

Covenant Protestant Reformed Church Ballymena, NI

9 June, 2020

Dear saints in the
Protestant Reformed Churches,

End of Our Mission Field

On 9 March, the CPRC Council unanimously decided that, sadly, the Limerick Reformed Fellowship (LRF) was not viable as a mission field. A number of serious blows and problems all indicated that this was the only conclusion. When small works come to an end, it can happen very quickly.

This was a big disappointment to us, after a lot of work and prayer, going back some two decades. It began with Bill Davies, who received the *Covenant Reformed News* and shared it with others in Limerick. These saints requested literature and audio cassettes from us, and started meeting together on the Lord's day to listen to a CPRC sermon, fellowship and pray. When touring the Republic of Ireland with Rev. and Mrs. VanBaren, Elaine Bos and his wife, Prof. Hanko gave the first lecture in Limerick (on the covenant) in the summer of 2004, after a British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) conference in England. After 43 speeches over the next 6 years by various Protestant Reformed ministers (VanOverloop, Eriks and D. Kleyn) and professors (Gritters and Hanko), and myself (<https://cprc.co.uk/limerick-reformed-fellowship-lrf>), the CPRC ordained Rev. Martyn McGeown as our missionary in Limerick (30 July, 2010) where he has been stationed for almost 10 years.

Now the brightest Reformed light in the Republic of Ireland is going out and our hopes to form a (small) denomination are dashed. Our sovereign God has closed the door. His ways are always wise and often inscrutable (Is. 55:8-9; Ps. 77:19).

Elder Brian Crossett and I travelled to Limerick to meet with the saints of the LRF face-to-face to explain the Council's decision to them (12-15 March). All understood and agreed that this was the right thing to do, as did our missionary earlier. We encouraged them to relocate to Northern Ireland

in order to join the CPRC (Belgic Confession, 28). One family has already done so and other saints from the LRF hope to move in the future.

After informing the LRF and the CPRC, we notified our sister churches, the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC) in Singapore and especially the PRC, for you, our fellow saints in North America, have provided the bulk of the LRF budget for 9-10 years. We thank you for your generous assistance and encouragement, and are very sorry that the money and support you invested in us did not result in the formation of a Reformed church in Limerick.

Rev. McGeown has accepted the call to Providence PRC in West Michigan. According to recent estimates, his immigration to the US will take about a year or more from now. In the meantime, he is ministering to God's people who remain in the LRF.

Those who lose most when a Reformed mission field or church ends are those who agree with the precious truth that they have been taught but are unable or unwilling to move. They either attend nowhere or drift back to another congregation that often manifests only dimly the three marks of a true church (Belgic Confession, 29). Such poor people either seek to retain substantial elements of the biblical and Reformed faith, and so are desperately unhappy in their new congregation, or they compromise and still their consciences just to fit in. Quickly or bit by bit, their biblical and doctrinal convictions get watered down, as they sell the truth (Prov. 23:23), and doctrinal confusion and fog enters in. For anyone who is convicted of the scriptural teaching of our *Three Forms of Unity*, the ecclesiastical situation in Limerick can only be described as dire.

Coronavirus Lockdown

On 21 February, we held our annual congregational dinner in Broughshane, with Rev. and Larisa McGeown, Sam Watterson and Dale Mansona of

the LRF joining us. In February and March, three households of the Gould family from Antrim started attending the CPRC, because they were convicted of the truth of marriage, divorce and remarriage, and God's sovereign grace. Another covenant child, Micah Hall, son of Philip and Susan, was baptized on 1 March. Over this period, we began to hear talk about COVID-19.

We had 6 Hungarian believers stay with us at the manse (6-11 March): Janos, a Reformed pastor; Balint, a licentiate minister, with his wife, Kati, and daughter, Illango; Gabor and Veronika. These fine saints have helped us with translations (<https://cprc.co.uk/languages/hungarian>) and are seeking to publish Rev. Ron Hanko's excellent *Doctrine According to Godliness* in book form in Hungarian. By this stage, the coronavirus clouds were beginning to gather but our Magyar friends were able to fly back to Budapest as scheduled.

Another Hungarian brother, Tibor Bognar, who moved to Northern Ireland some months ago, was to make his confession of faith in the CPRC on the morning of Sunday, 22 March. But, sadly, this was our first service cancelled due to the coronavirus scare. Since then, we have been live streaming a streamlined service from our church building at our usual times of 11 A.M. and 6 P.M., first on Sermon.net only, and then also through YouTube and Facebook.

