

Covenant Protestant Reformed Church Ballymena, NI

20 November 2020

Dear saints in the
Protestant Reformed Churches,

Church Growth

2020 has seen significant growth in the CPRC. Three Gould households from Antrim, about 11 miles by dual carriageway from Ballymena, started coming to our congregation at the start of March. Kerryann Gould came across us through our YouTube channel and main website (www.cprc.co.uk). Her three children are Aaysha, Somaya and Yossef. Kerryann spoke with her parents, Billy and Anne Gould, and her sister, Grace, about our scriptural doctrines and church. Key issues for the three Gould households were (and are) the Bible's teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage, and God's particular grace in Jesus Christ.

Three saints from continental Europe have moved to Ballymena to join us. Tibor Bogнар from Hungary made confession of faith on 26 July. His mother, Boglarka, arrived in our country on 9 September. Ivan Ortu from Sardinia, a large Mediterranean island west of mainland Italy, came on 10 October. The Lord used the Hungarian and Italian translations on our website (to which Tibor and Ivan have also contributed) and the British Reformed Fellowship conferences, amongst other things, to bring them to our church.

Two families from the Limerick Reformed Fellowship have relocated to Northern Ireland. Sam and Anga Watterson were received as members on 26 July, along with 3 of their children: Jason, Eleanora, and Jonas. The next Lord's day, their 3-month-old daughter, Lara, was baptized. Manuel and Emily-Kate Kuhs and their 4 children (Sebastian, Penelope, Fe-

licity, and Elizabeth) moved here in the middle of October.

This, of course, not only manifests itself in increased attendance at both the Sunday services but also in catechism, for we now have 15 students in 4 classes. This growth also benefits the fellowship at our Tuesday morning study on "Saving Faith: A Biblical and Theological Analysis" and our Wednesday night class on the *Belgic Confession*, which recently concluded its treatment of "Anabaptist Political History and Theory" (Art. 36) and began "Eschatology and Time" (Art. 37) (www.cprc.co.uk/belgic-confession-class).

We produced a new CPRC address, telephone, and e-mail list (8 November) but not in the foolish spirit of David's numbering the people in II Samuel 24. We are mindful and thankful that it is the sovereign Christ who builds His church. He does so at the time and in the manner of His choosing (Matt. 16:18), sometimes in ways that are unexpected or tinged with sadness, as with our brothers and sisters coming to us from our (closing) mission field in Limerick.

Coronavirus Restrictions

In order to maintain social distancing during these days of Covid-19, we roped off every other pew in our main auditorium. However, even with this loss of seating and the addition of new people, we are still able to accommodate all who want to come to our services, though it is getting tighter.

Our church building, which was completed in the summer of 2010, was designed to admit a fair bit of growth. We have added chairs in appropriate places in the auditorium, plus we have a cry room, a balcony (where Tibor trans-

lates the sermon into Hungarian for Boglarka) and a narthex. Thankfully, with some planning, a seating chart, and the cooperation of all our people, we have not had to divide the congregation (for example, with half coming to the morning service and the other half to the evening service) and no one has been turned away.

The Covid rules and the greater attendance have meant that our Tuesday and Wednesday classes, which formerly were held in the Bible study room, now meet in the (significantly larger) balcony area, for which we have purchased a whiteboard. The catechism classes are now held in various locations in our church building to avoid having to clean one room between each of the classes

The pandemic made things especially complicated for those who moved country to join us, something that is never easy at the best of times. They had to navigate the coronavirus regulations in Italy, the Republic of Ireland, or Hungary, while putting their own affairs in order, and leaving their homes and jobs, etc., and then settle into a new church, home, job, and land, with its different form of Covid restrictions.

Sometimes even the coronavirus situation in a third country was a factor. Ivan Ortu had to rearrange his flight route from Sardinia so that he no longer passed through the Netherlands, after the UK added that country to its “blacklist,” for he wanted to avoid a 14-day quarantine upon arrival in Northern Ireland.

Fellowship between the people of God is crucial, as the saints build and maintain relationships with each other, giving and receiving support and encouragement in the Lord. This is especially important for new people, particularly those from other nations, but occasions for face-to-face communion outside church meetings have been severely curtailed in the present climate.

Currently in Northern Ireland, the regulations only permit people from one other specified household into one’s own home. Membership classes, which, in the CPRC, typically take place in the home of either the family or the minister, have been put on hold. Even a relatively simple transfer of membership is more difficult, since ordinarily it is our policy for an elder and the pastor to meet with the individuals or families in their homes.

We even decided to forego holding a Reformation day lecture this year (and a wonderful subject had been planned for it!) since, in these coronavirus days, we anticipated having far fewer visitors. Instead, on 28 October, we had our Annual General Meeting (with reports on the congregation’s audio-visual witness, finances, evangelism, etc.), which we had not been able to hold at its usual time in May or June.

