

The Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute and the Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools: Their History and Relationship

by Agatha
Lubbers

The writing of these observations and reflections coincides with the celebration of the fiftieth convention of the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute (PRTI), which was attended by nearly all of the 129 teachers currently working in the Protestant Reformed Christian schools, plus many teachers from Plymouth Christian School and Zion Christian School. The convention met October 21-22, 2004, at the Eastside Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since 1956, the year of the inception of the PRTI, a convention or conference has been sponsored. Because two conventions were held during the year 1956, we have reached the fiftieth convention before we have reached the fiftieth year of the existence of the PRTI.

In the late 1940s and very early 1950s, faculty members of Protestant Reformed schools attended the conventions of the Michigan Christian Teachers' Association, a profes-

sional organization of teachers that are employed in the schools belonging to the National Union of Christian Schools (NUCS) and now called Christian Schools International (CSI).

However, it was March 29, 1956, that the teachers of Adams Street Protestant Reformed Christian School and Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School met for a conference. This conference was later called the first convention of the Protestant Reformed Christian schools. The purpose of this conference was to bring together the faculties and boards of the two Grand Rapids PR schools so they could talk about mutual concerns. I can remember well that meeting because I was the teacher of thirty students at Hope in grades five through seven. My yellowed notes indicate that the late Rev. G. M. Ophoff was the featured speaker at 2:00 p.m. at Hope Protestant

Reformed Church on the topic "Teaching Citizenship." Later that afternoon, the faculty members and board members discussed the following topics: "Discipline and Punishment," "Intramurals: Method and Value," "Combining Subjects When Two or More Grades Are in the Same Room," and "Failure of Pupils." The evening of that day the conference or convention moved to Adams School. The evening began with group singing led by the late Mr. Al Heemstra and was followed immediately by a panel discussion on the topic "School Board and Teacher Relations." The following topics were discussed: "Discipline: Can the School Board Help the Teachers? How?" "Selection of Textbooks," "Curriculum Planning," "Failure and Promotion of Pupils," and "Hiring New Teachers: When? How?" After a recess another panel assembled to discuss the topic "The Distinctiveness of Our Schools."

Although there has always been some misunderstanding about the beginnings of the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute (PRTI) and the Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools (FPRCS) and the relationship between them, let it be stated that my recollection and research indicate that the meetings of the PRTI predate the origin of the FPRCS. The PRTI is an organization of professional educators that had its origins as early as March 29, 1956, now called the first convention, while the FPRCS, an organization founded by several boards, did not have an initial meeting until December 1956.

The PRTI met next on April 2, 1956, and organized by making arrangements for the writing of a constitution. The constitution was ratified and adopted at a meeting in June of 1956 that was attended by eight teachers from Hope and Adams in the lower level of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the corner of Fuller and Franklin. The constitution of the PRTI established the name of the organization, the basis, the purpose, the criteria for membership, the officers, the time of the meetings, the dues, and the rules for making amendments. It is noteworthy that the early minutes indicate that each member of the organization would be assessed fifty cents per meeting. That means that the treasurer would be responsible for collecting \$7 annually from each member, and because the total membership could not have been greater than twelve or thirteen teachers, the grand total to be collected each year would be about \$90.

When one considers the amount collected and the grand goals of the organization "To create a medium through which we may produce materials of a specific Protestant Reformed nature, to be used in our own schools and thereby making our schools more distinctive," it seems necessary that several wealthy and generous patrons would have had to contribute funds to make this a possibility. By

the way, such generous donations were neither solicited, nor received by the PRTI.

Another yellowed sheet in my notebook of PRTI events includes the notes I took as the first secretary of the PRTI. The second convention was held October 18, 1956 at Adams School and at Hope School. A total of thirteen teachers and a few prospective teachers attended this convention. The teachers from Adams were Jean Dykstra, Ruth Dykstra, Fred Hanko Sr., Winifred Koole, Hulda Kuiper, Delia Slomp, and Jeanette Veldman. The teachers from Hope were Jessie Dykstra, Agatha Lubbers, Delores Mensch (Miedema), Marie Moelker, and Alice Reitsma.

