

Clarion



Focus on Home Missions

Proclaiming the Gospel in Our Own Cultural Context

Clarion

To equip God's people for his glory,
in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized
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What's Inside

This issue of *Clarion* magazine is a special topic issue on home mission; that is, local mission projects and churches that are running here in Canada. The issue was coordinated by one of our editors, Rev. Matthew Van Luik, and he leads the issue with his article, "Home Mission: Proclaiming the Gospel in Our Own Cultural Context."

Throughout the rest of Issue 23 you will find reports from quite a number of churches and projects: the Brampton mission, Streetlight Christian Church, Mercy Church, Ambassador Canadian Reformed Church, Prince George Canadian Reformed Mission Church, and the Chinese Reformed Church in Surrey, BC. They share their joys and challenges, goals and observations; it is beautiful to read about the church of God is growing here in our country.

Thank you to Rev. Van Luik and all the authors of our articles for their work on this issue. It is our hope also to feature foreign mission in the coming year on our pages.

Laura Veenendaal

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Home Mission

This issue of *Clarion* is focusing on various local mission projects by Canadian Reformed Churches in different areas of the country. These missions are not all the same, for each has its own unique character. Some are new church plants, others are working out of an existing congregation, and some began with a core group of believers from Reformed churches. There is no one model that needs to be followed for mission work to succeed in this country. There are certain principles that need to be followed, but there is no cookie cutter approach that will work in every situation.

Some history

Developing missions in Canada are fairly recent developments within the Canadian Reformed Churches. Beginning around 1950, there was a large influx of Dutch immigrants into Canada. Many of these immigrants had gone through a church schism in The Netherlands in 1944. When they arrived in Canada, they sought each other out for support and quickly established churches in their new country. These churches were known in their communities as Dutch churches, even though they took on the name "Canadian." The early immigrants were focussed on establishing new churches, and schools for their children; to a large degree, they maintained a separation from the communities in which they lived.

These churches did not forget about their mission mandate, for quickly they worked together to send missionaries to foreign nations. There was a desire to see the gospel spread through

the whole world. This mission work was focused on third world countries, first Papua, then Papua New Guinea, and later Brazil: places that had not yet been reached by the gospel. Canada, on the other hand, was a country of European immigrants who came from Christian cultures. For that reason, the Canadian churches were more focussed on protecting and maintaining what the Lord had given us. There were already voices within the churches speaking about the task of the church to reach the people in our own communities. Recently I became reacquainted with the book by Rev. Van Dooren, *Get Out! & get rid of dilemmas*, first published nearly fifty years ago, in 1972. It was a call for the churches to become active in our communities with the gospel.

This call resonated to some degree, for it led to the forming of home mission committees in many churches across

Canada. These committees tried to stimulate the members of the congregation to be active in spreading the gospel, but often this work floundered either because of opposition to the implementation of some ideas, or because they did not really receive the full cooperation from both the leadership and members of the congregation. This work involved asking people to leave their comfort zones and to share the gospel with others. While we can be critical of the past, we need to see that the Lord was already working a change within the churches, so that today we see a more concerted effort within the churches to be a light in this nation.

Opportunities

Not only has there been a spiritual shift within the churches, but there has also been a huge shift in the diversity of this country. Fifty years ago the majority of Canadians were of European descent, but today they are becoming the minority, as people have immigrated into Canada from every country of this world. The major metropolitan areas are the most ethnically diverse areas in Canada, as immigrants tend to settle in those areas. In my own city, Brampton, one of the fastest growing cities in Canada, fifty-two percent were recent immigrants in 2016, and they represented 209 different cultures. We have welcomed people to our worship services from India, Asia, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. This ethnic diversity is being reflected more and more across urban population centres in the country. It raises the question: what should the church look like in the context of this diversity? God gave the apostle John a vision in the book of Revelation concerning the future for the church. In chapter 5, he sees a Lamb standing in heaven. The Lamb is the Lord Jesus. He takes the scroll from the hand of God and, when he opens it, John hears those in heaven singing, "Your blood has purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation." John sees in this vision the gathering of the nations into the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we see the nations coming to Canada, the church must also begin to reflect in its composition people from the nations in her midst. We should expect that, for Peter says in Acts 10:35 that "God does not

show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

That means that we are to move confidently into our neighbourhoods to witness to the Lord Jesus. We will meet people, some who have already heard about Jesus in their home nation, and others who have no knowledge of Christ at all. But the gospel is the power of God by which the Lord gathers his people from the nations of the earth. Therefore the church needs to be bold in its witness, for the honour of our Lord and Saviour is at stake.

The most effective gospel ministry occurs when our gospel witness is accompanied with service

The gospel: a sales pitch?

What is our goal in bringing the gospel to the nations? I believe this is a key question that will determine the effectiveness of our witness in our communities. Is the goal just to fill the pews and get people into church? In North America, people think about mega churches as successful churches, and small churches are considered unsuccessful. Success is measured by the size of the church. The temptation for the church is to become salesmen who offer people a better life in Jesus.

My concern is that as churches we approach our mission in the same way. We put out our ads to the community for our worship services (today we offer livestream) or encourage people to come out to an evangelical event to speak to them about the gospel. We generally know that such sales pitches do not have much success, but we let ourselves feel like we have done our duty. It also confirms for us that the hearts of the people are hardened, for they did not respond to the message. The gospel message does not resonate in the same way as a car ad, for the gospel calls people to sacrifice something they do not care to give up.

So what is our purpose in reaching the people in the community? Your answer will determine your approach to your community. Is our goal only to call people to come so we can fill our pews or is our purpose to serve the community in which the Lord has placed us? Christians are called to service by the Lord. We are first to serve those who belong to the household of God, but we are also responsible to care for and love our neighbour (even our enemy) as Christ taught in the parable of the "Good Samaritan."