Our Websites

We have been live streaming our Lord’s day services by video on Sermon.net since October, 2013. Several months ago, this company from Oklahoma added a function enabling us to simulcast on YouTube and Facebook. With our Sunday services being streamed on three websites, many more people are watching live.

At the recommendation of a lady in our congregation, we now also live stream in audio only (www.cprc.co.uk/live-streaming). This is useful for God’s people who are blind or have limited bandwidth, etc.

Jacob Buchanan assembled a new and better, yet cheaper, computer for the live streaming of our services on the Lord’s day. The old one did the job for over seven years before failing.

The CPRC YouTube site has now surpassed 1/3 million video hits (www.youtube.com/user/CPRCNI). Stephen Murray has put in many hours of work, uploading 2,414 videos over the last 11½ years.

Mary installed a free SEO (search engine optimization) plug-in on our main website (13 June). Besides creating a site map, the SEO plug-in alerts us to, and suggests, minor changes that we can make to advance our rankings in the various search engines. It has resulted in a noticeable increase in people coming to our website through searches.

Another major improvement to www.cprc.co.uk is the addition of push notifications. A good number of folk have subscribed already and so will be notified whenever we add anything new to the website.

In the 5½ months since my last letter (9 June), we have added 151 translations (www.cprc.co.uk/languages). Over ⅔ of these are the 107 Burmese items by Rev. Titus in Myanmar, which we received through a memory stick from John VanBaren. The 18 Spanish translations include all the chapters of *Saved by Grace* by Prof. Ron Cammenga and Rev. Ron Hanko, as well as materials on God's covenant and the errors of Charismaticism. The others are 9 Hungarian, 5 Indonesian, 4 Urdu (from friends in Pakistan), and 3 Odia, plus 1 each in French, Romanian, German, Portuguese, and Tamil (Church Order of Dordt).

Other News

On 25 June, I was interviewed on Iron Sharpens Iron Radio on "Regeneration: God's Gift of a New Heart." This audio and the earlier interview on "Supernatural and Infallible Regeneration: Most Delightful, Astonishing, Mysterious and Ineffable" are atop our regeneration resources page, which also contains articles, sermons, and quotes on this beautiful subject (www.cprc.co.uk/resources-on-regeneration).

A pallet of excellent RFPA books and other Protestant Reformed literature, well packed by Alex Kalsbeek, arrived at our house on 29 June. Over the next few days, we attached CPRC Bookstore stickers to the hundreds of items, and put them on shelves and on the floor

of the book room at the manse, and in the book cabinet at our church building. Both the number of titles and the amount of stock are larger than they have ever been before. These superb materials will keep us going for some time and benefit a lot of people!



Several major improvements were made to the manse and its grounds over the summer. The three youngest Buchanan boys, helped by Colin, their father, replaced rotted posts and planks in two fences, and tightened the sheep netting. My brother, Douglas, painted all the outside of the house. Julian Kennedy and Tommy Duncan help me to spread tons of topsoil and sand to level and improve the manse's lawns.

After spending 14 days quarantining on Northern Ireland's beautiful north coast, Rev. Ron Hanko and Nancy were able to visit the CPRC during their last week in our province. It was great to see them both again and hear our former pastor preach to us at both of the services on Sunday, 27 September.

After recently celebrating his 90th birthday and having written excellent articles in all or almost all of the previous 421 issues, Prof. Hanko decided that the time had come for him to lay aside his work for the *Covenant Reformed News* (www.cprc.co.uk/covenant-reformed-news). With the October installment, his son, Rev. Hanko, who produced almost all of the first (fortnightly) 200 issues, graciously resumed writing for the (now monthly) *News* after a hiatus of almost 20 years.

Yesterday, we posted the new *British Reformed Journal (BRJ)* to people in the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Canada, India, Germany, Eritrea, Australia, Brazil, etc., as well as a bulk mailing to the RFPA building in Michigan. Paula Roberts of the RFPA is kindly helping to keep our international postage costs down by passing on copies of the *BRJ* to subscribers in the PRC. Among the current issue's six articles is "Common Grace in Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism" by Bálint Márk Vásárhelyi, our main Hungarian translator. New subscribers are always welcome (www.britishreformed.org/journal/subscribe).

The dates for next summer's rescheduled British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) family conference are 10-17 July 2021. Prof. David Engelsma and Rev. Andy Lanning are to develop the beautiful truth of our union with Christ at Castlewellan Castle, County Down, Northern Ireland (www.britishreformed.org).

Those of you who are interested in going to the conference would doubtless appreciate a 100% guarantee that it will go ahead. However, at this stage, given the uncertainty regarding the dissemination of vaccines internationally, foreign travel regulations, Covid rules for large groups in Northern Ireland in the months ahead, etc., we are not in that position. We will let you know as best we can as soon as we can, especially because we understand that you would need to buy transatlantic flights in order to come.

I trust that you will understand and be patient. Our Lord Jesus Christ rules from heaven so that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). May His peace guard our hearts and minds (Phil. 4:7), as well as our steps.

Yours by grace,
Rev. & Mary Stewart