Program notes duplicated in the memorable purple ink indicate that the sites for the convention were Adams in the morning and Hope in the afternoon. Alice Reitsma, principal of Hope, opened the meeting with prayer, and this was followed immediately by a panel discussion on the teaching of art in our schools. Panelists were Antoinette Borduin (Quenga), John Buitter, and Jean Dykstra. The conventioners enjoyed a recess for coffee and were treated to presentations by Hulda Kuiper on "Parent-Teacher Conferences" and Ruth Dykstra on "The Place of the Kindergarten." The Varsity Grill on Franklin and Madison, across from the original Grand Rapids Christian High School, was the site for fellowship and lunch. This was the earliest version of the annual banquet. All traveled to Hope School and assembled by 1:30 p.m. for the afternoon sessions of this second convention. Alice Reitsma made a presentation on "Oral and Written Composition." This was followed by a panel discussion with Jessie Dykstra, Winifred Koole, Delores Mensch, Thelma Pastoor, and Delia Slomp participating.

It should be noted that in those early days the teachers did attempt to publish a simple newsletter and journal that featured articles relating to the task of education. I can remember turning the crank on a mimeograph in the lower level of the Creston Protestant Reformed Church parsonage to produce this early version of the PRTI newsletter and journal that later became the *Perspectives in Covenant Education*, which was first published in October 1975.

Other goals of the organization were to work for unity and understanding between our Protestant Reformed schools and to study materials related to the field of education in conjunction with the word of God, so that the teachers could be better qualified to teach from a Protestant Reformed viewpoint. The teachers that belong to the PRTI have faithfully attempted to do exactly this.

The 140 teachers and prospective teachers that attended the fiftieth convention at Eastside in 2004 were repeatedly urged to refrain from despising "the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). God used those small beginnings to bring us

to a time when many laborers would be working to establish and maintain Protestant Reformed Christian schools, of which there are currently fourteen. They were important beginnings, and our covenant God has blessed us so that we have continued faithful to the truth of God's word unto the present time. May God give us continued faithfulness to his cause in the world.

Also, the basis of the organization has not changed. The basis of the PRTI for these many years has been the "Word of God as interpreted by the Three Forms of Unity and as these are applied in the educational principles of the Protestant Reformed schools." Ah! What a blessed and sure basis that is, and it has served us well these many years.

The fundamental character of the PRTI is that it is an organization that is controlled by a membership that is limited to Protestant Reformed persons who are either teachers or prospective teachers. Although our schools are not controlled by the church, they are schools that have such a close relationship to the Protestant Reformed Churches that all the teachers must be members of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and they are in that way eligible to be members of the PRTI.

The Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools (FPRCS)

The official minutes of the federation indicate that the first meeting of the FPRCS was held at Hope School on Friday, December 7, 1956. The minutes referred to this significant and monumental meeting as the first meeting of the combined Protestant Reformed Christian school boards.

Just to set the record straight, it ought to be noticed that the initial meeting of the federation and all subsequent delegate board meetings of the federation of Protestant Reformed Christian school boards were expanded board meetings. The teachers in the schools were not directly involved in these meetings. There was even some question among the teachers about the necessity of the federation, since the PRTI, which had been founded in the early months of 1956, had begun meetings with much the same purpose as that for which the federation was being founded—the further training of the teachers in the schools.

The important point, nevertheless, is that both the teachers who organized the PRTI and board members who were instrumental in organizing the federation saw the need for the development and further preparation of the teachers in the specifics of the instruction that teachers and parents were called to give students and covenant children

in the Protestant Reformed Christian schools.

