

Editorial Note:

This issue of our newsletter focuses on the 'unofficial website' of our denomination. The Domestic Mission Committee is working on taking on the oversight of this website in the near future, the Lord willing. We are thankful for the great work of Rev. Gise Van Baren and his sons for creating, developing, and maintaining this website for many years. We trust that many of you are well acquainted with the website and perhaps also have benefited from it in various ways. Rev. Van Baren is concerned about the need of retiring from the work of maintaining

the website. We have learned how effective the website has become in helping those outside of our churches learn about our denomination and for the purpose of disseminating materials published in our churches. It has become one of the most effective tools the Lord has given us for the work of missions, even all over the world. Our vision as DMC is to continue to develop and use this website and we even encourage our readers to inform others about it and the wealth of information that can be found on it. The interesting articles of our newsletter tell the story about all of this.

IN THIS ISSUE

p1 PRCA.org: Significant Tool for Denominational Use

p3 PRCA.ORG

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PRCA.ORG: Significant Tool for Denominational Use | Update from the Mission Development Committee

For many, prca.org has become a household word. For some, who are not members of the Protestant Reformed Churches, it has become a source for their edification. It doesn't take a person too long to see that there is a great deal of information provided in the web site called prca.org.

The website had a humble beginning. What began as a Protestant Reformed pastor's idea in Loveland, CO to be a witness and to spread the gospel has grown over the years into a place of resource and a witness to the world.

It was that fact that the Domestic Mission Committee's (DMC) sub-committee called the Mission Development Committee (MDC) recognized as a possible logical part of its work. Since it is the sub-committee whose work it is to promote the work of missions, the MDC put the idea on its agenda and quietly began to give the matter some thought. Some things were apparent right away. First, that information for just about everything is internet based. Second, the generations coming will be looking on the internet for much more of their information. The third thing obvious would be that it is helpful to have information about our churches at one source. And in the fourth place, we saw that the Reformed

Free Publishing Association (RFPA) had a very effective web site of its own for promoting our written works.

If then the above were some of the positive reasons for a denominational web site, there were some reasons to approach the idea with caution, too. First, there can be content concerns when something becomes "official". This can happen with a web site as well. Second, we also knew prca.org is a private venture of one man's intentions and design, a site which he owns. These two reasons alone would normally have stopped an otherwise good idea cold in its tracks. But we remembered that in our work as sub-committee, we were mandated by the DMC to promote the cause of missions. This thought caused us to press on in our consideration of the idea of a denominational web site.

After arranging a meeting between the MDC and Rev. VanBaren to discuss having a link to our own fledgling DMC missions web site a little more prominently displayed on his, we discovered as we talked, a reason, a very compelling reason, to press on. Rev. VanBaren expressed a sincere desire that his many years of hard work and labor of love continue in good hands for its use in the furtherance of the gospel.

The result of this meeting was reported to the DMC which decided to form a special sub-committee that would make it their specific mandate to pursue the possibility of having a truly denominational web site owned by the PRCA. Their work specifically was to investigate all of the details involved in the operations of the website prca.org and make recommendations concerning a possible transition of the web site from Rev. VanBaren's hands into those of the denomination.

The last part of their mandate was to present to the DMC for its consideration and recommendation a reasonable way of receiving, overseeing and maintaining the web site for years to come. Perhaps most intimidating would be to present this to the Synod of 2011. However, these recommendations, including placing the maintenance and supervision of prca.org into the hands of the DMC, are being recommended to Synod for her consideration.

So may it seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us as a denomination at Synod 2011 to take this opportunity of continuing the work of a tremendously valuable missions tool called prca.org.

At the request of the Mission Committee, I present this account of the origin, purpose, and development of the “unofficial” Protestant Reformed Churches’ website.

I accepted the call to the Loveland, CO Prot. Ref. Church in 1994. About a year after arrival there, I read an intriguing e-mail sent to all of the ministers from Richard Moore, then pastor of the Hull, IA Protestant Reformed Church. He pointed out that churches were placing web pages to inform others of their churches and their distinctives! They advertised their presence to those who had access to the Web. (Incidentally, the Web as we know it was introduced about in 1991.) He pointed out that we too should investigate the use of this means to inform others of our presence within the community. The more I thought of the suggestion, the more intriguing it was to me. None of our churches of which I am aware, had such a site at the time. Perhaps I could try to design a site for the Loveland Congregation. It would include a picture of the church, time and place of the worship services, listing of the activities of the congregation, and a brief statement of our Reformed faith.

