

Pray the Lord of the Harvest...

The Agenda for Synod 2015

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The church belongs to the Lord. God gave His elect to Jesus Christ in eternity, who in time redeemed each member from sin and death. God rewarded Jesus by lifting Him up to be Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22). We confess that Jesus gathers, defends and preserves His church throughout history by His Word and Spirit (LD 21, Q. & A. 54).

Thus, whenever the church meets together in her assemblies, she is careful that everything be done in harmony with the Word of Jesus Christ and His Spirit. For the work of the church is the work of Jesus Christ. All the delegates of the Protestant Reformed Synod who meet the week of June 8 in Faith Protestant Reformed Church (Jenison, MI) are conscious that the work is His. This reality is driven home by the fact that the most pressing need in one of the works the Protestant Reformed Churches carry out in common, a need that is at the very heart of Jesus' command to His church—"go ye into all the world"—only Jesus can fill.

I speak of the need for a missionary to the Philippines. God has called the churches to labor in these islands, given us faithful missionaries, and prospered the work, so that the FMC reports that a denomination of churches has been formed by two congregations that hold to the Reformed confessions and adhere to the same doctrine and walk as the Protestant Reformed Churches! The reports on the work—the FMC, Doon PRC (the calling church), and the missionaries—are overwhelming. The reader is overwhelmed by the work being done, by the opportunities the Lord gives, by the spiritual and theological progress of the believers there, and by the zeal for spreading the gospel in the Philippines.

And, overwhelmed by the *need*. The need arises because the Lord, the King of the church, has called Rev. Smit, one of the two missionaries, to be the pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church (in Grand Rapids, MI). But the need in the Philippines is unspeakably great—the need for ongoing training of ministers; the need for seminary training; the need for guiding (four) consistories, *and* classis *and* classical committees; the need for preaching; the need for one, preferably, two more missionaries. Some of the work must be curtailed; some stopped. Rev. Kleyn cannot do the work of two men. Only the Lord can fill this need.

Pray the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest (Matt. 9:38).

With that same conscious dependence on the *Lord*, may the entire agenda of synod be completed.

The purpose of this editorial is to furnish a brief summary of the agenda (with comments). The report on the Philippines comes from the Foreign Mission Committee, and we take note of only one other item in their report—a significant proposal to revise synodical guidelines for paying the travel cost of "the wives." The FMC argues convincingly that frequently it is very beneficial for the work

of the churches that wives of minister/elder delegations accompany their husbands. Currently the guidelines allow reimbursement for the wife's travel costs only when the husband is gone for four Sundays or more. The FMC proposes that synod authorize full reimbursement for "the expenses incurred when a wife accompanies her husband on the business of the churches, when the standing committee:

1. Is convinced of the value of the wives accompanying for that particular trip, considering each trip on a case by case basis, and
2. Stands ready to defend its decision before synod, if synod should so inquire.

These benefits are real, but difficult to grasp for one who has never gone on such a trip for the churches. The value is not "companionship." Surely a man can live and survive and work well enough without his wife for a few weeks. Rather, the benefits include her observations and her balanced perspective for the man sent. And on the other hand, as regards the people visited, the value is the encouragement and counsel for the *women* there. Should synod agree with this change, the committees will need to be honest and wise in implementation. For those worried this will produce exorbitant costs, believe me, all synodical committees are aware that they and the fellow members of their congregation pay the synodical assessments. There is a natural caution about spending the hard-earned money of the people in the pew.

Next, we turn to another vital work of Christ—missions in *North America*—the Domestic Mission Committee. The only active field of the DMC is in Pittsburgh, PA. Missionary W. Bruinsma reports on the joys and the sorrows of missionary labors, which, he notes, are quite similar to those in established congregations.

Included in the agenda is a special appeal from Rev. Bruinsma for a second missionary to Pittsburgh. He has four main grounds—well fleshed out—for his request. These are (in skeletal form):

1. His present labor as a pastor in our mission in his area of Pittsburgh (Forest Hills) is a full-time labor, demanding nearly all his time.
2. There is demonstrable need for additional labors in surrounding areas which he is not able to perform.
3. The combined efforts of two missionaries would be advantageous to the fellowship and the present missionary.
4. It would give time to write tracts and study guides for use on the mission field.

The DMC agreed with the principle of two missionaries on a field and with the advantages for this field. The Council of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, the calling church, disagreed. And the DMC acquiesced to Southwest's decision.

Admittedly, such a weighty matter must be carefully considered and good grounds provided for the decision produced. While conceding that Southwest's consistory is in a much better position than the editor to make a wise judgment in this field, I also have to say that the grounds for rejecting Rev. Bruinsma's request are not overwhelming.

And now to step back a bit, consider that the PRC has money and manpower for a second missionary. The pulpits of all the PRC may well be filled in just a few months. Times are relatively good in the USA, and the PRC are financially able to do more work. Also, consider that a fairly large class is scheduled to graduate from seminary in 2017, D.V.

With as many as nine graduates in two years, we will have a goodly number of graduates with very few openings. What to do? One option is to push ministers in their low to mid-sixties into early retirement. Another far better option is to look for *opportunities*—that is, pray the Lord of the harvest for open doors.

In Pittsburgh, does not opportunity stare us in the face? We have the opportunity to do work that Rev. Bruinsma is currently not able to do. The concrete advantages to this field are well presented. And add this—this is the opportunity for a younger minister to learn from an experienced missionary by working alongside him for several years. By now, all agree that God has endowed this seasoned missionary (Bruinsma) with wisdom, diligence, zeal, patience, and the ability to work well with consistory, DMC, and mission group. Add to that, he has not only demonstrated his heartfelt commitment to all the truths that the PRC hold dear, but he knows how to teach and preach them in a mission setting. What tremendous profit for a young missionary to learn from him! In my judgment, this is an opportunity that ought not be passed by. My prayer is that the Lord of the harvest will lead synod to agree with Missionary Bruinsma's request.

