

**Presentation by Rev. J. Witteveen on Mission Work in Prince George, BC
Classis Pacific West of June 8, 2010**

It's now been about 2 ½ years since we began the mission work in Prince George. Looking back over our time on the mission field, it's amazing how fast the time has gone, but it's equally amazing to see the way that God has been working!

The first thing I want to comment on is why we ended up in Prince George. For a number of years, the Smithers congregation has been doing mission work among First Nations people in the Smithers area, and in Fort Babine, where Pastor Bredenhof had been working. Prior to my call, the Smithers Mission Board made the decision to relocate the work to another centre in Northern B.C. In consultation with Native Christians and others, they came to the conclusion that the best place to send a missionary to work among First Nations people would be Prince George.

Prince George is the largest centre in Northern B.C., with a population of around 80,000 people. Of these 80,000 people, about 8,000 are First Nations, so about 10 percent of the total population. So based on numbers alone, Prince George seemed like a natural choice. Now there have been mission efforts to the native in Prince George in the past. A First Nations church had been started about twenty years ago, but when the missionary left, and some of the key members moved away, the church basically fell apart. Since that time, there have been other efforts – a First Nations pentecostal church, which has now become the “All Nations” Pentecostal church, a Roman Catholic downtown outreach, a charismatic downtown outreach, and some activities done by the Anglican church as well. In addition to these activities, there are also travelling evangelists and “tent ministries” that come to town from time to time, ministering to First Nations people.

According to my original mandate, I was called to work primarily among First Nations people. For much of the first year my energies were focused on reaching out in the Native community; I would meet with people at a Christian drop-in centre, at a downtown cultural centre, and develop contacts in that way. After meeting with a number of people, talking with them about the Reformed faith, getting to know them, developing relationships with them, I started a Bible study. I rented a room at the Native Friendship Centre. I prepared the material for the study, set everything up, invited people, put up flyers... and no one showed up. Given the situation that Native people live in, the lack of commitment they have in many parts of their life, and the way that they're bombarded with messages from all kinds of Christian ministries, this isn't surprising, but it is frustrating. After two years, I still have some contact with one of the people I contacted in the first months, but the rest have just kind of disappeared. One lady came to one of our worship services once, and since then, she avoids me like the plague.

But the amazing thing that has happened since we arrived is that there has been a lot of interest in our work outside of the native community. We now have sixteen communicant members, twelve non-communicant members, nine families attending regularly, and some single people as well, including some university students. We started holding Sunday worship in our home, but in September of 2008 we began to meet in a rented hall, because

we had run out of room in our living room. Then in October of last year, we managed to secure full-time rental of a church building that wasn't being used. We have one formal worship service, which is pretty much the same as what we're all familiar with, except we don't have an organist. Then we have a coffee and fellowship time, and then I teach a lesson from the Reformed confessions; last year we worked through the Heidelberg Catechism, we've recently completed our first study of the Belgic Confession, and now we're working our way through the Canons of Dort. Personally, I think we should be spending more time with our congregations on the other two forms of unity, and going through the Canons of Dort in particular has been very stimulating and helpful for our people, and from my experiences with Canadian Reformed visitors to our services, the newcomers are more familiar with the teaching of the Canons than our own members are.

Then on Sunday evenings, we have a Bible study. And we don't do the Bible study once every two weeks, from October to April – it's weekly, it's year-round, and everyone shows up. We began last year with a study of the Old Testament, then moved on to a study of the Attributes of God, and now we're doing a course in church history. We've advertised these Bible studies in the local newspapers and on the radio, and we've had several people from the community respond to these ads, and we usually have around 20 people participating in the Bible study. We also have a smaller Bible study on weeknights, and we've recently begun to study the issue of the “federal vision.” I also hope to begin office-bearer training in the near future.

At the same time as the Bible study on Sunday nights we've started a youth program. A local Baptist church was running a youth program called Awana; they decided to stop running it, and that left the program to us, providentially. Two of our members had formerly run the Trek and Journey programs in that Baptist church, and they're running the program now as a part of our outreach. Right now we have more than twenty teens participating in the program every Sunday night, and the Lord willing we'll be expanding the program this fall to include younger age groups – by September we're anticipating having at least fifty kids and young people involved. I begin by giving a short message on a passage of Scripture, the young people go downstairs for their Bible study, and we have our Bible study upstairs.

I also spend one afternoon a week as a volunteer chaplain in the chaplaincy at UNBC, and I've participated in an “Inter-Faith conference” at the university as the representative of the Christian faith.

There is a hunger out there for the full message of the gospel, and it's not always where we're looking for it. But we remember that God's ways are higher than our ways, and we're happy that He is using our ministry in this way as well. This means that the original focus of our mission work, the focus on first nations people, has been removed from my missionary mandate, and we're working on broadening the mandate, and will present that expanded mandate to the supporting churches for their approval. The Lord has clearly shown the direction that we need to be going – there was a desperate need in this community for a Biblical, Reformed church, and for an outreach that isn't focused on one ethnic group or another, but on the entire population.

When our people think of mission work, we often think of the work that we do in sending missionaries to exotic places overseas; take a look at this year's mission calendar, and you'll see what I mean. You've got beautiful pictures of Brazil and Papua New Guinea, of people that look very different from ourselves, people who speak different languages, people with different cultures. And then on a couple of the pages you'll see pictures of the work in Prince George. They're not quite as colourful as the other pictures. The people in those pictures look pretty much like you and I. The church building looks like an average little church building, not a quaint and picturesque tropical structure.

Even now, when people ask me if "we have any Natives," and I say no (although technically that's not exactly true), they'll say, "Oh, you're doing a church plant then, not mission work." And I patiently explain that no, this is not a church plant, this is mission work, and just because the people I'm doing mission work with aren't all of one specific ethnic group doesn't mean that this is not mission work!