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**DEAR FRIENDS AND
 NEIGHBOURS**
 We know that COVID-19 has been hard for
 all of you, and we hope these flowers
 brighten your day.
 It's Easter next weekend, and we've given
 you an Easter lily as part of our joy in
 remembering the death and resurrection of
 Jesus Christ for the true forgiveness of all
 our sins.

Effective ministry is not going around the community as a door to door salesman with the gospel. We want to speak to our neighbour about the grace of God in Christ Jesus, we want to talk about the good news of salvation, but our witness must be accompanied with loving service for our neighbour. When Christ proclaimed the gospel during his earthly ministry, his message was always accompanied with works of mercy. He healed the sick and comforted the downtrodden in their suffering and pain. He understood their needs by listening to them and addressed their need with the hope of the gospel.

In the days of the early church, the believers did not only speak (yes, they talked incessantly about Jesus, for he was the new focus of their lives) but for the sake of Jesus they served their neighbours. It was Christians who showed charity in the Roman world to those who were poor and suffering, Christians were in the forefront ministering to those suffering because of plagues and pandemics (putting their own lives at risk), and it was Christians who rescued abandoned babies and raised them. The most effective gospel ministry occurs when our gospel witness is accompanied with service.

Indeed, faith comes through the hearing of the gospel, but the gospel comes within the context of a community of believers who care for each other and their neighbour. The power of the gospel becomes evident through the loving care we show others. God's grace at work in us becomes a powerful example

for those who do not yet understand the gospel. They may not fully understand the gospel message, but they see the lives of believers being transformed by the power of the Spirit.

Avoiding pitfalls

Here is a pitfall to watch for. We easily make our service dependent on the response of the person we are helping. If after a period of time they do not show any interest in the gospel, we are ready to move on because we do not see the results we are looking (praying) for. From a human perspective that is understandable, for we want to see results, but that is not true service that reflects the grace of Christ. We want to attach strings to our service, but the Lord just calls us to serve and he in his time will bring forth fruit.

Recently I heard a story about an ESL (English as a Second Language) class. This class had about twenty people, and all of them came to faith, in a slow trickle as the years went by. After twenty years, the last member of this class came to faith. This reminded me that we do not determine the timing for people to come to faith. That rests in the hands of the Lord. We are just called to serve our neighbours out of love. People need to understand that our love is genuine and that we truly care for them, even if they never come to acknowledge Christ. Sometimes it may mean that we will shed tears of grief when someone we cared for dies without the comfort of the gospel.

At other times we will be filled with joy as we witness such a person seeking their life in Christ at the end of their life.

While we love to see our pews full on Sundays, that is not the goal. Christ's goal is to gather a community of believers whose hearts are being transformed through his love. When we care for our community well, we trust the Lord will cause it to bear much fruit. It frees us from the pressure of growing the church, for we leave that in the hands of Christ. We trust that Christ in his wisdom will cause his church to grow and flourish.

Keeping the church pure and faithful

In my ministry I have heard two comments that need some attention. The first is that as churches we need to get our own house in order before we can witness. The second, if too many new people come to the church, it will water down the church. Without realizing it, both come from an attitude of arrogance, as if we can fix all the problems with the church and as if the faithfulness of the church rests solely with us. It reveals a lack of trust in Christ as the one who gathers and cares for his church. It is this arrogant attitude that will eventually lead to the demise of the church, for the church only exists through the grace of Christ. When we no longer rest our faith solely in the grace of Christ, it will lead to a twisting of the gospel into a human effort. Then Christ will say to us as he did to the church at Sardis, "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1).

The Lord's answer to both objections is to be faithful in witnessing to his name. The answer to troubles in the church is not to circle the wagons and take a defensive posture, but the answer is to serve. When we serve our neighbour, we learn to lean on the grace of Christ. No one can serve others in their own strength, for it calls for a sacrifice on our part that we naturally are not willing to make. To serve others involves self-sacrifice.

Being a healthy church

Faithful service is only the result of Christ's grace at work in us. If you do not know the grace of Christ, if his undeserving gift of salvation is not what motivates you, you cannot give joyful service to others. A spiritually healthy church is one in which all the members love to serve for the sake of Christ. We joyfully give

such service to our brothers and sisters and our neighbours as well, for we want everyone to experience the love and grace of Christ that overwhelms our own life.


This also means that we do not need to fear for the future of the church. When people come to know Christ Jesus, they are hungering for the truth of God's Word. New believers will insist that the church remains faithful to the Word of God because that is the foundation on which they are building their faith.

New Christians have asked me, "Why are there Christian leaders and ministers in Christian churches who do not take a stand for the truth today?" It baffles them that there are Christians within the church who do not hold on to the truth or are not excited by the gospel. They want to take a stand for Christ and their enthusiasm for the truth becomes an encouragement to

the congregation to hold on to the truth. New believers are an incredible witness to the joy of the gospel in their lives. The preaching of the Word often moves them to tears as they are reminded of the Lord's work in their own hearts.

When people come to the church from different cultures, yes, they will bring something of their culture with them to the church. But that is not something to be feared but to be celebrated, for we see the Lord at work in it. I hear the joy that members of the congregation express when they see sisters from other cultures come to special

holiday worship services wearing their traditional dress. At the end of one of my classes, the students look to a dear sister to sing one of her African songs, a song that is usually based on a biblical passage or story that was mentioned during the class.

As Reformed churches we have received a rich inheritance that is deeply grounded in the grace of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is the faithful preaching of God's grace in Christ Jesus, a grace only received by faith, that leads to healthy spiritual churches. Healthy spiritual churches are not the work of human beings, but they are the result of Christ powerfully at work in the hearts of his people through the faithful preaching of the gospel. It is this gospel message that renews our hearts and it alone is able to renew the hearts of our neighbour. May the Lord use us as instruments to serve our neighbour and lead many to faith in his Name. 

