

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Giving Shape to the Future of the Church

by Jack De Vries



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

"A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ"

www.ministryformation.com.au

The vision, adopted by the Christian Reformed Churches in Australia in 2006, is to be “A Church Reforming to Reach the Lost for Christ.” A church reforming . Pause for a moment – reflect on this. What does this mean? To be a church reforming to reach the lost for Christ. It is one thing to be a Christian Reformed church – this says a lot about our identity as a community of believers. We have roots which go way, way back – back to the Reformers – people like Luther, Calvin, and Knox. We also have branches which reach out to other communities of believers – the holy catholic or universal church. We are Christian Reformed.

The church is always reforming – on the one hand, this is not something novel, some radical new idea dreamt by a synodical advisory committee. This was already emphasized in the Protestant Reformation – the concept that the church is always reforming – (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). The Reformers underscored the importance of the church being confessional. The church needs to claim and reclaim its identity to the historic Christian faith. And we keep doing this – calling ourselves time and time again back to the Bible, back to the Scriptures, back to the Word of God – each time asking ourselves – are we being true to the Truth? Do we keep ourselves to the holy Scriptures which are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

To be a church reforming is a vision to claim and reclaim our identity to the historic Christian faith – to be a confessional church. But it is more than that. This is clear from the mission statement which flows out of the vision:

“To multiply Bible-based Christian fellowships and congregations which equip and nurture their members and grow throughout Australia and beyond.” To be a church reforming is more than simply upholding and calling us back to the historic Christian faith. To be a church reforming is more than simply being confessional; it is to be missional! The church is not only always reforming; it is always forming – *ecclesia semper formanda*. Every church is on the continuum of contextualization. The missional church is always engaging its context and continuously recontextualizing its ministry. The missional church is always asking: “What needs to change in us and around us so that we will engage the world and reach the lost for Christ?”

Reforming and forming! These paired ideas are basic to the vision adopted by our churches in 2006. There is a dynamic and healthy tension between change and continuity as well as between mission and confession. By the leading of the Holy Spirit, as a denomination and as churches we are always forming even as we seek to engage in reforming. There needs to be a balance between the two. We invite change even as we seek to maintain continuity. It is only by and through the Holy Spirit that we are able to maintain this tension and engage in both of these things simultaneously – reforming and forming – being confessional and missional.

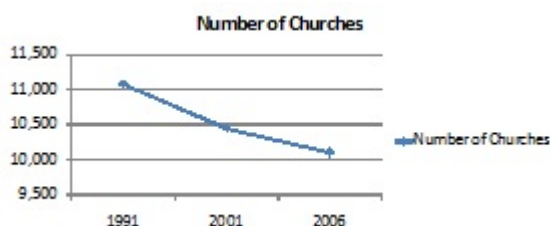
The idea of reforming or reformation is clearly outlined in the fourth aspect of the fourfold task: “To reform continually the life of the denomination (including our church ethos, customs, church order, use of resources, denominational committees,

support staff and agencies) to encourage and enable the fulfilment of the fundamental aim.” We have to be engaged in both reforming and forming so that our fundamental aim is both encouraged and enabled – the result of seeing the lost come to Christ, to see growth and spiritual multiplication of churches and individual believers.

Well, how are we doing? There needs to be a reality check. There are different ways to do this. One way is to look at the bare facts – look at demographics – the numbers. Put together the figures from our church yearbooks and the statistics are telling. What do they tell us? The bare facts tell us that most of our churches are in decline and as a denomination we are flatlining. It only takes one generation for a church to shut its doors. And unless our churches do something to turn the tide around, this is the outcome we can expect.

Another way to do a reality check is to look at the Australian context where we serve. Currently the Australian population stands at over 21,00,000, and it is growing. The population is growing by 1,000,000 every 3 years. In another 10 years our population will exceed 25,000,000. We need 1000 new churches every three years just to keep up with the population growth.

While the population is growing the actual number of churches in Australia are declining (see diagram below).



Today there are 1000 fewer churches than 15 years ago. There are less and less churches for more and more people. These are stark realities.