But we have a mission field right on our own doorstep – right in our own backyard. We think of sending missionaries overseas, but it's interesting that churches from overseas have begun to send missionaries to North America and Europe. There are more Reformed Christians in Sudan and in Korea than there are in all of North America. Our country has become a mission field.

I was never expecting to be working as a missionary in Prince George; this call was something totally unexpected for me; I had been hoping to do mission work overseas. I spent a couple of months in Africa, and I saw the excitement there about the gospel, and the desperate need that exists there. And like anyone else, that exotic kind of thing that you think of when you think of mission work appealed to me, a lot.

But now I'm in Prince George. It's not an exotic place, in the slightest. It looks pretty much like any other city in Canada – we've got malls, hockey arenas, Wal-Mart, Costco, Future Shop, snowploughs and Sikh temples, just like any other Canadian city. But it's every bit as much a mission field as the jungles of darkest Africa or Borneo or wherever. After spending two years in Prince George, I have come to see how desperate the situation is, even here in Canada.

The state of the Christian faith in communities like Prince George is very low. There are 52 churches in Prince George, but most of them are very small, and many of these are preaching a very weak, or even dangerous message that has nothing to do with the Christian faith proclaimed in Scripture. In Prince George, over half of the people checked the "no religion" box on the last census form. Communities in our own country provide us with a mission field that is right on our doorstep, and I pray that God will use our efforts to bring the gospel to many people who are lost and hopeless, and don't even realize it. Mission projects like this one are an opportunity for us as Canadian Reformed Churches to let our light shine in our own backyard.

Here are some things we don't usually consider:

1. We have a Biblical church order. This is a tremendous blessing – it protects us from ecclesiastical tyrants and self-appointed prophets who lead the sheep astray and run their churches like their own little fiefdom.
2. We have the Reformed confessions. These are such a great blessing, but for us who have grown up in the church, we often take them for granted. But they provide a fence around our doctrine, and stop us from going astray, from being blown around by every wind and wave of doctrine. And they give us an excellent resource that is much appreciated by people who may never have been exposed to them before.
3. We have a serious liturgical style of worship. This protects us from all the weirdness that goes on in the churches around us. As Canadian Reformed people, we generally don't get out much. Sometimes we think that the grass is greener on the other side, but we don't realize the amount of weird that goes on in other churches in the name of Christ. Our liturgy – our order of worship, our commitment to God-centred worship – it's a blessing that we shouldn't take for granted.
4. We sing the psalms. I think a lot of people in our churches look upon this more as a curse than as a blessing. You hear about people who want to sing more hymns, who want to sing more praise and worship, who think the Genevan tunes are too difficult, who don't see the value in singing the psalms. Talk to the new members of the Prince George church, and you'll see the value and the beauty of our Psalm-singing heritage, and you'll hear about the mindless pap that passes for worship music in the majority of churches.

Many of our people have a tendency to denigrate our own heritage, to put it down, to belittle it, and most seriously, to become complacent and satisfied with ourselves. We don't value what we've received, because my generation has never really had to work for it. People complain about the liturgy, about the preaching, about the stiff, formal style of worship, about being bored with it all. We know what we do. We know the traditions we have. But too often we don't know why we do the things we do, why we worship in the way we do, why our preachers preach like they do.

In Prince George, all of our members and regular visitors were formerly members of various evangelical and charismatic churches. They've sung the silly and childish praise and worship songs until they were sick and tired of them. They've spoken in tongues. They've waved their arms around and jumped up and down. They've seen it all. They've had the ecstatic experiences. They've seen the trends come and go.

And then they discovered the Reformed faith. And they see the richness of it, the beauty of it, the joy that we have in the simplicity of our worship, in our focus on God's Word, in our serious study of the Bible, in our fellowship. They've been there and done that, and they see the tremendous blessing that God has provided in sending a Reformed missionary to their city.

But they also see something else, and it's not quite as positive. They see Canadian Reformed people who don't really seem to appreciate what they have. They talk to

Canadian Reformed people who are looking to the evangelical churches that they've come out of as examples of where we should be going. They see us being embarrassed about our heritage, or being bored with it, or lacking zeal in our lives and in our proclamation of the good news.

But by the grace of God, we have something that the world needs. We have something, the only thing really, that our nation needs. We have something that our city, our neighbourhood, the people on our street, our neighbours, need. We have, in the Reformed faith, a gift of God that we should never take for granted. We have something that other people are searching for, and can't find in their churches. We need to realize what we've been given – because much is expected from those who have been given much. We are a city set on a hill – do we have walls erected around that city so that no one can get out, or in? We are the light of the world – are we hiding that light under a basket, or are we letting it shine?

You know as well as I do that this world is in darkness. In our country, the church as a whole has never been in such bad shape. The gospel message has been watered down, the church has become conformed to the world, we're looking for marketing techniques and for ways that we can adapt our message to make it palatable for unbelievers. As Canadian Reformed Churches, we need to see our calling. We need to see the mission field on our doorstep. We need to realize that we don't have to water down our message or adapt our style of worship or try to be seeker sensitive by dumbing everything down in order to reach out to people. But we need to realize that we need to be open. We need to be inviting. We need to be welcoming. There are Christians out there that are searching for a place where they can hear the message of the Reformed gospel, where they can worship God in spirit and in truth. There are a host of unbelievers out there who have never, despite all of the churches and all of the ministries out there, who have never heard the real message of the gospel. We have it. Let's use it. Let's give thanks for it. Let's not take it for granted. Let's not rest on our laurels and pat ourselves on the back that we've got it made. Let's pass it on. May God bless our work, and may it all be to the praise and glory of His name, first and foremost.