Mature in Christ

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer... I call to the Lord... and I am saved." (Psalm 18:2-3)

In this psalm that contains so many descriptions of what God is like, we find eight just in verse 2 alone! God is described mostly using pictures. Though we can't see him, he compares himself to things we can see so we can know him.

First, he is a rock. I'm from Australia, so when I think of rock I must think of Uluru, that giant red rock in the middle of the country. David uses two Hebrews words for "rock" in verse 2. One refers to large rocks like Uluru: huge, imposing, and indestructible. The other refers to clefts or caves in a rock: a place for eagles to build their nests or where a person takes shelter from a storm. So, God is massive, everlasting, and dependable. But he is also a shelter to whom we can run to for safety.

In verse 2 David really shows his military background. God is his fortress. A castle built up strong, on a high place, easily defendable against attacking enemies. We also see that God is his shield, who protects him from the weapons of the enemy. And God is his stronghold, a high wall or tower built to keep someone well protected and safe.

All the pictures come together to show how God is David's refuge and deliverer. What about you? Do you know the Lord like that? Is he your rock? Your great, immovable, impregnable fortress in times of trouble? Is he your shelter in whom you take refuge when you are afraid of the storm?

He is for David! And so, throughout his life, David has known what to do when he is in trouble. Verse 3: "I call to the Lord who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies." It has become a way of life for David: in times of trouble he cries out to the Lord, and the Lord saves him.


What about you? Do you do that? Find refuge in God? Is he the first one to whom you call in trouble? Does it sometimes come later? First we try to fix things ourselves, and when that doesn't work, we cry to the Lord!

We can learn a lot from David's confession in this psalm. The Lord was not a last resort – only when David had nowhere else to turn. Nor was the Lord just a handyman – only to turn to when something goes wrong. The Lord was David's life-long refuge

and shield. He was always there, an unchanging rock. David turned to him when he was in trouble.

We are all in constant, desperate need of help. Perhaps, like David in verses 4-5, you suffer from sickness, sadness, or poverty. We all struggle with sin and temptations that are constantly trying to pull us away from God. So, we all need to constantly find refuge in God. Not just when enemies are attacking or we're at our wits end! We need to be close to him our whole life!

And in this our Lord Jesus is our salvation. He depended on his Father his whole life. He spent entire nights in prayer. When the wrath of God against our sins was so great, he sweated drops of blood, he knew what to do. He called out to the Lord. "O Lord, if it is possible, take this cup from me." The punishment against our sins meant that God took his love and favour away from his Son and left him only his burning wrath. And still Jesus, faithful son to the end, called out to God in his distress "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Because of Christ's faithfulness, and complete suffering for our sins, the Lord is our deliverer. Take refuge in the Lord, in bad times and in good. He is our shield, fortress, and everlasting rock in times of trouble. He is our salvation, so worthy of praise! 

For further study

1. **Is God your first "call" when you are in trouble? Or do you find yourself trying other things first?**
2. **Do you take refuge in God just as strongly when things are going well?**
3. **How does Jesus's cry of suffering on the cross teach you of your refuge and salvation?**



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Home Mission Update:

The Brampton Mission

Five years ago, the Grace Canadian Reformed Church of Brampton sold its historic brick church building to a developer. The congregation proceeded to build a new building 750 metres down the road on Creditview Road, a main road in Brampton.

Out with the old, in with the new

Ten years ago, the old building was surrounded by fields. Today, the new building is surrounded by multiple square kilometres of new development. Our city block contained 21,100 people in 2016, and multiple blocks have been built north of us in the last few years. The city also has ambitious plans for Heritage Heights, a planned nearby development of some 36,000 homes, estimated to eventually contain 124,000 people.

These developments are mostly filled with people from South Asian or African backgrounds, although not entirely. Many are recent immigrants, either first or second generation. Some have knowledge of Christianity, many do not.

The upshot is that Grace Brampton now possesses a prominent new building in a rapidly growing area with few other churches. The church is in prime position for mission. Visitors regularly visit our church on Sunday, and large crowds attend our outdoor BBQ events.

The congregation saw the opportunity, and despite its small size, decided in faith to call a missionary. They sent me a call, and after accepting the call, I was ordained as the co-pastor for missions on November 1, 2019.

Greeting a neighbour with an Easter Lilly >

A steep learning curve

The learning curve in this task is intense. Every month it seems that the Eric of last month did not know anything. It is deeply challenging to meet people from so many different cultures and figure out our local neighbourhood while brainstorming new outreach events and programs – all at the same time. Thankfully, our congregation and council strongly support the work and are excited about the possibilities of mission.

Overall, we've had a good year, but COVID is bringing major headwinds. The good news is that our Lord Jesus brought us seven new members this year from our local community – into a church of 103 members. One came in through profession of faith, as she grew up Roman Catholic. Another is being examined and will profess her faith later this year. Three adults were baptized, along with two children from the one couple being baptized. All of these members were previously unchurched.

What tremendous joy Jesus has given us in this! Pastor Matthew and I spent most of the year discipling each new member on a weekly basis, and we continue to teach and disciple as time goes on. Few things warm a pastor's heart more than walking through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrines of faith with a keen disciple!

COVID challenges

What's more difficult is COVID and the resulting restrictions. So far, all our new members entered our church by walking in the front door on a Sunday. They sat down, heard faithful preaching from the Bible, and felt compelled to keep coming. Nothing mission-related was done to attract them, other than faithful preaching every Sunday. (Not an insignificant thing, however!)

But, my job is to enable our church to be more active in mission. We want to proactively engage our neighbourhood,






A sister introducing a recent convert to the pastor

instead of passively waiting for visitors. Unfortunately, COVID hit right as we were beginning to ramp up in March for outreach. All our plans were cancelled as the province went into lockdown. Since then, we have only been able to do a small fraction of what we hoped to do.