The Contact Committee reports their conviction that sister church relations with the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore have never been better. Since the Synod of 2014, CERC called and installed Rev. A. Lanning as her pastor. CERC has welcomed church visitors from the PRC for the second year now, to the benefit of both.

Our relation with Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland is likewise as firm and vibrant as ever. A CC delegation came for official church visitation to CPRC NI in January and visited the mission fellowship in Limerick as well. The report is true oneness and unity among these saints and steadfastness in the Reformed faith. Another sister to be cherished in these last days.

Both of our sister churches are committed to sending representatives to synod—Deacon Tang from CERCS, and Deacon Hall from CPRC NI.

The CC also reports on a conference on the doctrine of God's covenant held with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Australia in July of 2014. The EPC and the CC propose another conference for 2017.

The CC gives a lengthy report on our contact in Giessen, Germany—the BERG. The CC is fulfilling the mandate of Synod 2014 to “identify in their report to next year's synod the differences between the BERG and ourselves and what progress has been made in the discussions.” This is a developing contact in the spiritual wasteland of the country of Martin Luther. The report indicates the care with which the CC pursues such contact, subject to synod's approval and direction.

To the synod of 2014 the CC proposed that they be mandated “to study and recommend what guidelines synod would follow to determine whether and how to participate in an ecumenical council of churches, and report their study to synod.” However, the CC reports that they were not able to complete this, and ask for another year.

The CC requests permission for a follow-up trip to Namibia and South Africa in 2016 in response to invitations received. Details will need to be worked out.

The final point in the CC report is that the Free Reformed Churches and the Heritage Reformed Churches are proceeding with preliminary plans for *limited* Psalter revision and desire the PRC to join them in this endeavor. Psalter revision is hardly the CC's area of labor or expertise, and they leave this judgment to synod without recommendation. If synod decides to participate, a more extensive report will be forthcoming.

The Catechism Book Committee returns with a request for reformatting all the catechism material—books and workbooks. It would be quite helpful to synod if they would bring a sample (a finished product) of what they have in mind. They also inform synod that the confessions will soon be available in electronic format free of charge.

The Board of Trustees, in addition to the normal financial reporting, informs synod of the desire of two faithful servants to be replaced. They are the stated clerk, Mr. Don Doezema, and the synodical treasurer, Mr. David Ondersma. Their importance for the smooth and efficient running of the denomination cannot be overstated.

Peace PRC (Lansing, IL) comes with a reasonable request, namely, that if in their search for a new place to build, they find a plot “across the border” in Classis East territory, they be allowed to remain in Classis West.

The Theological School Committee reports on various details—physical and educational—that they oversee. The most important: a qualified graduate is recommended for examination at synod, namely, Ryan Barnhill. They recommend that the exam be shifted a little from the ordinary. If Seminarian Barnhill gives his sermon specimen Tuesday morning (as per usual), then, with synod's approval, Prof. B. Gritters will examine him in the afternoon in two areas of study. This is recommended because Prof. Gritters is scheduled to speak in the June camp of CERC in Singapore on Monday, June 15. Graduation is scheduled for Thursday, June 11 in Faith PRC. All are welcome to witness the glad event and to hear Prof. R. Cammenga's address.

The TSC brings a significant report on retirements for the current seminary professors. The current method for replacing professors can be found in the Constitution of the Theological School (found in the PRC's Church Order Book). The basic provision is that when a professor reaches the age of 65, a replacement is called; subsequently, there is a transition period of up to five years (it has not gone beyond three years to this point). Replacements for the three current professors are scheduled to occur in 2019, 2020, and 2021. Recognizing that such a quick transition is not wise, the TSC brings a proposal to spread out the replacements to 2017, 2019, and 2021. In addition, they desire the transition period to be the full five years.

And there is one appeal to synod. The appeal concerns the church political question of whether a congregation may change the date of a special day set aside by the churches in the church order (in this case Prayer Day), and whether a congregation may do that on its own, that is, without going through classis and synod. Classis East decided that a congregation may. The appeal asks synod to overturn classis' decision.

This appellant deserves to be heard carefully. I suppose from a certain point of view, all appellants deserve to be heard. But some approach the broader assemblies with rancor; some with sarcasm;

some casting about unfounded charges. This appellant wrote carefully, in a most Christian manner. Whether one agrees with him or not, one can appreciate the genuine concern and Christian spirit that his appeal breathes.

The appeal raises an interesting question that deserves a good discussion. On the one hand, the PRC are death to independentism. On the other hand, they have historically and emphatically rejected hierarchy, and the notion that the authority of the synod is higher than that of a congregation. This issue must be worked out between those two extremes.

And the best part is, neither side (whichever Synod adopts) is a denial of Reformed truth. Synod will need to make a judgment as to the proper application of the principles of the church order. But there is no reason for the discussion to be heated or rancorous—though it certainly may be spirited!

There you have the highlights of the agenda. If you can visit, you are most welcome, especially for the examination of Mr. Barnhill. (You can also watch *that* online, since the examination will be live-streamed from Faith PRC—subject to synod's approval.)

The purpose of this editorial is, you understand, not to satisfy curiosity. It is rather that you may know the work Jesus will be doing through the twenty delegates the week of June 8 in Faith Protestant Reformed Church. And knowing that, you can pray with understanding for the work.

Pray, then, to the Lord of the harvest.