Another way to do a reality check is by looking at the results from those CRC churches who participated in doing a Natural Church Development (NCD) survey. NCD has identified eight characteristics of healthy churches. These are churches which are not only growing, but are reaching lost people for Christ. These eight characteristics are:

1. Empowering Leadership
2. Gift-based Ministry
3. Passionate Spirituality
4. Effective Structures
5. Inspiring Worship Services
6. Holistic Small Groups
7. Need-orientated Evangelism
8. Loving Relationships

A church’s health is in direct correlation to these eight characteristics. The potential for health and growth is limited by the minimum factor, where the church scored the lowest in the NCD survey. According to the surveys done among CRC churches in Australia, the most common minimum factor is “Passionate Spirituality” with “Needs-orientated Evangelism” in a close second. All of this is to conclude that if as a denomination we are serious about reaching the lost for Christ, we need to address “Passionate Spirituality” and “Need-orientated Evangelism.”

A further way to do a reality check is to travel the country, visit with pastors, church leaders, and congregation and take a thermometer reading. This is what I have been privileged to do over the past

seven months. I have visited almost 90% of the churches and/or pastors throughout the CRCA. What is the reading?

First of all, there are a number of



favorable indications within the CRCA. There is an almost unanimous positive reception of the CRCA Missional Vision and the Fourfold Task all across Australia. The momentum for implementing the missional vision is gathering speed.

There is an overwhelming appreciation of the ministry training provided by the Reformed Theological College in Geelong. We are seeing a number of students engaged in theological studies elsewhere. But this is not reflective of the quality of training offered by RTC. The regular degree programs along with the annual “Fan the Flame” and “Preaching” conferences are invaluable assets to the CRCA.



Most church either have developed or are seeking ways to develop holistic small groups. Churches are discovering that traditional methods of pastoral care no

longer are effective in our changing culture and with the emerging generation. An effective small group ministry will allow churches to provide ongoing discipleship and effective pastoral care.

A growing number of churches are committed to church planting. It is encouraging to speak with churches in WA. While some are actively engaged in church planting, the majority are considering it. Current church planting is occurring in Mansfield(QLD), Kingston (TAS), Grace (WA), Perth (WA), and Newcastle (NSW). Wantirna(VIC) is committed to a church planting strategy of church growth.

There is a ground swell of enthusiasm among the youth and young adults within the CRCA. Through programs such as Target 21 and THING, youth are being challenged to embrace the missional task of the church, reaching the lost for Christ.

Pastors and churches are deeply committed to being gospel centered. The confessional aspect of the church is strong with no signs of it diminishing. This is truly something to be grateful for. We are a denomination rooted in and built upon the truth of God’s Word.

And finally, the majority of churches have a heart for gospel ministry, both word and deed, beyond the walls of the church and borders of Australia. Whether it is sending teams to minister among aboriginal Australians, establishing mission outposts in Africa, ministering to the disadvantaged children in Burma, or engaging the gospel in the Solomon Islands, the commitment to missions is strong.

While these are all promising signs of

church health and commitment to the missional vision of the CRCA, there is heaps of room for ongoing congregational growth and improvement. For example, very few churches are actively engaged in raising up the next generation of leaders. The vast majority of churches do not have young adults enrolled in doing internships. Most churches are struggling with finding people to fill in leadership vacuum, be it elders or deacons, committee members, or people to engage in ministry.

While the subject of church planting is something a growing number of churches are discussing, the actual planting of churches is not on the horizon of most churches. With numerous churches in decline, church leaders are trying ways just to maintain ministries, not engage in new ventures.

We are losing ground not only among those Christ calls the lost but also with many of the found. This is a hard pill to swallow. The story is common. Youth do pro faith, but sometime in early adulthood some move on to other churches; others move away all together. It is difficult to clearly identify the reasons for this movement. Some leave for Anglican or other evangelical churches in order to be part of a church which seems to be more culturally relevant, meets their family's needs, and/or the worship style is preferred.

This reality of our secular Australian context, the urgent need for church multiplication, and the current state of the CRCA demands that the way we are being and doing church will not cut it into the 21st century. This is where *alignment* comes to the fore. What needs to

happen? The CRCA needs “to reform continually the life of the denomination (including our church ethos, customs, church order, use of resources, denominational committees, support staff and agencies) to encourage and enable the fulfilment of the fundamental aim.”