This is discouraging, and frustrating of course. That said, we know that God governs this world, and he ordained the spread of COVID. So, we do what we can in the circumstances we are given. Despite the restrictions, we've been able to do some things. We've built a yearly missional event plan as a Home Mission Committee. I've been able to semi-regularly attend a group meeting at the local mosque for a Koran/Bible dialogue. We are setting up an English-as-second language (ESL) ministry. A large group of volunteers from the congregation are coming out to five training sessions from a professional. Lisa and I also continue to do hospitality and relationship building in our local neighbourhood.

Pressing on

So, yes, despite the challenges we have much to be thankful for. Most of all, it's clear that King Jesus is at work in our church and neighbourhood. The Holy Spirit is on the move. That's a vivid encouragement to us here in Brampton.

Lastly, our hope is that all of you would keep us in your prayers, for we know that mission is driven and sustained through prayer. We hope to regularly send out prayer requests, and we are thankful for everyone who continually remembers us in their prayers. 



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Streetlight Christian Church

In 2018, Streetlight marked twenty years of ministry. John Calvin had written once that an anniversary is as much a time to celebrate accomplishments as it is a time to reflect on failures and missed opportunities. We certainly have both to reflect on at Streetlight.

We recently decided to be more focussed on what we wanted to accomplish and to avoid as much as possible failures and missed opportunities by adopting certain guiding statements:

Vision: To restore our city to their Creator through the Redeemer

We also needed a strategy to realize our vision:

Mission (or strategy): To preach Christ so that God might gather his people together in worship in service

We have chosen to understand the Word “preach” broadly to include children, adolescent, youth, and adult programs as well as Sunday worship. By committing ourselves to proclaiming Christ, we are confident that we cannot fail, for this is the power of God for the salvation of all people. We are humbled to witness this power released into our community.

It is deeply gratifying to see neighboring churches share in the excitement of this vision as they commit prayer, volunteer service, and finances.



At the core of Streetlight, we have a lot of work being done by staff and missionary:

- Our administrator keeps us within the realm of organization.
- Our mentor appeals to children and youth in whom we had invested so much but who, over the years, wandered from the faith; she also works more directly with families.
- Our youth workers carry the lion's share of weekly gospel programs at three different levels: child, adolescent, and young people ministry.
- Our missionary focusses on adult ministry and Sunday worship.


Sometimes we feel that we serve lost and forgotten tribes who live just short of the modern age. For many in our community, the Internet and cell phones are still being discovered or accommodated. Many people live in difficult circumstances:

- Hand to mouth existence because they are uncertain about food, family, or/and home.
- Blended families so complicated that only a mother could explain it.
- Health that is so compromised that people in our neighbourhood have a life expectancy ten years lower than the Canadian average.

- A bleak future because they cannot break the poverty cycle since educational accomplishment is extremely low (one third of residents have no diploma or other educational certificate).

The challenges of working in the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada are many.

But who has joy and who is rich? Those who have known Christ all their life and are comfortable with the gospel? Or those who are being drawn to it and are shocked to think that God actually exists and matters, and that they matter to him? It is awesome to see people put hope in the riches they have in Christ.

Personally, as a missionary, I am hardwired to ordain leaders at Streetlight, but the reality is that I am obliged to find satisfaction in gathering followers of Jesus. I am learning to be content with that. The Lord will give us whatever gifts he thinks his church needs - even to Streetlight Christian Church. 



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Mercy Church: A New Church in East Hamilton

Recently, I was asked to share the Mercy Church story. Like your own church's story, this is still being written and, in reality, ours has only just begun. Presently, we are in the process of becoming an instituted church and hope to celebrate that day in mid-December.

In this brief article, I will share how Blessings Christian Church (hereafter: Blessings) prayerfully chose to plant a church in east Hamilton and identify some of the ways we have organized ourselves to serve our community.

It has always been the prayer and vision of Blessings to see churches multiply throughout Hamilton; coupled with their rapid growth in the spring of 2018, the idea of having a second location was put into action.¹

There were two questions, however, that needed to be addressed. First, what are the methods of determining where this new church should be established; and, second, what will be the character of that church? Traditionally, at least within the CanRC tradition, the decision of establishing a new location for a church "split" has often been made rather pragmatically. A new location is chosen that is a reasonable distance from the

mother church but central enough for the majority of the new members to attend with relative ease.

Where to locate?

Blessings chose a *via media* between those two realities. It was decided that the church should be located where there was a need for a local Reformed church presence – whether or not a few or many members resided – while still being a reasonable distance from Blessings and also Streetlight Christian Church (which is downtown Hamilton). With that decision made, a call was extended to me and, after accepting the call, I was commissioned to help launch this new church in east Hamilton.

Immediately, we had to ask the question: where specifically did God desire us to plant this church? It may be helpful to note that east Hamilton may have upward of 200,000 residents. To familiarize ourselves with the dynamics of this part of the city, we enlisted an intern from Redeemer University – Adrian Faber – who fulfilled a four-month placement with me in the fall of 2018. He compiled research on the twenty-one neighbourhoods that spanned from downtown Hamilton to Stoney Creek. We wanted

¹Blessings Church was instituted in January 2015 with approximately 200 members and by early 2018 there were some 450 members in their newly purchased Stanley Baptist church building, which surpassed the recommended eighty per cent capacity limit.



to know what evangelical gospel presence was present in these neighbourhoods and what services were provided by existing ministries and churches. We were also interested in the demographics of these neighborhoods (immigration, poverty, mobility, family make up, etc).

Although there is a gospel need in every neighbourhood across the city, we chose three from the list that seemed to meet our modest criteria. Over the course of three to four weeks the launch team of some twenty members was asked to review the stats on these neighbourhoods, walk through them, pray and fast as we sought the Lord's leading. Thankfully, the decision

was unanimous to plant in an area in lower east Hamilton called McQuesten, which is bounded by the Red Hill express way, Barton St, Queenston Ave, and Parkdale Ave (if you want to locate us on Google maps).