Out of concern that the Republic of Ireland might impose travel restrictions, the Watterson family (Sam, Anga, Jason, Eleanora and Jonas) from the LRF headed to Northern Ireland more quickly than they had originally intended. Since the house that they were to rent was not yet ready for them to move into, they stayed at the manse and we had a lovely time with them (23-28 March) before they were able to settle into their new home.

A number of people in the CPRC have had COVID-19 or reckon that they have had it, including Mary and me. We lost our senses of smell and taste for about 8 days in early April, something that had never happened to us before. We thought that we merely had the flu but later these symptoms were identified as likely indicators of the virus. Our congregation has a high proportion of health work-

ers and medically vulnerable people. The coronavirus regulations in Europe are much stricter than in America. We do not have a "First Amendment." Our civil governments and media are, sadly, more socialist, and so more willing to seek control over the freedoms of the citizenry.

Because of the uncertainty due to the coronavirus and the resulting civil restrictions, the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Council decided on 21 April to reschedule this summer's conference to next year. Lord willing, it will have the same beautiful subject (union with Christ), the same fine speakers (Prof. David Engelsma and Rev. Andy Lanning) and the same great venue (Castlewellan Castle, Northern Ireland), and it is to take place on almost exactly the same week one year later: 10-17 July, 2021 (<https://www.britishreformed.org>).

I was to represent the CPRC at the synod in Trinity PRC which is to begin today (9 June) but international travel is not advisable for us in the current circumstances. For instance, those entering the UK, including returning British citizens and residents, are required to self-isolate for 14 days. There is little sense in our going to America for 1 week only to return to 2 weeks of quarantine!

Redirected Labours

Because of our civil government's coronavirus prohibition of meetings outside one's own household, much church work was (and is) impossible, some new labours were (and are) required, and additional problems were created for the congregation and its officebearers. Indoor meetings for catechism and Bible study, family visitation and our Annual General Meeting have been ruled out for the time being, likewise visiting mothers after childbirth (Denisa Fiurasek and Lara Watterson were born on 5 and 6 May, respectively).

In this novel environment, the first thing we did was to create an updated CPRC address, telephone and e-mail list of our 32 households, including new members and attendees (25 March). This helps our people keep in touch with each other, and facilitates our posting the Sunday bulletin and other reading materials to the saints each week, as well as congregational e-mails.

In order to get more hits through searches, etc., I added the Scripture texts to the sermon titles on the CPRC YouTube page (www.youtube.com/user/CPRCNI)—a lengthy job, given that we have over 2,300 videos on-line. With the coronavirus lockdown, we have had record growth in subscribers to our channel and the number of videos being watched has increased significantly.

April's *Covenant Reformed News* completed volume 17 (almost all of the first 8 volumes were produced by Rev. Hanko). The lockdown gave us a good opportunity to engage in the time-consuming task of compiling bundles of the 24 issues in each of the various volumes (<https://cprc.co.uk/covenant-reformed-news>). The number of free e-mail subscriptions to the *News* has gone up recently, especially through the advertising of our friend David Hutchings in Wales.

Along with many Protestant Reformed ministers, I took my turn with a devotional (on Daniel 1) for the students at Trinity Christian High School in Hull, Iowa (22 April). This was the first video that Mary and I produced at the manse (www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVmY5EUEXUQ).

On 14 May, I joined Chris Arnzen on Iron Sharpens Iron Radio for an interview by telephone on the new birth: “Supernatural and Infallible Regeneration: Most Delightful, Astonishing, Mysterious and Ineffable” (cf. Canons III/IV:12). The audio is on a special webpage containing sermons, articles, and box sets of CDs and DVDs on this lovely topic (<https://cprc.co.uk/resources-on-regeneration>).

For some time, my two filing cabinets have been overflowing with notes from sermons, Bible studies, lectures, etc. I took the “opportunity” of the lockdown to reduce the chaos to order! I bought a third filing cabinet, and the new space and classification system should work for some years to come, Lord willing.

We have restocked with office supplies, including scores of reams of paper and card stock. We designed, printed, collated and stapled 1,000 copies of a new CPRC Book catalogue (<https://cprc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Book-Catalogue-2020.pdf>). February 2016 was the date

of our last book catalogue, so this was desperately needed.

Alex Kalsbeek ably assembled for us a pallet of Reformed literature, consisting mostly of RFPA books, but also several boxes of BRF books and some PR pamphlets. It is currently in transit and should arrive at our house in the next couple of weeks. Our hearty thanks to a generous anonymous donor who paid for the shipping and to AIM (Active in Missions), which some time ago gave us \$1,000 to help with our Reformed literature witness.