There was, however, one big problem. This was something beyond the scope of the knowledge and understanding of one who received his training in the seminary. But I had one advantage that provided some hope of success. My son Phil was a student at the University of Michigan. He worked with computers and had access to the facilities at the University. He agreed to set up a website. I would send him the materials which he then would place on this site.

So began the first website in our denomination in mid-1995. The page contained the basic elements: the name, picture, and location of Loveland church; the time of services and information concerning other meetings held at the church. It presented itself as a defender of Reformed doctrine and had set forth on the page a tulip signifying the “five points of Calvinism” together with scriptural references in support of this doctrine.

There were difficulties at that time that we had to work around. One was the slow speed of computers then (though at that time these seemed quite fast), and slowness of transmission time which was done via telephone. There was also only one telephone line to the parsonage (and none to the church). Consequently, I would begin sending materials to my son very early in the morning via e-mail so the telephone would be available for church and the parsonage use during the daytime and evening hours.

Another difficulty was that we had no internet service. I could not send e-mails or upload materials without that. But my daughter, who was a student at Colorado State University at Ft. Collins, had an account enabling her to use their internet access from our home. With that, I could send the necessary e-mails and content for the web page.

The more we worked at that Loveland web site, the more it seemed wise to add materials showing our denominational affiliation: its confessions, its sister churches, its Seminary, as well as its publications. And the sooner we could get all this on the Web page, the more quickly people from the whole world would be able to read and download this material.

However, to read and download the materials, these must first be found on the Web. One must know and use the exact domain name to reach the website. One can list the domain name with pages listing churches—it could be in a local city website or perhaps under a national listing of denominations. Another way was by means of search engines. Fifteen years ago there were many of these. One had to submit the domain name and information concerning the church in order to be listed. If something changed, as often it did, one could frantically contact each of the search engines to provide the corrected information.

In recent years this has greatly changed. There are several major search engines: Google, Yahoo, or Bing. One need not apply to appear on their listing. They find almost instantaneously all the web pages

that exist. These then list a website by certain standards so the most significant would be listed first.

But after a short time in bringing Loveland Prot. Ref. Church on the Web, it seemed proper to have a separate website which would present all denominational activity as part of a denominational page. So while Loveland Web page continued as before, a new denominational page was designed (somewhat in the same form as it currently appears). About the same time, Jim Lenting (from South Holland PRC) and the evangelism committee of South Holland PRC informed us that earlier they had secured and paid for a domain name “PRCA.org” – wisely recognizing that it could be used for the denomination in the future. So when the Loveland site contained increasingly materials about and from the denomination, they offered it for use (in 1997) to Loveland. The offer was gratefully accepted and continues now as the “unofficial” site of the Protestant Reformed Churches.



The front page of the web site was designed and set up to make the materials readily available. And the picture on top of the page was deliberately placed there. I had requested Mrs. Jean Ezinga of Loveland to paint a picture of a church which was at the same time humble in appearance but still obviously a church. It must be a reminder of the true position of the church in the midst of a wicked and rebellious world. Isaiah 1:8-9 would be the Scriptural reference portraying this. She made a striking water-color to illustrate it. Later, when it was suggested by one not a member of the Prot. Ref. Churches that we ought rather to have a cathedral or beautiful church on the top of the page, I wrote him my explanation. The substance of the answer can be found by going to www.prc.org/ and clicking the picture itself.

Gradually over some five years other features were added to the website. First we added many of

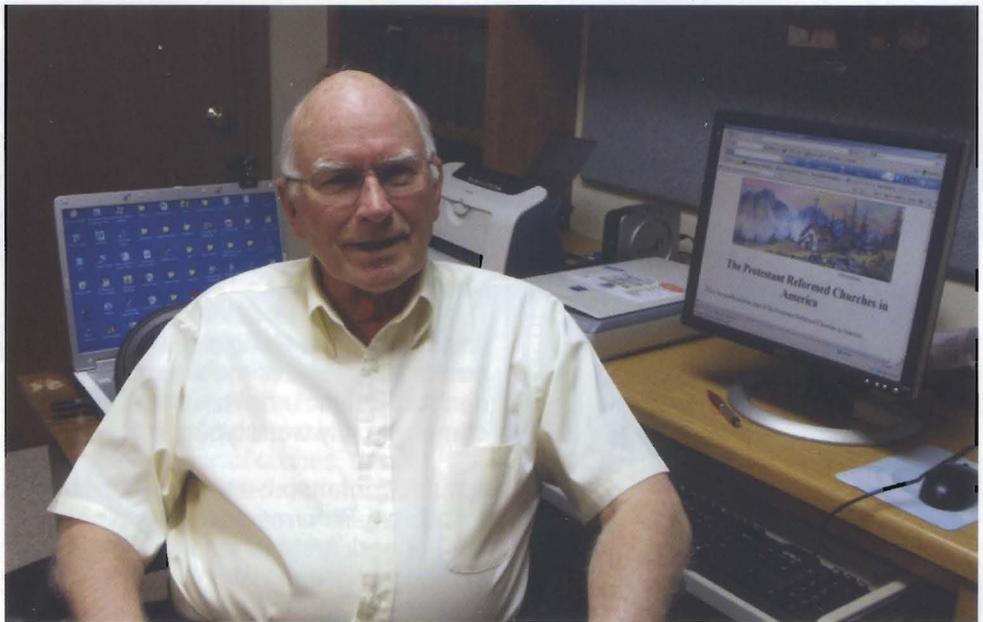
our pamphlets and articles. Shortly after, we began placing each issue of the Standard Bearer on the Web beginning with the Sept. 15, 1996 issue. We placed ten volumes on the Web before the project was taken over by the Reformed Free Publishing Association – RFPA.org -- where they have done an excellent job of continuing this work. They are also gradually placing the earlier volumes on their website as well. The ten volumes remain on the PRCA.org page though the link on the front page directs the reader to the RFPA site.