The neighbourhood we chose is known as an arrival city, in which twenty-five percent (and growing) of the residents identify with a visible minority, forty per cent of homes are lone-parent homes with the majority being single moms, and a disproportionately high number (approximately forty per cent) of people living below the poverty line. Moreover, this area was noted for its paucity of faithful, Bible-believing churches.

Getting started

Having decided on the area, the process of launching a church in this area began.

We held a congregational meeting at Blessings, where we shared our vision for this new church and invited people to sign up. From the outset, I felt strongly that we needed to practice what some have called a theology of presence. For the gospel to reach this part of the city, in other words, we should strive to become present in this community. “Doing life” with our neighbours in this community would allow relationships to develop and our church to reach into the hearts and lives of those around us. To that end, even before people signed up, we encouraged everyone to consider this option prayerfully. This meant for some that they would be entering a lower socio-economic area where concerns about safety had to be addressed in view of, for example, rumours of gang culture. In hindsight, now that we have situated in this locale for over a year, this concern was overstated.

At that time, an additional eighty-five communicate members plus children signed up, which brought the numbers to approximately 130. From this number, we were blessed to form a pre-council of four elders and two deacons and numerous teams including: community engagement, small groups, Sunday worship set up team, promotions, new arrivals team, youth and children, music team, facilities team, AV team, finance, etc. Over the course of the year, a number of our members chose to move into an apartment building that served as a chapter for the MoveIn organization.² Others have rented, or, like my family and I, purchased a home in the area. Of course, there are reasons why some members cannot pick up and move into east Hamilton, but it is still often encouraged and a number of members continue to look for availability and earnestly wait on the Lord in this.

Preparing to launch

Although we had a sizeable group and although Blessings was reaching capacity, we felt it necessary to take some eight months to prepare for the launch. This meant that we continued to worship at Blessings but commenced our own small groups and every other week for seven months held missional training sessions for the congregation. Sometimes guest speakers were invited to these sessions in which we covered themes

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such as evangelism, hospitality, welcoming the disabled, understanding poverty, mental illness, the growing sex trade, and others. Although at times there was some information overload, it did help us to realize something of the need and character of planting a church in a lower east Hamilton with some of the dynamics of lower socio-economic residents, lone parent homes, and English as a second language confronting us. At one of our training sessions, we were reminded that as we waded into a community spreading the gospel, things can get “messy.” As a church, we are continually challenging our

cultural assumptions in order to make the gospel accessible to those in McQuesten.


During this time, we also had to consider a name for our church; following the lead of Streetlight and Blessings, Mercy Christian Church was formed. Of course, our intention is to be a faithful church within the Canadian Reformed churches, adhering to the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order. In sum, we strive to be a missional body of believers under God’s guidance that seeks to disciple the covenant community, evangelize the non-believer, take a genuine interest in the community around us, and encourage every member in active service for Christ. Our recently adopted mission statement captures it this way: “Mercy Christian Church is a Reformed church in East Hamilton that glorifies God through gospel-centred worship, intentional discipleship, and the promotion of the gospel both locally and abroad.”

²MoveIn is a movement of regular Christians prayerfully moving in among the unreached, urban poor. See <https://www.movein.to/>



Finally, on September 8, 2019, we formally launched a church in the east side of Hamilton and, apart from some COVID-19 restrictions, have been meeting in McQuesten for over a year.

After one year in east Hamilton, the Lord continues to open up doors for us to get to know, love, and serve our community. During the warmer months we have a Friday evening “park-night” in a local park where members have been able to connect those who reside in McQuesten. We have done flyer drops and carol singing as well as flower drops during COVID-19, which has opened the door for more connections in the community. Although we had many plans for this summer – including summer camps – this has been put on hold until after COVID-19. During COVID-19 we put up posters inviting people to call us if they needed help (spiritual or physical) and this also translated into a number of contacts in the community. Church members have been encouraged to make at least one touch point per week in the McQuesten area. This could be as simple as going to the same Tim Horton’s every day or the same barber shop or grocery store. But for others, this is walking the streets while praying for the community and meeting people, helping out at the urban garden, going to a park to meet moms and tots, or trying to get to know the community through other venues.

More could be shared, and we are still in the throes of learning what it means to practice a theology of presence in a community that for many of us is new. However, the Lord has been faithful, the gospel is powerful unto salvation and we have already been able to witness a few people coming to faith. In fact, in a few weeks’ time we hope to baptize a couple who arrived earlier this year from the Middle East and have come to believe the truth claims of Scripture and desire to follow Christ as faithful members of his church. We celebrate this awesome story of conversion and we praise God for all that he chooses to do through us in allowing us to shine the brilliance of his love and truth in a city desperately in need of it! 

Needs met

This brings us to our launch. For months we struggled in prayer to find a building that was large enough to house us as a congregation and allow us to double or triple in size (currently we are at 160 members). Doors were shutting and the angst was growing. However, the Lord opened a door to a large 350 capacity banquet Hall under St Nicolas Ukrainian Catholic church, which is in the heart of McQuesten. The Lord then doubled his blessings upon us in providing a 2000 sq/ft box store on Parkdale Ave, some 500 metres from our Sunday location. I am writing from this space right now, which has been renovated to serve us in all things Mercy – office space, kitchen and meeting spaces for Council, Christianity Explored, small groups – and plans are under way for post-COVID-19 after-school programs, moms and tots Bible programs, as well as a drop-in centre on Friday nights.



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The Mission in Niverville

and a Framework for the Missional Church



*O God, why do you cast us off forever?
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your
pasture? Remember your congregation, which you
purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the
tribe of your heritage!
Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. Direct
yourself to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed
everything in the sanctuary!
Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting
place; they set up their own signs for signs. They were
like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. And
all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets
and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire; they
profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it
down to the ground. They said to themselves, "We will
utterly subdue them;" they burned all the meeting plac-
es of God in the land. (Ps 74:1-8)*

Our work

I will try to explain our situation in Niverville, some of the things we do, and the framework through which we seek to shine a light. And in all this, I want to challenge you to be a salt and a light as well.