What shape might this alignment take? Here I like to borrow from Stephen W. Hinks' book, *The Journey Ahead for the 21st Century Church and Its Leaders*. He provides a helpful way for the CRCA to enter into a discussion about alignment.

Hinks identifies three paradigm shifts which need to take place with church leaders of the future.

Paradigm Shift #1 for Church Leaders:

“They have a kingdom focus ahead of parochial interests and exegete culture well, to find connecting points for gospel impact.” (Hinks, p. 87ff) Hinks goes on to describe how life is seen by church leaders, church members, and by believers with a kingdom focus.

For church leaders the church is at the centre of their world; they live, work and sleep church. How true this is with most ministers. They want to extend the kingdom of God, but the focus is church membership. Members bring people to the church; the church gathering is the entry point.

The problem is that this is not how life is seen by church members. For them their home and family is the centre of their world. They fit church life in whenever they can. If it is convenient, they might attend church or volunteer some of their time and talents. But home and family comes first.

A kingdom disciple sees life differently. All that they do is seen as living kingdom values as part of God's mission, wherever they are. Every aspect of life is important to kingdom living. This is something that resonates well with a Reformed world and life view. Paraphrasing the late Abraham Kuyper, there is no square inch of the universe that Jesus not lay claim and say: "This is mine." Or in the words of the *Contemporary Testimony*, "Our world belongs to God."

For kingdom disciples, the object is not to change society but transform the hearts of those in the society. They find entry points or bridges into the local culture rather than attempting simply to attract people to a local church.

The key for kingdom disciples is to find what God is doing in the local community and join him in that mission. God has a plan for the world and each day works toward the coming of his kingdom on earth. His kingdom activity is broader than the church! So one of the main questions I ask churches in my denominational work is this: "What is God doing in your community?" This does not reduce the role of the church; it just changes it. The focus is shifted from the local church or the person's private life to a kingdom centered one. The goal is get people into the kingdom, not just the church, membership in the kingdom rather than membership in the church.

As I encounter churches I discover quickly that many churches are finding these connecting points into the community. Kid's Hope is a good example of such a point of contact. Church members go out into the schools and become tutors and support persons for children. These are

kingdom opportunities to help transform the hearts, to turn the hearts of children toward God. Chaplaincy programs in the schools are another example. But the list goes on: tutoring children after school, having teenagers teach seniors computer literacy, Religious Education (RE) classes, doing make over in a school or hospital, drop in centres, and so on.

Paradigm Shift #2 for Church Leaders:

"They inspire and equip the people of God to live as disciples and be creative in mission and they encourage incarnational ministry down the street and across the world." (Hinks, p. 92)

The church needs to engage in discipleship. This is key! Rather than simply being program centered, where members are very busy in celebration, cell and a church ministry, discipleship is stressed. This begins with a person's first contact with irreligious people. The Christian witness is not just about "investing and inviting" but holy living and serving people. Church gatherings no longer an end in themselves; they are for inspiration and training – equipping people to be salt and light in the world. Life is not divided between the sacred and the secular. All of life is an opportunity for incarnational ministry – becoming Jesus to the people in the world, following Christ's example of compassion and generosity.

Paradigm Shift #3 for Church Leaders:

"They value the workplace as a mission field by encouraging and equipping Christians as missionaries in a foreign culture and open network opportunities for themselves as civic leaders to set up entrepreneurial ventures for the kingdom." (Hinks, p. 94)

Church leaders of the future encourage and equip members to be missionaries in the one area of their life which occupies the majority of their time: the workplace. Networks are set up so that people are encouraged by the local church. Church leaders likewise are encouraged to do the same, to get involved in the marketplace, to join community organizations, school societies, the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, and connect with politicians. Each of these connections into the community become ventures for the kingdom.

