

Open Letter to the Christian Reformed Church in Canada¹

Calvinist Contact

March 16 and March 23, 1979

It may be hazardous for a Canadian missionary who has largely been absent from Canada since 1958 to discuss publicly the sensitive issue of Canadian-American relations within the CRC. These relations have not been static, as the recent creation of the position of Executive Secretary of the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada indicates.

However, though absent for most of 20 years, it may well be that a missionary's perspective contains elements that have escaped the attention of the folk at home, especially when that perspective is formed by 10 years' experience of living in the USA and by an additional 10 years or more of working under a CRC board with mostly American colleagues in a mission endeavour.

This experience, furthermore, has been accompanied by years of reflection that has been begging for expression for at least six years, but which we have suppressed to make sure we would not act in undue haste. In the meantime, a well-known missionary recently retired, constantly pressed us to bring the matter into the open – an American, at that.

I should point out the two-fold reasons for this open letter. The first is my deep concern for the future of CRC in Canada as a genuinely indigenous Canadian church. The second reason is a situation of gross discrimination, not to speak of dishonesty, that affects all Canadian

¹ Published in *CC*, 16, 23 Mar/1979. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 195-196.

missionaries serving under the CRC Board of World Mission (CRWM), particularly those of us who spend many years in their service. This second reason will be placed in the context of our comprehensive relationships with CRC-USA.

I write this, it must be admitted, with a sense of embarrassment towards Highland CRC, the American congregation that has gone so far beyond their call of financial duty in their relationship to us, that it may well appear to them a point of ingratitude. This letter is written not because of their treatment of us, but in spite of it. I believe it is an issue that, for the sake of the health of CRC-Canada, needs to be discussed openly. Our years of experience give us the necessary authority.

The first point I wish to drive home is that, even though the CRC is officially an international body, the fact of this composition does not normally function in the minds of our southern comrades, except when they have a specific reason to consider it. I will demonstrate this with a number of examples that may be insignificant when taken by themselves but, when placed in the perspective of our discussion, it is precisely these insignificant, almost instinctive actions and attitudes that constitute the most significant examples.

1. Canadian students at the CRC denominational college and seminary are classified among foreigners. (*Banner*, 14/10/77, p. 22 as well as *Calvin Spark* published somewhere around beginning January, 1976.)
2. The calendar published by the Calvin Alumni Association in 1977 mentions just a few Canadian holidays, while it mentions most if not all American ones. The 1978 edition has dropped national

holidays of both nations, but retains the religious ones. However, it is only the American Thanksgiving Day that is listed, and Canada's Boxing Day, so much part of the Christmas celebration, does not appear.

3. This instinctive attitude is displayed in *The Banner* more than anywhere else. There is hardly an edition that does not contain some article that clearly assumes the magazine or its constituency to be basically American. I do not have to remind you of the offensive year-long emphasis on the American bicentennial with its total disregard for Canadian sensitivity. Before me lie the most recent editions I have in my possession – thus an arbitrary selection – that contain several references indicating the attitude under discussion.
4. The bulletin of Church of the Servant (19/9/76) indicates the “stonewalling objections” raised by officials at the CRC denominational building in Grand Rapids to having the Canadian flag flown along with the Star and Stripes.
5. The same one-sided emphasis occurs in other recent CRC publications. I refer to Timmerman's *Promises to Keep*, a book about Calvin College, and CRWM's *Lengthened Cords*, in both of which Canada is virtually ignored and few readers would learn through them the international composition of the denomination.
6. Since I am serving under the CRWM, I am most familiar with them and wish now to indicate that the same mentality is operative there, except when a specific occasion arises that forces them to pay attention to Canada, occasions that appear to be increasing in number.

---- Whereas the Board keeps itself abreast of developments in American tax and social security laws as a matter of routine, Canadian missionaries are expected to provide the Board with information about Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and to provide suggestions as to how we could participate in it. And this while we Canadians are far away from home!

---- The annual meeting of the Board in 1977 appointed an ad hoc committee to look into the CPP matter. During the discussions, to which I was invited, an American member of the committee openly and without embarrassment stated that they basically are unfamiliar with Canadian arrangements. Similar experience is recorded in a letter from an Ontario colleague who has kept close tab of the situation through the years.