Why go to Niverville? A place with several small churches? Why spend your time in an area that could be called a little leftover of Christendom? There are many needs around the world. Why shine a light where there is already light? Psalm 74 is the answer. The author describes a world that is broken apart by the enemies of God. The picture of physical devastation and destruction corresponds to the rampant heresy and schism that characterizes the church of God in Canada today. The enemies of God have made a wreck of the modern church. Jesus says to preach the gospel and *disciple* the nations. We have a failure of discipleship in the church today. Our goal in Niverville then is holistic. We build relationships with the church and the unchurched.

Concerning the churches of Niverville, our mission is not to steal sheep. Our mission, instead, is to encourage these churches to live out the gospel of Christ in their churches.

And we see the response. We have inserted ourselves into this community, and God has prepared the ground so that we were received by the churches here. We might disagree with some aspects of the ecumenical movement, but it gives us opportunities to talk to other traditions that we have not had before.

Impacting the community

God has blessed us in ways I did not expect. At this moment, we have already had two members from outside our community join us in Ambassador. We have one other that would like to become a member. Beyond that, there are others whom God connected to us in various ways. I'm currently engaged in three one on one Bible studies besides more regular Bible studies.

We have also had people come through and disappear. This is one of the heartbreaks of ministry that I am sure all my brothers share in. Yet we hope and pray that eventually they will find their rest in God. "Our hearts are restless until we find rest in you."

How have we sought to reach out to our community? It is not hard to think of different ways to do this, we have had a forum on infant baptism, we have hosted events on various topics of interest, we have had BBQs, games nights, I have tried knocking on doors (though that came to a stop with COVID), and I try to include myself in the town events that I can. To a degree, I've connected with the small Christian college south of town as

well and for a while held Bible study with students from there. I also participate in the ministerial in town and have met with at least one of the council members. I am at a place with the town ministerial, where I can dig into more substantive issues. It takes a lot of patience.

We're also exploring different ways to set up a Christian resource and learning centre in the future. The Lord has provided us with a good building and the space to build up to something like that. There is a base to connect with, in the town's many homeschoolers, and hopefully beyond that.

It's not hard to think of different ways to reach out. It's more about finding the time, the manpower, and the energy to participate in these different things. We throw a wide net and learn through the process what works. A lot of people ask me, "What works?" I really don't have an answer other than be prayerfully aware of opportunities. The Lord wants his people to shine and he wants his people to be salty. He will provide the opportunities if you aren't hiding your light under a bushel.

"Presence" or "Christ in me"

But it isn't about the programs. COVID made me realize that we may have been overly programmatic, not because I ever trusted in programs, but by default. Programs have their place, mostly to raise awareness that your church is there, but to really shine a light you need to be a presence.

In order to be missional, we need holy people. I need to be holy. I need Christ in me. It's all about holy people being holy in their walks of life, holy people caring about the people in their community. Put on the gospel armour: that includes the breastplate of righteousness, which I believe refers to the righteous works that the Spirit works through us if we do not resist him. Even if you disagree with that particular exegesis, the same truth is in Lord's Day 32. (One clarification: I won't be able to deal with the aspect of body here. Not everybody has the same gifts, so not everyone will be on the "front lines" in the same way; take my encouragement and exhortation in that context.)

That is why the centre of growth in our presence is participation in the means of grace: for it is in the means of grace where God takes your average churchgoer and turns him into a weapon of war. There is this term "missional" that has caught the imagination of many in the church today. Unfortunately, what that often means is adding an apparatus to the church that will make it more missional, whether it is a committee, a team, changing the music, or wearing a particular type of clothing. There is nothing *per se* wrong with those things, but that is not missional, it is merely a dressing.

I have this rule, "If these changes are edifying for the body of Christ in this locality, they will also be edifying for the mission of that body." To be truly missional, we need to grow at being church.

That means that the problems that stand in the way of "being missional" are not merely externalities like the *Book of Praise* and wearing suits. Those things matter, but not near as much as we like to think they do. We get caught up in our little fights over these things, and we lose the big picture.

We need to "let the word dwell in us richly." That comes out in singing. That is received through reading, through praying, and through the Word we hear on Sunday. Our language should be shot through with Scripture. Christ uses the Word through the Spirit so that it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me. As Reformed, we love the Word. That Word should be forming us and growing in us, so that it springs forth in our lives.

I would argue, however, that there are some attitudes among us that have hampered that "springing forth." Through these, we are tempted to put our light under a bushel.

Facing pessimism

I often see an overly pessimistic attitude about the impact we might have on society. Despite the confident promises of Scripture and the call to look to the things above, we often doubt the impact Christians can have on the world. We look at the giants of evolutionary theory and gender studies, and we fear to conquer the land. Sometimes we incorporate them into the Christian faith out of our fear. Sometimes we hole up, angrily talking about what is going on out there, again out of fear. Begin with Christ on the throne, the things that are above! And the power of the resurrection! You have the Spirit of God with you!

This pessimism is aided and abetted by a bad eschatology; the belief that the Bible teaches things will get worse and worse; again, despite the promises of Scripture.

Another thing is failing to love the brotherhood. I mentioned how the church in Canada is broken and overridden by heresy and schism. We are very good at pointing out the faults of our brothers in other churches, but do we love them? I give the example of Christ himself: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." I think our compassion ought to extend to many of the shepherds as well, for they often do not know better and are themselves harassed by the expectations of the evangelical establishment and their own congregations.

We shouldn't expect our Christian neighbor to pick up his Bible and suddenly figure out the doctrine of infant baptism.