Main Website Developments

Being largely confined to our home for many weeks also gave Mary and me more time to work on our main website (www.cprc.co.uk). We added a special coronavirus resources page, which contains four sermons dealing with aspects of the pandemic and materials on uncertainty, fear, worry, God's providence, signs of the times, comfort, etc. (<https://cprc.co.uk/coronavirus-resources-page>).

In the 3½ months since my last letter, we have added 137 translations, including 17 Spanish (by Jorge in Peru and Alex in Mexico, who has translated all of Rev. Griess' Reformed Witness Hour messages on Calvinism), 14 Hungarian (by Balint and Tibor), 12 Indonesian (by Irwan and Cai, who are helping us again), 11 French (by an excellent new translator), 6 Afrikaans (by Nic, who is back in the harness), etc. Our website now contains several more translations of the documents in our *Three Forms of Unity*, including the Belgic Confession in Nepali, probably the first time this creed has been rendered into this language. Many more ecumenical creeds have been added to www.cprc.co.uk/languages so that we now have over 200 languages on our website. Another silver lining in the cloud of the coronavirus lockdown (Rom. 8:28)!

Regarding the number of translations in our top languages, we have 1 in the 500s (552 Italian), 1 in the 400s (483 Portuguese), 1 in the 300s (301 Hungarian), 1 in the 200s (222 Spanish) and 4 in the 100s (169 German, 161 Burmese, 150 Indonesian and 138 Afrikaans). Especially to help new translators, we created this webpage, “Translating for the CPRC Website: Questions and Answers”

(<https://cprc.co.uk/articles/translatingforwebsite>).

This would be a good link to send to anyone you think might be both willing and able to assist us with this project.

With the aid of friends from many countries, we created new section headings and rearranged hundreds of pieces on almost all of our 9 separate language pages (Italian, Portuguese, Hungarian, Spanish, German, Burmese, Indonesian, Afrikaans and Russian), as well as our 48 Chinese and 40 French translations, etc. The layout is now much improved! Since we have so many items on our Italian and Portuguese pages (and also our lengthy Articles page), Mary created “accordions” or collapsible tabs for their subsections.

After a lot of time because of red tape, we managed to prove to PayPal that the CPRC is indeed a charity, so that we could qualify for lower charges for using their services on our website. First, Mary enabled people in the UK to pay for our books and box sets of CDs or DVDs on-line by PayPal or bank transfer, and it has been working well (<https://cprc.co.uk/bookstore>). Second, she set up a donation page, both for people in the UK (who can also contribute Gift Aid) and all the nations of the world by PayPal or bank transfer (<https://cprc.co.uk/product/donations>). Over the years, many people have asked us to set up such a webpage and several have used this service already. Third, saints from any country outside the UK (except America and Canada, for we do not want to “compete” with the RFPA) can now buy the products in our bookstore through PayPal or bank transfer, with the former being most convenient and least expensive for most people (<https://cprc.co.uk/ordering-information>). Our first international customer who used PayPal was a brother from France.

Slowly Returning to Normality

Council meetings with our elders and deacons have continued, though only through video conferencing. As things opened up a bit, Julian Kennedy, Tommy Duncan and the Buchanans were able to do outdoor work around the church property, such as cutting down bushes and trimming hedges.

More recently, visiting people outside their houses has been permitted. We can see the saints in

their gardens, if the weather is good. Thankfully, it has been unusually sunny, dry and warm for most of the last 3 months.

Last week, I was able to catechize Corey and Katelyn Hall in their back garden, since this involved parties from just two households. As of yesterday, we have reached “Step 2” of the Northern Ireland Executive’s “Pathway to Recovery,” according to which “groups of up to 10 can meet outdoors” with social distancing, etc. Weather permitting, this will enable us to hold the Seniors catechism class with its five students and the morning Bible study class dealing with faith on the manse’s patio in the days ahead.

Hopefully, progression through the “Pathway to Recovery” will now start to speed up significantly and we move through to “Step 5” and, beyond that, normality more quickly. Especially now, increasing numbers of people are more concerned with the burdensome regulations, the many indirect problems caused by the lockdown and the damage to the economy, than they are with the coronavirus itself.

It all goes to show how relevant our Belgic Confession is! Before the scare over the pandemic brought many things to a grinding halt, the last 15 of our Wednesday night classes treated Article 36 on “The Magistrates.” We looked at many Scriptures opposing civil rebellion, and analysed both Anabaptist revolution and Anabaptist world flight (<https://cprc.co.uk/belgic-confession-class>). These meetings proved more immediately relevant than any of us would have thought at the time! Those in America, which has greater civil liberties, have more freedom for many aspects of the work of Christ’s kingdom.

May the Lord be with you all. Please continue to pray for our church and its witness in Northern Ireland and further afield.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Rev. & Mary Stewart