

REAPPLYING THE GREAT COMMISSION

“Evangelical” and “Reformed” are not contradictory terms.

by Jason De Vries



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

“A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ”

www.ministryformation.com.au

Jason De Vries is in his final year at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. He is interning at Monroe Community Church, a Christian Reformed church plant in downtown Grand Rapids. You can read more of his thoughts on evangelism and ministry on his blog: www.devriesj.wordpress.com

This article, with the discussion questions, appeared both on Jason's blog and in The Banner, October 2008. Used with permission.

"In short, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, as we know it, is dying." Rev. Sam Hamstra Jr. made that startling statement in the March 2007 issue of The Banner ("A Modest Proposal").

Perhaps "dying" is a bit strong. Perhaps not.

In any case, dying is a process, and in most instances it takes a while to go through that process. Likewise, how often have we thought a person dying, only to see her regain strength and make a full recovery? Dying does not mean dead. It means we're heading in that direction but not yet there. So while I generally agree with Hamstra, I feel the conclusions he seems to have arrived at are a bit premature.

What I mean is, there must be an option that takes the middle ground. Something that's not quite "business as usual," but not exactly "let's disband and do something completely different" either.

Rather, the CRC is in need of a reevaluation or rethinking of the Great Commission and the implications that

follow for the way we "do" church.

Why the Great Commission? Because the three verses of Matthew 28:18-20 provide the church of Jesus Christ with the most succinct description of its mission here on earth.

Despite popular opinion in many Reformed churches, evangelical and Reformed are not contradictory terms. Unfortunately, churches that tend to focus on evangelism—using the Great Commission as their "proof text"—also tend to do a poor job of educating those whom they bring in through their efforts.

At the other end of the spectrum, we in the Reformed camp are renowned for our commitment to Christian education and scholarship but seldom experience the throngs of new believers walking through our doors that others do. Some say that's OK; it's not our job. But at the risk of sounding cliché, unless we change we will die. Some say that's OK. . . .

According to the CRC's 2008 Yearbook, we average just three new members per congregation per year as a result of evangelism. When you consider the multitude of resources and agencies we have dedicated to evangelism, you've got to ask, "Why aren't we more successful?"

I believe there are two primary causes: (1) we see church leaders as the ones primarily responsible for carrying out the Great Commission; and (2) the importance of the Great Commission is seldom emphasized within our worship services and denominational publications. The result has been a rather apathetic response on the part of our congregations and their individual members.

Who's Responsible?

If the CRC is to survive well into the future, we must become more effective in telling people about Jesus. That will only happen if everyone in our churches feels the urgency and senses the responsibility of Jesus' call:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

When Jesus spoke these words he was addressing a small group of believers—11 of them, to be exact. This tiny group was not the entirety of the fledgling Christian church, but pretty close to it.

As Reformed Christians we hold to the belief that the church is not an organized institution but an organic and dynamic group of individuals working together to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. Though Jesus was addressing his disciples as a group, he obviously meant his words to be understood as a command to the individual members of that group. Extend his command to our modern-day context and we see that every one of us has a responsibility to carry it out.

How?

The key word here is relationships. The single most effective way to successfully talk to people about Jesus is through meaningful relationships. On a certain level this sounds deceptively easy. But if it were, more of us would already be

comfortable sharing our faith. So I have some tips that can make it easier for all of us.

1. **Begin with those closest to you.** If you're like me, chances are pretty good you grew up in an environment where you didn't have a whole lot of meaningful contact with nonbelievers. But that's changed. Now you live in a neighborhood or apartment complex full of people who think you're the world's biggest fool for believing in this whole "Jesus thing." Invite them over for dinner or to watch the big game or to meet you for coffee. Just get to know them and appreciate them as individuals—don't treat them as "ministry targets." Who knows, you may end up with a new best friend.

2. **Use F.R.O.M.** This is an acronym I learned from a senior pastor I served with. Now I think of it whenever I meet someone new. The letters stand for Family, Recreation, Occupation, and Memories. Use the acronym as a guide to remind you what sort of questions make for good conversation starters. As the conversation begins to pick up, more questions will come to mind. Take a genuine interest in what your new friend is telling you. Most people just want to be listened to; and listening goes a long way toward building a relationship.

3. **Ask people if you can pray for them.** This is probably the simplest thing you can do. Here's how easy it is: "Is there anything you'd like me to pray about?" I can't count how many times I've asked this question and had people break down in tears just because I asked it. Very few people will deny someone's prayers. But the key to asking this is to actually pray for them for a specific time, and then

check back with them afterward. The goal is to help them see God at work in their lives.

4. Invite someone to hear the gospel.

This is perhaps the most difficult step—hence the reason a meaningful relationship is so important. Talk about how God has worked in your own life. Open the Bible and discuss the key teachings of Jesus together. Or invite your friend to church—assuming your pastor frequently works a gospel presentation into the worship services. If your church has a contemporary service that strives to connect with unbelievers or new Christians, your friend may feel most comfortable there. But if a traditional service is your only option, encourage your pastor to explain the different parts of the service so that a newcomer will better understand what’s happening.

5. Expect God to work. Finally, expect God to work through you. Often even we Reformed Christians, who value God’s sovereign will and power so much, tend to put God in a box. But if we’re willing to be used and we ask God to do big things for the kingdom through us, he will. God’s always looking for a few good men and women, young or old, to do his work.

The power to turn this so-called dying denomination around lies in our hands. It’s time we all begin to accept the job Christ has called his church to do.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you see any evidence that the CRC is dying? What must the church do to foster new life?
2. What do you think about Jason’s suggestion that in order for the CRC to survive, “we must become more effective in telling people about Jesus”?
3. Discuss Jason’s suggestions for building relationships. How do you feel about his approach to evangelism?
4. Do you believe that “the power to turn this so-called dying denomination around lies in our hands”?
5. What new insights do you take away from this discussion?