in prayer for our churches.

Classis chose delegates for Regional Synod East in November. As elder delegates: brs. J. Lenting and J. Ruggi; brs. T. Medemblik and D. Sieders as alternates. As minister delegates: Revs. J. Louwerse and A. Witten as primary; Revs. K. Kok and J. Poort as alternates. The church of Kerwood was appointed as convening church for next meeting of classis, the Lord willing on December 18. Personal question period was made use of. The Chairman could judge that no delegates needed to be censured for their conduct in the meeting. And the meeting was adjourned till September 25 with singing and prayer.

The delegates gathered at the Hamilton Providence CanRC on September 25. Elder D. Aasman welcomed the delegates, the deputies from Regional Synod East, Dr. and Mrs. Temple, and the many visitors. The meeting was opened with the reading of Psalm 119:1-8, singing of Psalm 119:1-2, and prayer. The credentials again being in order, the meeting of Classis was resumed. Dr. J. Temple presented his sermon proposal on Ruth 1:1-5 for the requirements of the peremptory exam. In closed session, Classis judged the sermon to be sufficient. Dr. Temple was then examined in the areas of Old Testament Exegesis, New Testament Exegesis, Doctrines and Creeds, Church History, Knowledge of Scripture, Ethics, Diaconiology, and Church Polity. In closed session, Classis could conclude that the examination was sustained. The deputies for Regional Synod East, Revs. M. Jagt and R. den Hollander, could concur with the decision of Classis. With thankfulness, Classis could inform the brother and, having seen the relevant documents, approbated the call of the church of Providence to Dr. J. Temple. At the request of the church of Ancaster, Classis appointed as counsellor during their period of vacancy Dr. A. deVisser. Rev. W. den Hollander will continue to serve as counsellor of Ancaster until December 2019. Personal question period was made use of. The Chairman judged that no delegates needed to be censured for their conduct in the meeting. The meeting was closed by the chairman with singing Hymn 84 and prayer.

Rev. A. Witten Vice- Chairman at that time 