---- Whereas officials in Grand Rapids automatically take responsibility for the administration of social security for American missionaries, they appointed Ontario folk to study problems related to CPP, as if the former's responsibility for CPP is any less than that for social security.

---- Whereas the Board automatically accepts administration for social security for Americans, the office has verbally suggested that we Canadians, since we are not eligible for participation in CPP, should make our own private pension arrangements.

---- Whereas the Board automatically sends American tax forms and information annually to *all* missionaries, including Canadians (!) we have yet to receive any Canadian forms or information. In fact, the office does not even appear to know whether or not Canadians

serving abroad are required to send in forms or where they are available!

A mentality

---- A Board publication giving basic information about itself and the location of her missionaries indicates the force of the mentality under description. Several fields are described in terms of their connection or relation to the USA, but not a word about Canada, except that she is referred to as one of the foreign countries bordering on the USA. A CRC document classifying Canada as a foreign country in the same breath as Mexico?

- Guam is described as: “A U.S. territory over 5,000 miles west of California.”
- Philippines: “Shares the Fourth of July with the U.S. for national independence.”
- Cuba: “Nearest ‘overseas’ area for evangelism.”
- Mexico: “Only two foreign lands touch the U.S. – Mexico is one of them.” “Love your neighbour” – over 45,000,000 of them.”
- Puerto Rico: “A commonwealth associated with the U.S.” “American but ‘overseas’.”

It must be remembered that the document under discussion is designed to introduce the Board and its work to her constituency in order to gain prayer and financial support. These sorts of efforts are usually the product of very painstaking choice of words. The possible effect of each word is carefully weighed. Yet, even in such a carefully

worded document the attitude comes through loud and clear. This surely is an indication of the depth of the problem. If Canadian sensitivities had been considered even superficially, some of these items would have been deleted.

---- A Board official visiting Nigerian missionaries talked about our “American” endeavour. Suddenly he remembered the presence of yours truly and that of a few others. His reaction was a quick, “Sorry, John, I mean ‘North American.’” I pretended to be amused, but the point did not get lost on me. Such are the basic, small, instinctive actions that betray the *de facto* attitude under which your Canadian missionaries labour year in and year out. These are the attitudes that are normally operative in our boards when no one is around to press the issue.

The geographical argument for limiting the selection of members of CRC boards to basically Michigan-Chicago area suddenly seems to hold no water anymore when it comes to American churches far removed from other American churches. The Anchorage church in Alaska, though geographically closer to Classis B.C., belongs to Classis Pacific Northwest. Delegates have to fly over B.C. to attend meetings or pass along its coast. Possibly they even land in Vancouver, B.C.! At the same time, some Manitoba congregations belong to an American classis. Apparently, these brothers are more capable of international and denominational thinking than those from the even farther north – Alaska.

The final example relates to the naming of two classes – Pacific Northwest and Atlantic Northeast. Pacific Northwest used to include B.C., but since their breakup they have retained their old name that

should, for geographical reasons have gone to B.C. Atlantic Northeast is a recent creation, but it appears that its organizers forgot that there is a classis north of them. Both names can be understood only in terms of American geography, not in terms of CRC geography. (I concede that Alaska is north of BC!)

Another main fact in the CRC is that all boards and their offices are located in the USA. The implications of this fact become more profound when one sets it in the context of the attitude described in the above 6 points, for very few Canadians man any of the significant offices in these boards. This means that their affairs are directed by a mentality that is American in orientation and that tends to ignore the Canadian reality.

John Klomps drew our attention to this fact in *Calvinist Contact* of 10/3/75 in a strikingly concrete way. The number of Canadians serving in the denominational headquarters in no way reflects the proportion of Canadian membership. What's more, some of those who have served have returned to Canada, partially, I am told by a Canadian colleague, because they did not enjoy living in a *foreign* country with its different history, traditions and mentality.

Board members, in distinction from employees, are almost exclusively drawn from the Michigan-Chicago area, with often one or two from Ontario. The reason, of course, is distance and expense. But whatever the reasons, it provides for the barest minimum of Canadian participation in decision-making.

Though neither Americans nor Canadians in the CRC are totally unified in their approaches to life, articles appearing in both *The Banner* and *Calvinist Contact* have through the years discussed real differences

between the two sections of the CRC. My twenty years of experience fully substantiate their existence. It means in effect, that the traditional orthodoxy with its pietistic flavour characteristic of the CRC in the American Midwest calls the shots.