Hinks underscores the importance of entrepreneurial leadership. This is something some of us might be uncomfortable with. We are often content with the status quo and curb anything which might “rock the boat.” But if we are to be effective into the 21st century, church leaders ought not be satisfied with what is but rather search for what can be. Such leaders are interested in continuing innovation, not satisfied with the status quo, always looking for new ideas. In summary, the goal of church ministry “is to equip the members as disciples to intentionally spread themselves and increase their network with a view to loving and serving people, having spiritual conversations, sharing their story and the gospel when given opportunity.” (97)

What might these three paradigm shifts mean for the CRCA as we make our journey head into the 21st century? What are some guiding principles which can engage us in the alignment required? Well as churches Hinks suggests that we should adapt more and adopt less, initiate more and imitate less, move beyond imitation to innovation. So often as

churches we imitate what other churches are doing. They begin an Alpha program and we think we need to do the same. We become carbon copies of other churches. Instead as churches we should ask ourselves what unique thumb print we can make on the community around us. We need to adapt ourselves to the culture so that it can be penetrated.

There should also be less control and more trust. This might be a hard pill for some of us to swallow, but if we as individual churches and collectively as a denomination are to make inroads into our Australian context, we need to make room for each other. “Love always trusts,” Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians. At the congregational level this will mean when church members or leaders do things a little different from what we are used to or what has been done in the past – we lean to trust and not control. This is what empowering leadership is all about.

This trust also needs to be engendered at the denominational level – between congregations within a given classes, between classes within the CRCA. In the past we might have become suspicious of those who do things differently or think outside of the box. This does not mean that there are no boundaries. It means that we manage at the core but we lead at the edge. There are some things which are essential to our common commitment to Scripture and our Reformed beliefs. In these essentials there must be unity; but there also needs to be a lot of charity in the non-essentials. It might be difficult to give definition to those things which are at the core and which things are at the edge. For this we need wisdom and grace. The past will lead us forward. To be reformed

means to be always reforming – always going back to Scripture as our guide. But it also means to be forming – always leaving room to join in God’s mission in the world.

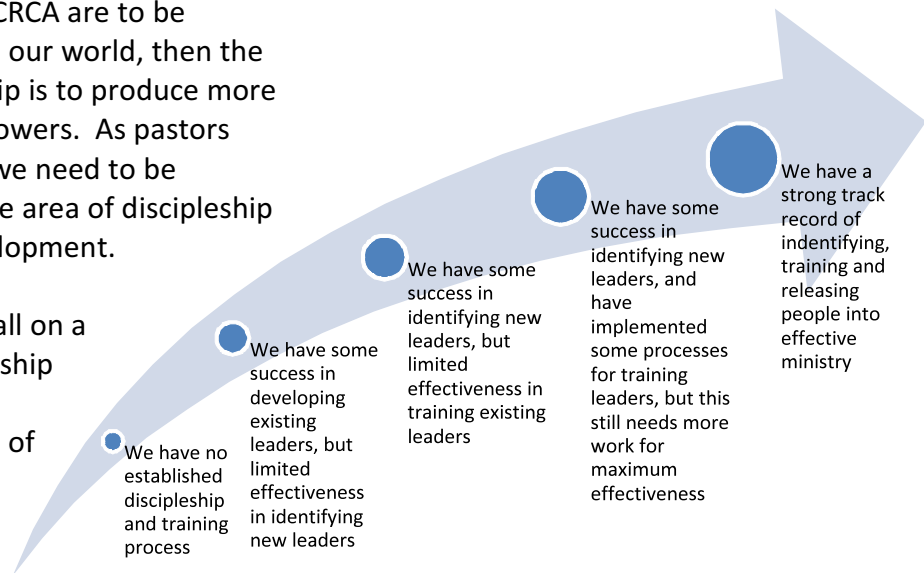
of God.” (12:2) The journey might be uncertain and difficult, but we follow our Saviour not in fear, but in hope, not in reluctance but courage.

Finally, if we as the CRCA are to be difference makers in our world, then the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not just followers. As pastors and church leaders we need to be engaged in the whole area of discipleship and leadership development.

As churches we are all on a continuum of leadership development(see diagram). For some of us we have no established discipleship and training process.

For others, we have some success in developing existing leaders but limited effectiveness in identifying new leaders. The issue for you might not be identifying new leaders, but training existing leaders. Your church might be engaged in training, but the training is not effective as it can be. More works need to be done. And then there are those churches which have a strong track record in leadership development. Each leader and church ought to figure out where they are at on the continuum of leadership development and make a commitment to move up to the next level.

In all of this we remember Jesus’ promise to build his church! In the words of the author of Hebrews, “let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scoring its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne



"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others." --- Jack Welch