The printed sermons of the Reformed Witness Hour were added and later the audio sermons. The latest of the Radio message is automatically featured in a special link available anytime through the week. The Reformed Witness Hour has taken over this work with its own site. PRCA.org links to them as well.

The Theological Journal of our Seminary was also added to PRCA.org. Rev. Richard Smit offered to scan all the earlier copies from its very beginning and these were all placed on the website. (Just recently someone pointed out that 5 of the earliest issues were missing. These were obtained from the Seminary and promptly added. He immediately sent his thanks in an e-mail.)

Another feature was added: “Today’s Meditations” by Rev. J. Heys. Each day there appears a different “Meditation” page. The contents were gradually enlarged. There were instructive and edifying quotes from well-known theologians. At the request of another individual, there was a list of scriptural passages presented daily which enable the reader to go through the Bible in a year. Added just recently are brief instructions on the Heidelberg Catechism (one Lord’s Day each week with seven thoughts on that Lord’s Day—one for each day of the week). This latter is the project of a committee from the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore. Each day a Psalter Number is given with the singing of the Psalm-singing choir featured.

There are lists of pamphlets, sermons (both written and audio), our catechism books, several of the RFPA books, and links to those of



PRCA.org webmaster Rev. Gise Van Baren at his workstation

our churches who broadcast their live Sunday services every Sunday using the resources of SermonAudio.com This website contains hundreds of the sermons preached from many of our congregations.

Various other things are presented for instruction and encouragement. There is the “Covenant Reformed News” from Northern Ireland with a new issue each month. There is a list of Scriptural words and their explanations based on Scripture itself. These were first written by Rev. Dale Kuiper. Rev. W. Langerak presently does this for the Standard Bearer.

On our website there are various articles by Protestant Reformed ministers translated into other languages. There is also a link to the website of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Ballymena, Northern Ireland (www.cprf.co.uk) which contains a host of translations of P.R. literature into dozens of other languages. (Another valuable link is to the site of the Immanuel Prot. Ref. Church, AB. Rev. Tom Miersma prepares in a systematic way the important doctrines and practices of Holy Scripture.

A number of years ago there were added to the PRCA website, the bulletins of the various churches. Mr. Ken De Jong (of Peace PRC) had e-mailed the bulletins of most of our churches to an extensive list of e-mail addresses for many years. Doubtlessly, some of the readers of this document were on his mailing

list. This work of Mr. De Jong was greatly appreciated. Mr. De Jong also sent these bulletins to my e-mail address. We began to place these on the PRCA site and continue this even today. These were placed not simply to satisfy the curiosity of others, but for three reasons. First, this could promote greater awareness between sister churches. Their activities, their needs, their listing of the sick, and their continued work in ministry could bring fellow saints closer together. Secondly it provided some encouragement for those interested in the Reformed faith, to select the church nearby and listen to the sermon announced on its bulletin. Finally, a number of those not members of our denomination have indicated that they regularly read some of the bulletins because of their interest in the churches.

The Value of the Web Site

The fact that the World Wide Web is available in virtually every part of the world is obviously one reason to continue the work. Much of our literature is now widely downloaded and printed for use—without further cost to the churches. Though there is a valuable place for printed materials which can be distributed, the cost of this work is sizable. Now we have the means to provide the materials worldwide without the cost of printing or postage.

