

## *The CRC, the Presbyterians and Ecumenical Relationships*

*John H. Boer*

To begin with, I appreciate that the CRC and the Presbyterian Church in Canada are upgrading their relations with each other (*CC* of April 11, 2011, p. 6). According to the *CC* report, the new agreement states that they now “pledge to work even more closely together in the future than they have in the past” [in *CC* words, not in the official agreement under discussion]. That’s great. May that come to pass.

It has not always been a relationship of cooperation. Every time I hear “Presbyterian” or see one of their churches, a deep regret that has lingered in my soul for decades, resurfaces. The regret is that when the Dutch emigrants originally established the CRC in Canada—mostly during the 1950s—the Presbyterian Church ignored their new Reformed compatriots and left it up to the American CRC to organize and settle us. Yes, “us.” I was among them. While I am genuinely grateful for the work of CRC-USA among us during those early years, I regret that the Presbyterians did not have the vision to welcome and embrace us into their already existing denomination. Instead of being a satellite of an American church, we would be part of a denomination with firm footing in Canadian history and culture. Instead of two small denominations, we would have a much stronger Presbyterian-Reformed presence in Canada. We would be able to address Canadian issues in Canadian Christian ways without needing the approval of American-majority synods meeting outside of the country.

I have asked several Presbyterian clergy about this failure, but no one has been able to give me an explanation that makes sense, apart from their unfortunate lack of vision at the time. It is my prayer that the CRC has agreed upon new relationships with a church that now has more vision and imagination than it did only a few decades ago.

I write the above because of doubts in my heart on this very topic. As I read or listen to Canadian media, I come across references to various denominations—United, Anglican, Roman Catholic—but practically never about the Presbyterians, even less than the CRC! In fact, I do not remember reading or hearing anything of significance about the Presbyterian Church. So, what has the CRC saddled itself with? A staid Scottish Presbyterian bunch without colour or vision? Perhaps with a streak of Scottish rationalism in its theology? Is it going to be up to the CRC to wake up their new partner and instill new vigour? Now that might be a worthwhile

mission in itself, but is the Presbyterian Church going to accept such a role on the part of the CRC? Besides, does the CRC have enough vision and imagination to stimulate others?

I have a personal reason for these questions as well. My wife and I live in downtown Vancouver. We divide our time between the Vancouver CRC, our root church, which is located some distance from us, and downtown churches within a ten-minute walk, our community churches. We have found the Baptist and United churches much more lively and interesting than the Presbyterian Church, which is closest to us geographically. An reflection, perhaps, of the previous paragraph.

A related issue is the lack of information among the CRC membership about such ecumenical partnerships and co-operative ventures. The CC article indicates that the two churches have cooperated with each other in the past. Again, great—but how and where? Certainly not on the local level that I am familiar with. It's as if the Presbyterians don't exist. It is time that denominational officials involved in such interdenominational ventures disseminate information about these projects. That holds not only for CRC-Presbyterian relationships, but for all other ecumenical relations as well. Neither the clergy nor the bureaucrats in Burlington or Grand Rapids own the church. The CRC is not a democracy, but neither is it supposed to have a hierarchy of professionals who play out their personal visions for the denomination behind the scenes and at best give brief reports to some obscure committees and eventually to the Board of Trustees or whatever they are called these days. The black hole of ecumenical relationships in the CRC needs to be lit up so that the membership be more involved, especially at local levels. At the moment, that level hardly plays any role at all. What is the point of interdenominational networking relationships if nothing happens locally? That local church is not a mere inconvenience that is milked to pay for these ventures; it is the core, the real church. ***It is time that black hole be lit up and the membership be informed of and participate in these activities for which they pay but not pray, let alone indicate their approval or otherwise, simply because they are kept in ignorance.***

If we're going to have relationships with the Presbyterians, let us start locally—in Port Alberni, in Saskatoon, in Milford. Occasional combined services to begin with? I am going to write my CRC Council to get that ball rolling locally. No better place to start. In the meantime, would our representatives in Burlington provide us with more information, please? Bruce

Adema, Director of Canadian CRC Ministries, I am calling on you to let the congregations know what's happening or, perhaps, stimulate local councils to pass on information.