It is the basically church-oriented mentality that provides the main direction of the boards, while a more kingdom-oriented vision, even when entertained by some appointed officials, always has an upstream battle to face. It means, among other things, that the churches in Nigeria with which the CRC is associated are now ill-prepared to carry out their Christian responsibility in the political era Nigeria is entering. They have as narrow a view of religion as that of the churches that have come out of more traditionally Evangelical and Fundamentalist missions.

When a few years ago a missionary was requested by the equivalent to a member of a provincial cabinet to aid prominent Christians to come to terms with a Christian approach to politics, the missionary was forbidden to do so by the mission. Since 1977 I have been working in a situation where such would now be possible, but in the meantime the fundamental orientation of the churches have jelled. They make a definite distinction between the “work of God” and “work for money.”

Pastors, evangelists and certain others are viewed as working for God, while the Christian politician, businessman, etc., are viewed as doing secular work.

Right now, Christians in politics in Nigeria need the prayers and teachings of the Scriptures for politics, but the churches are not equipped to provide this. And that at a very critical state in Nigerian history. Right now, the direction for Nigeria’s future is being hammered

out, but the Christian contribution does not go beyond the warning to be honest.

Financially, the exclusive location of CRC boards in the USA means a lot of CRC-Canada money is siphoned off into American coffers and from there distributed. Mission money basically comes through Grand Rapids, of course, but even when it is remitted from Canada, it is done so only upon instruction of American officials.

Is it any wonder that this situation has discouraged Canadians from contributing their full denominational quota? Lack of opportunity to fully participate and American control do not make for joyful stewardship, especially when the mind-set of the CRC in the American Midwest does not always coincide with CRC-Canada.

It is true that most CRC boards have now incorporated in Canada. The reason for this is that the Canadian government began to frown on giving tax relief for donations to charitable organizations based in a foreign country. Thus the boards, along with the National Union of Christian Schools (CC 28/4/78), found ways of getting around this problem by re-organizing their Canadian presence.

However, these are not much more than efforts to find tax shelters for increased Canadian giving. So far, I have yet to find indications that from the start such re-organization took place to increase responsible Canadian participation.

When confronted with such facts, Americans predictably object that they do not desire to dominate. This may be true, but the fact of their overwhelming presence and the location of all offices in their country is bound to produce the effects described.

Another important matter at issue is that of our identity in Canada as a genuinely indigenous Canadian church. During the last few years, Canadians have increasingly resented domination by the American colossus. Many of the largest organizations in business, labour or service areas have their headquarters in the south – and that spells only relative autonomy, with the main policies set by folk who have little personal stake in the country's welfare. The CRC is in this respect very typical of Canadian organizations and one could wryly argue that this is a sure sign of our indigenous character!

This apron-string-like connection of CRC-Canada to the USA is bound to influence the way in which more nationalistically-inclined Canadians view us. The connection, in other words, will have negative effect on our evangelistic efforts. We can hardly shake our Dutch roots, but our American connection can easily be remolded so as to reduce this unnecessary barrier to evangelism. The total picture being what it is, I would expect many Canadians who may be interested in the Gospel to reject the CRC as a suitable church for them simply because of the tight American connection.

Foreign impressions

Our identity abroad is another issue at stake. Canadians ought to know that at least in Nigeria we are all identified as Americans and our financial aid is regarded as coming from the USA. This exclusively American identity of the CRC mission is not consciously planned by the Board, but in view of the overwhelming number of Americans they meet, both missionaries and Board delegates who visit, and in view of the location of headquarters in the USA, such identification is almost impossible to avoid.

Canadian money is handled by Americans and the latter get the credit. It would not matter if there were no credit involved, except that which goes to Christ, but that is never the case. Canadians give to missions for the honour of Christ, not for the honour of Canada. However, when the honour goes to the USA, then it has unintended effects Canadians should at least be aware of and decide whether that is within their purpose.

Not only credit is at stake, but also a negative reputation. The USA, for reasons we do not need to give here, has less than an honourable reputation in many nations where missions operate. Because we work under the umbrella of what is regarded as an American organization, that reputation rubs off on us.

During the 1977 annual meeting of CRBWM, a Canadian member reported on the problems CRC missionaries faced in a Latin American country simply because of our American connection. Why should Canadian missionaries go burdened with such unnecessary baggage? Personally, I have long chafed under this identification and I suspect that many a Canadian donor would chafe at having her donation so identified.