That is a worldview change. I'm not forgetting about good doctrine here. It is for the sake of good doctrine that I desire to see the love of the brotherhood. Good doctrine has little affect if it is preserved for the select few.


One of the biggest things

This brings me to one of the biggest things that undermine our presence as the church. We have failed to restore the regular practice of eating the Lord's Supper. If we want the presence of Christ, this is where he has promised his most intimate presence. Due to our federational framework for practicing Lord's Supper, this is something we need federational change on before we can begin to use this means of grace properly.

All this ought to encourage each one of us in personal holiness in our lives. My person is a microcosm of the church. As Christ changes me, my transformation becomes more evident to the world around me. This is not simply through visible good works, but through the audible good work of speaking about Christ, the Word that lives in me. If I am filled with the Word and with Christ himself, I will not be able to keep myself from speaking about him when the opportune time comes.

In order to be missional, we must first improve the presence of Christ in our own lives.

I have sought to explain our situation in Niverville and some things that we do. I have sought to share the framework that I am working out in "doing mission." I have also sought to challenge you as you seek to understand what it is to be truly missional.

Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land, are full of the habitations of violence. Let no the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!
(Ps 74:20-23) 



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Prince George Canadian Reformed Mission Church



When writing about the mission work in Prince George, two verses come to mind: the first one is when Paul says “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” The second one is when the preacher tells us to “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days” (Eccl 11:1). The brothers and sisters of Prince George Canadian Reformed Mission Church have been casting their “bread” on many different “waters,” and God has certainly blessed us with those who are being saved and others who think our message is folly. Yet the Word goes out and it does not return empty.

Pastor Tim has been able to bring the gospel each Sunday, building up the brothers and sisters with encouraging, admonishing, and comforting words. The morning service is used to expound and teach a portion of Scripture, for example, a sermon series on letter of James and a short series on the Lamentations of Jeremiah. The afternoon service is used for teaching the congregants about the confessions of the church, especially the Heidelberg Catechism. Over the past few months, there have been a number of visitors who have returned for more

teaching. Pastor Tim has encouraged the congregation to be intentional in spreading the good news of the gospel to the neighbourhood and wherever God has called us.

By way of introduction

It is time to introduce ourselves though. You know Pastor Tim and his wife, Linnet, and their children. When Pastor Tim asked me to write this review of the year, I wasn’t sure what to write, because we have only been working with Pastor Tim for a year. As the author of this update (and from now on third person) on the work in Prince George, John Siebenga provides the caveat that any errors or issues with this submission are totally his. In June 2018, he retired from thirty years of teaching at various Christian schools in BC and continues to counsel as a registered clinical counsellor part-time. Together with his wife, Betty, they have raised six children and are blessed with twenty-three grandchildren (they both stress the “grand” part).

After an evening with Pastor Tim and Linnet in Houston, Betty and John wondered if they could split their time between Houston and Prince George, assisting Pastor Tim and the

congregation. Betty had many skills and energy to offer; John had some things that he could offer. So, they “cast their bread” out to Pastor Tim and then the Smithers Home Mission Board (SHMB). What they did not know is that the SHMB and Pastor Tim had discussed advertising for a retired couple to join the PG Mission Church. They did not expect the “bread” to come back so quickly. The long and short of it is that John and Betty agreed to volunteer their time for two years and, ho man, does a year go quickly. It has been an enormous blessing to everyone involved.

Resources

John was able to create three pamphlets that explain the gospel message in a concise way. “What is the Gospel?” explains what the good news is to those who are perishing, how this good news is free, and that Pastor Tim and John and Betty are available to give further explanation. “Who are You?” answers the question of who we are before God and that, as an image bearer of the Triune God, people have worth. “What is Faith?” explains that faith requires counting the cost of following Jesus with the wonderful news that there is a life to live that continues forever. These pamphlets have distributed to more than 140 homes in the neighbourhood with very mixed reactions – many think it “folly,” yet others ... the bread has been cast....

After reading the review of Rosaria Butterfield’s book, *The Gospel Comes With a House Key* in Reformed Perspective, John built a picnic table for in front of the church and, using a router, carved in some Christian symbols. Since Tim Horton’s is right next door, many people pick up their coffee at Timmy’s and sit at the table to enjoy their coffee. Many contacts have been made over a cup of coffee this past summer. Once again, the bread has been cast....

As John and Betty were cleaning up in a back room of the church one day, they came across a box of NIV Bibles. These Bibles have been wrapped in a plastic bag, with one of the pamphlets and a note that says: “Take Me Home,” and placed on the picnic table. As of September 15, eleven Bibles have found a new home in Prince George. A “mailbox” has been placed near the picnic table with more information about the gospel and the church. We pray that seeds of the gospel are planted through these means. More bread....

Men and members

A couple of years ago, Pastor Tim began meeting together with the men of the church to deal with many practical matters of the church. This group has now morphed into the Men’s

Planning Group and has been slowly taking on more and more of the “churchly” duties that are standard in Canadian Reformed Churches. In a sort of a way, this is a church council in training. The members are very active in the everyday functioning of the church, from music accompaniment, to building maintenance, to diaconal care, and everything in between, we are thankful for an eager group of helping hands and the many gifts that God has given the body.

One of our members, Thomas VanLeeuwen, with the capable assistance of his wife, Rachele, have organized a Sunday night Bible study. These evenings have welcomed a number of visitors as well, who have been a blessing to the discussions, as they often bring up things that long-time Christians have not thought of for a while. The group has studied the Book of Amos using a study guide and a number of lecture series from Ligonier Ministries. Studying this material has brought us face to face with the power of God’s saving work. Praise be to him.

Last year, the Smithers Home Board and Prince George Mission Church put together a brochure that was sent out to all the Canadian Reformed Churches, boldly asking members to prayerfully consider a move to Prince George. In early 2020, a reminder of the brochure and additional information was sent via email to the churches. From this effort, two families have decided to relocate to Prince George. The bread was cast through the brochure and we did not wait many days for it to return. All praise to our God.