Through the World Wide Web, the Reformed Witness Hour can be heard worldwide at any time—and without any additional cost to the Reformed

Witness Hour. The local broadcasts are a valuable tool to promote the truths of God's Word where our churches are located or where they are engaged in mission labors. The PRCA.org site began carrying these broadcasts that now are continued on the most recent website: www.reformedwitnesshour.org. There is also included the useful feature accessing the current broadcast which makes the most recent Sunday message available throughout the week. It might be beneficial for each of the websites of individual churches to link this feature prominently in their pages: www.reformedwitnesshour.org/cgi-bin/refwitness.pl

The individual church websites can link to desired materials from the PRCA website. This makes unnecessary the duplications of materials that are already on the PRCA site. (A number of sites, for instance, link to the "Meditations" or the "Creeds" or the "sermons,")

How often is the PRCA.org site accessed? Some idea can be gained by checking the bottom of the "front page" of the site. The average number of "hits" to this page is 152,085 annually. Since Feb. 1, 2006 the total "hits" are 765,490. The "hits" have been increasing in number each year. If you wish to check further on "hits," click on "site statistics" below the number at the bottom of the page.

It is worthy of note that the web site is accessed from over 25 countries world-wide. The United States has the most individuals accessing the site with the most materials read or downloaded. It is striking too that China is in second place with downloads—almost the same as the United States. (Interestingly, usage from China suddenly spiked upward in August of 2010. It has been consistently high even until today. It appears that most of the downloads is audio sermons or music.)

There are reported to be over 200 million websites world-wide. Of these, our web site is number 708,440 world-wide and 281,171 in North America (as of Feb. 27, 2011). That places this web site in the first million of all webs (or about in the top 1/2 of 1% of all web sites).

One can use the popular search engines and type: "Protestant

Reformed" and our denomination usually comes up first in the listing. But more significantly, one can type on "Reformed" or "Protestant" and our denomination comes up usually within the top 15 (among millions of possibilities). This makes our denomination easier to find among hundreds of other denominations or churches.

(Incidentally, the Google search engine on the front page of the website can find all articles within the site containing any word typed in the box.)

A number of members of some of the Protestant Reformed congregations, I understand, first became aware of our churches through viewing the PRCA web site. (It would be interesting to find out who did. If you wish to "tell your story," you can send it to webmaster@prca.org. We would love to hear from you.)

There are not a large number of e-mails to the "webmaster." Those that do come; I either answer myself or refer them to one of our ministers or churches. We have a marvelous tool, given us in God's grace, to spread the precious gospel message through this means. And it can go places to which we likely never would be able to go. For this we thank our God.

How wonderfully God has directed and used human inventions that the gospel might be spread to the ends of the earth. In 1436 Johannes Gutenberg invented the Gutenberg press with its wooden and later metal movable type printing. One of the first

books printed on this press was the "Gutenberg Bible." With this invention, books could be produced rather cheaply and in large numbers. Soon Bibles were produced cheaply enough so that even the poorest of peoples could purchase or be given a copy. So today one can find virtually in every hotel or motel room a "Gideon Bible." Now with the invention of the internet and the World Wide Web, even the smallest of churches and denominations can be involved in a world wide evangelism. The Bible is available on-line. Thousands of sermons are on-line. Printed materials on doctrinal and spiritual subjects are available there. Truly God has directed that the gospel indeed is being heard in all nations.

A Word of Thanks

I cannot end this account without a word of deep appreciation and thanks to my son Phil. He designed the original Loveland PRC web page. He originally prepared and uploaded the materials on that site and later on the PRCA site. He took the materials of our three Creeds and put them into a form that was user friendly to those who needed to read and study them. He wrote the script which enabled one to link rapidly those text locations in a document to BibleGateway.com so that one could read the passage from the King James Bible. He also wrote the program which automatically linked to the latest Radio Sermon so that it could be heard any time during the week. And many times when I had problems preparing and uploading materials, he provided the needed assistance. So, thanks Phil!

WEBSITE SUMMARY BY MONTH						
Month	Daily Average			Monthly Totals		
	Hits	Pages	Visits	Visits	Pages	Hits
Feb 2011	26194	7473	2476	61919	186845	654850
Jan 2011	26127	6966	2436	75523	215953	809948
Dec 2010	25067	6789	2208	68453	210464	777097
Nov 2010	25165	6785	2486	74581	203574	754979
Oct 2010	26241	6929	2461	76311	214807	813493
Sep 2010	25299	6749	2351	70534	202481	758986
May 2010	21651	6943	2266	70250	215259	671190
Apr 2010	19667	6564	2373	71193	196945	590030
Mar 2010	22081	7314	2478	76825	226742	684524
Totals (from Mar 2010 - Feb 2011)				851545	2489641	8830295