Dear saints in the Protestant Reformed Churches,

Many of you have been asking for an update on my plans to immigrate to the USA. When we first started making enquiries into immigration, we were warned that the process could take at least a year, and that was without the added complication of COVID-19. On April 28, 2020 we submitted Form I-130 (“Petition for Alien Relative”) as the first step toward a “green card,” and on June 16, 2020, Providence PRC submitted two more applications under the general category of Religious Worker (R-1 and I-360).

On August 24, 2020 I was informed that the R-1 application had been approved and that I should seek the earliest possible appointment for a (non-immigrant) visa interview in London, England, UK. The earliest possible appointment at that time was August 11, 2021. Later I secured an appointment for November 10, 2020 in Dublin, which was cancelled and rescheduled for March 8, 2021, when Ireland increased its COVID-19 restrictions in October 2020.

On December 17, 2020, the National Visa Center (NVC) informed of us that USCIS (United States Citizen and Immigration Services) had approved the I-130 (“Petition for Alien Relative”), and after more forms, fees, and documentation, I am now “documentarily qualified” for an immigrant visa appointment, but I do not know when I might be assigned such an appointment.

Of the three applications (I-130, R-1, and I-360) two have been approved and one (I-360) is pending. However, I still need a visa interview. On February 23, 2021, the Irish government announced yet another extension of the current “Level 5” restrictions until April 5, with the result that the appointment for March 8, 2021 (the non-immigrant visa) has been cancelled. According to the embassy’s website, “Under Level 5 restrictions the Visa Unit will be able to provide only extremely limited immigrant visa services. Non-immigrant visa services will be suspended except for life and death emergencies and for travel to engage directly in the fight against COVID-19” and “Under Level 4 and under only extremely limited routine services will be possible. As such, wait times for appointments and processing times might be greatly extended” (https://ie.usembassy.gov/us-travel-restrictions/).

To clarify, a non-immigrant visa is one that allows temporary residency in the USA. For example, the R-1 visa would grant me permission to live and work in the USA for two and a half years, and could be renewed for a maximum of five years. An immigrant visa is one that allows permanent residency in the USA. The I-130 (“Petition for Alien Relative”) visa would grant me permanent residency in the USA.

Therefore, since the March 8 appointment is now officially cancelled, the earliest appointment that I have is the R-1 visa interview (the non-immigrant visa) in London, England, for August 11, 2021; and I am waiting for the embassy to grant an appointment for the I-130 (immigrant visa). If the embassy offers only “extremely limited immigrant visa services,” we wonder how likely it is for me to get an appointment for an I-130 immigrant visa interview in Dublin before August. The words “extremely limited” do not close the door completely, but they also do not offer a lot of hope. The National Visa Center’s website states: “NVC cannot predict when Consular Sections will resume routine services, or when your case will be scheduled for an interview.”

The issue, then, is not immigration as such, but the effect that COVID-19 restrictions are having on the embassy in Dublin. Under Ireland’s “Level 5” restrictions almost all businesses are
closed. No gatherings outside of one’s household, either in homes or in private gardens, are permitted. Some “social distanced” walking in parks and other public venues is permitted with one other household, but no picnics or the like are allowed (that would be a “gathering”). There is also a travel limit of 5km (3.1 miles) so that we may not, for example, drive to some of the beautiful scenic spots of Ireland and go for a walk, because “non-essential” travel beyond the 5km limit is punishable with a fine of €100 (c. $122), which applies to each adult in the vehicle. (We do have some nice areas for walking in Limerick, however). We also may not travel to Northern Ireland to visit family or to visit the church in Ballymena. Leaving the country on a “non-essential” journey is also out of the question and punishable with a fine of €2,000 (c. $2,430). Therefore, walks within the 5km limit, shopping for groceries, and errands to the bank or post office are really the only reasons for leaving the house, unless you cannot work from home.

Most grievous for us, however, are the continued restrictions on public worship. Most of the members of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship have left (two families moved to Northern Ireland before the end of 2020), so that only a handful of people remain. We have never had our own church building, the hall that we rented for ten years is closed, no other facility is available to us, and even mixed-household gatherings in private homes for worship, for Bible study, or even for a cup of tea are prohibited. Therefore, our worship is online only: I preach two sermons a week from my study and I lead a Bible study (on Proverbs) and teach four catechism classes (two for Providence PRC and two for my nieces in Northern Ireland) from home. The online program that we use allows us to chat afterwards, which is nice. Nevertheless, we long to be able to meet together again, but despite petitions from church leaders to the government and one pending court challenge (by a Roman Catholic businessman, whose case was just adjourned for the fourth time to March 23), the churches remain closed. Our brethren in Northern Ireland in the CPRC do hold in-person worship services and Bible studies, albeit with social distancing and the wearing of masks, but they are in a different jurisdiction (UK) with different rules.

We broadcast our services live on http://mixlr.com/limerickreformed/ at 11 am and 5.30pm (GMT) and the sermons are recorded and uploaded to https://sermons.limerickreformed.com/. I have been preaching a series on the parables (currently number 17 in the series) and have recently started my seventh time through the Heidelberg Catechism. I will continue preaching, teaching, leading the Bible study, and writing, until we move. We may not leave Limerick: Larisa does not have permission to reside in the UK, so moving to Northern Ireland is not an option, and we may not travel to other countries until immigration is sorted or travel restrictions are relaxed.

As you might imagine, we struggle with feelings of frustration, disappointment, and discontentment, but we also trust that God’s way is perfect for us. However, it is not easy: the monotony and lack of social interaction is very difficult, and the lack of fellowship and public worship is demoralizing. We greatly appreciate and need your prayers. Remember, too, the saints of Providence PRC, as they wait for their future pastor. It is wonderful to be able to teach some of the children catechism from afar, but we long to be with the whole congregation.

“Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD” (Ps. 27:14).

In Christian love,

Rev Martyn and Larisa McGeown