Having explained the context in which Canada's CRC relates to the denomination as a whole, we are now ready to appreciate the problem faced by Canadian missionaries who serve more than two or three terms. These, it might be said, are not many. The problem is our being barred from participation in CPP. CRC pension plans, in which all of us participate, are based on the assumption that participants are also covered by their national plans. CRC pension administrators have assured me that there is no machinery under which this pension can be

adjusted to our situation. Another word of advice one offered was that we should simply join the USA social security program. Apart from its legal impossibility, the suggestion contained the idea that if you really insist on being a CRC missionary, you had better break your remaining ties with your own country! Is that what is expected of us? I have met very few Americans who are prepared to take that step.

About pensions

More than a decade ago, a number of us began to discuss the CPP problem with officials in Grand Rapids, but all on an individual basis. We were told that our problem would surely be looked into and *surprise* was expressed that such a problem existed, even though they knew we were not in their social security system. A few years later, some of us began to compare notes and we then realized that all had been given the same line without any steps having been taken.

It is not only our participation in CPP that is at stake. Under present arrangements, Canadian missionaries deriving any income from Canadian sources such as interest are paying a huge **25%** non-resident **tax** for every dollar received, unless they follow the devious device of pretending to live in Canada by having the bank mail their statements to a local address.

That is a rate a missionary can hardly afford when he is forced to take extra precautions with respect to retirement no one else working for the CRC needs to consider. And all that because our American brothers have through the years dragged their feet. One official, who should have known about this 25% charge, expressed surprise when informed about it. But why did they not know of it? They meticulously follow developments in American tax laws. The answer lies in the foregoing.

Recently the matter has become even more complicated and Grand Rapids can now wash its hands partially. We are informed that Classis Hamilton and Toronto have told CRWM to hold off with incorporation, because they wish to “consolidate the various addresses in Canada.” I do not know about the most recent developments between the various boards on this issue, but in 1977 I have been told by an official in Grand Rapids that there were substantial disagreements between the boards on the matter and he predicted that it would take some time before they would come to terms with each other. In the meantime, our non-participation in CPP and the 25% non-resident tax continue.

In conclusion, I offer a few observations and suggestions. I hope that some congregation or classis in Canada will take up the issue of the standing of Canadian missionaries in Canada and push so that the CPP and the 25% problems be solved before 1980.

Do not think that a continued reasonable approach will change the attitude of our brothers to the south. We are by no means the only ones to face such troubles. The chairman of the Canadian branch of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association assures me that most Canadians serving under an international church with its headquarters in the USA suffer the same problem. We are not up against a CRC problem, but a national American characteristic. Let us not entertain any illusion that CRC-Canada, by being reasonable and putting on a bit of pressure here and there, can effect a basic change in that characteristic.

We need to reform the relationships between CRC-Canada and CRC-USA. It appears that there is movement now that CRC-Canada has its

own Executive Secretary and preparations are under way to establish a Canadian address. We are going in the right direction.

I am not up to date on the latest discussions, but from my vantage it would appear that we ought to move in the direction of having two regional synods in the CRC, with the 49th parallel serving as border between them. Each such synod would solve its own problems, but a general synod would meet once in three or four years to work on common issues. The Canadian Regional Synod would have its own mission fields abroad, financed and directed by Canadians. People from the one region who would like to work in a field administered by the other would be free to do so, for we would still be one denomination.

Under such an arrangement, Canada should make sure she does not repeat the mistake of centralizing every board in one place. They should be scattered throughout the nation to make sure all Canadians can feel they have a personal and active stake in the work of their denomination. One board should be in the Atlantic area, one in Ontario, one in Alberta and one in B.C. The nation is too large for centralization. That way each main area could contribute also the executive members without excessive traveling.

It might be objected that this will mean wasteful duplication. True, there would be some duplication if Canada were to have such boards, but the life and the future of the church in Canada is more important than a few extra dollars. With the increase in nationalism and Canadian self-consciousness, there will be an increase in Canadian indifference to the CRC as it is presently structured, also among our own young people.

In the long run, a loose federation under a general synod with each region working according to its own genius though with mutual

consultation, would also mean liberation for leaders in the American church. They would no longer be forced into a for-them unnatural attitude of “internationalism.”