Visitors

Prince George Canadian Reformed Mission Church has become the address for a number of regular visitors. These visitors, though not members, have been a great blessing to the community of believers here. One couple has expressed the desire to be baptized and become full-fledged members. This past Sunday, we could witness the public profession of faith of one of our younger sisters, Geneva Carrico. The world looks on and sees only folly. Brothers and sisters look on and see the power of God at work. The Lord calls us to be faithful in casting our bread upon the waters. He controls the currents in the water, and he controls the wind that drives the bread. What an honour to be part of his great work of salvation, planting seeds or casting bread!

Smithers Home Mission Board and the Smithers council have been a huge support to the church here in Prince George. One of the elders, Brian Berends, is in charge of pulpit supply and ably makes sure that ministers and readers are available for Prince George from the pool of pastors in the Bulkley Valley and



the elders and deacons of the council in the Smithers Canadian Reformed Church. There are also four men from Prince George who have been designated as readers to fill in for Pastor Tim.

As we look ahead to the future, there is much to be thankful for. The assistance of the supporting churches is always appreciated. It is amazing how many people stop by on any given morning from all over Canada. We pray that many more will come, visit, and make Prince George their home.


As the work progresses here in Prince George, we have heard from a number of people who have become disillusioned by Christian churches for various reasons. Their first encounters with Prince George Canadian Reformed Church was a welcome change for them. They felt they had found a safe, peaceful place that they could call home. We are ever so thankful for that sentiment.

"It's not just us"

As we look on the work that PG Church has been doing, we often wonder why is this the work of the PG church? Should this not be the task of every church? We feel very blessed in our location – next-door neighbours to Tim Hortons. Every church has a location, and we are called to be a blessing to the people around us. There is the challenge for us all – are we a safe welcoming community of believers? We become more and more convinced that someone needs to be present at the church building to be ready to share the hope that lies within us. Being told by those

who visit that we are a safe welcoming place to "be" is more than "bread returning after many days." It is a rich and humbling affirmation to the community of believers.

In mid-October, John and Pastor Tim will be leading an elders and deacons conference. They have invited a number of church leaders from Prince George to attend. May God use this event to build the worshipping communities of Prince George. John and Betty are in the process of organizing and hosting the series of videos called "Shepherding a Child's Heart." That will begin the end of October and continue into the new year. Beginning in January, John and Betty will host and facilitate the marriage course as they did last year. All of this is if the Lord wills it.

We have learned so much this past year about how he controls and works through viruses and diseases. It has forced us to become innovative in our worship and our communion of saints. May the Lord of the church bring all those whom he has called to a saving knowledge of him – here and everywhere his Word is declared. 



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The Chinese Reformed Church – Surrey, BC

While there are a number of church plants happening in the Canadian Reformed Churches, there is one, the Chinese Reformed Church, that is unique in that it is composed entirely of members who come from the most populous nation on earth. In addition, almost all of these members are first generation immigrants, which means that Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese) is their mother tongue and that their ties to the homeland are still very strong.

Prior to COVID, every Sunday a number of them would worship with the Cloverdale and Langley congregations in the morning and they would meet altogether in the afternoon in the Cloverdale church building. They would meet there for three hours at least. First, they would participate in worship using the Mandarin language. Thereafter there would be time for sermon discussion. Presently most still meet for worship but then on Sunday evening they have their sermon discussions online.

The Book of Praise in Mandarin

It may be of interest for our readers to know that in worship use is made of the Book of Praise. Now, you may wonder how that works, seeing the Book of Praise is in English and their worship is in Mandarin. The answer is that they use a Chinese translation of the Book of Praise. Yes, all 150 Psalms and all eighty-five hymns have been translated into Chinese. So, if you happen to visit, you can sing along in English. You may not know the words they are singing, but you will recognize the tune. Most of the credit for this fine work goes to sister Jean Yu.

At present, this church is not yet instituted and remains under the pastoral oversight of the Cloverdale Canadian Reformed Church. Contrary to common opinion, this church does not have its own minister yet. True, Pastor Frank acts as its pastor, but in actual fact he is a missionary of the Cloverdale church set aside (among his other duties) to establish a Chinese Reformed Church in the area.

Pastor Frank has been doing this work since the year 2000 and at the moment the church has an average Sunday attendance of sixty-nine (onsite and online) and consists of thirty-nine communicant members and twenty-four non-communicants. It has two elders and one deacon. The regular preaching is done mostly by Pastor Frank and, together with his wife, they do more than their fair share of the pastoral work as well. They


visit the members faithfully, either together or separately. The regular annual family and single visitations are often done by an elder and a deacon.

Busy with young people

A great deal of time and effort is expended on the young people, especially the students. Some of them have been sent to Canada to study and thus are far from home. To bridge the gap, Pastor Frank serves not only as their missionary-pastor, but also as their legal guardian. Thankfully, many of these young people are very active in church life and, after receiving instruction in the Bible, prayer, courtship, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession, three of them expressed a desire to profess their faith. Two young men raised up in the Chinese Reformed Church have gone on to become office bearers in the church and two are now either teaching at Credo Christian High School or training to be teachers.

A lot going on

In addition to the youth, the adult members are very active. Men and women's Bible study groups are thriving. Regular prayer meetings are held. A combined ladies aid and home mission committee is busy with outreach. Coffee Break and Helping Hands are both operational. Sometimes the comment is made that in an average church twenty percent of the members do eighty percent of the work. Not so in the Chinese Reformed Church. There the involvement level is much higher.

All in all, there is reason here for much thankfulness. We confess that our Lord is gathering his people today from all tribes, tongues, and nations. The Chinese Reformed Church gives ample evidence that this confession is true and is happening before our very eyes. Praise the Lord and may he continue to bless this unique church in our midst. 



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