The representatives at this first meeting that would result in the organization of the FPRCS were from Adams, Hope, and Oaklawn and South Holland, Illinois. Letters of interest had also been received from Edgerton, Minnesota, and Hull, Iowa. It was agreed that an attempt should be made to organize as a permanent organization that would be agreeable to the various school boards. Rev. Herman Hanko, then pastor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church, acting as chairman pro tem, appointed a committee to draw up a tentative constitution to be presented at the next meeting, scheduled three months later on Friday, March 15, 1957.

Another important issue was the appointment of a committee to study the matter of normal courses for teachers. The committee was appointed with the understanding that they would produce an outline for a complete normal course (teachers' training course), and the committee would also come prepared with advice and suggestions concerning personnel to instruct in this course.

Although the establishment of a teacher training college was soon ruled out as being impossible, the federation did appoint a seminar committee, and a seminar program was soon established, thereby making it possible and necessary for seminary professors, ministers, teachers, seminary students, and prospective teachers to meet for eleven four-hour sessions during late 1957 through early 1959. The seminars have been described as "forums for intellectual exchange between pastors and teachers which was stimulating and spirited." It has been said that "the level of debate (not often recaptured) was the mark of the commitment of these pioneers."¹

The first seminar met at Adams School on Friday, November 29, 1957. Rev. H. Hanko led by presenting a paper on "Education among the Hebrews." Rev. C. Hanko led the April 7, 1958 seminar on the topic "Education among the Greeks." Rev. H. C. Hoeksema led the June 27, 1958 seminar on the topic "Education among the Ancient Romans." Several of the sessions featured presentations by teachers now retired and in some cases deceased, that is, John Buijter, Jessie Dykstra, Fred Hanko, Winifred Koole, Agatha Lubbers, and Alice Reitsma. Our older readers will recognize the names of these teachers. The eleventh seminar on February 28, 1959, was led by Rev. B. Woudenberg on the topic "Twentieth Century Education in America."

When these seminars were finished we thought we knew it all, but the seminar concept would not soon die. Seminars were not soon discarded. Beginning in the spring of 1959 until 1969, the federation continued to sponsor and fund seminars. Eleven seminars were held on various

aspects of psychology and pedagogy, and most of these were led by the teachers.

During the years 1961-1964, eight seminars were held on methods of teaching. These seminars were all under the leadership of the first generation of teachers in the schools.

During the years 1965-1969, a new series of seminars began that dealt with topics such as, "Thomas Aquinas," "Augustine and His Teaching," "The Scholastic Movement," and "The Impact of John Dewey." These seminars were also led by teachers in our schools.

Although the seminar program ended in 1969, it was replaced during the years 1970-1979 by summer workshops. These workshops developed and produced manuals that could be used by the teachers in our schools. These manuals are presently being transferred to CDs. Mini-courses, individual writing, and study projects were also funded by the federation during the years 1970-1979. During the 1980s, much of the previous work seemed to die down, and a motion was brought to the floor of the delegates that the federation be abandoned and that the organization be ended. Through the efforts of certain people with another vision, the work and study began again in the mid 1990s and has continued on into the year 2004.

For a complete review of the seminars and workshops, I encourage you to obtain and read the pertinent section in the *Handbook of the Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools*. Copies of the handbook are available from Agatha Lubbers, executive director of the federation.

The chief goal of the federation is to provide seminars and workshops to promote the development, the understanding, and the presentation of distinctive Protestant Reformed Christian education. The federation is to seek ways and means for a more thorough training of teachers and prospective teachers in Reformed Christian principles.

For nearly five decades the FPRCS has been attempting to help teachers grow, and this development is seen as a third generation of teachers begin to take their places in our Protestant Reformed Christian schools. God be praised for his faithfulness.

The Relationship between the PRTI and the FPRCS

It ought to be very obvious that the FPRCS and the PRTI are two separate entities. Three representatives from each school board in the Michigan and Illinois area meet twice each year as the delegate board of the federation to make decisions and to determine assessments that make possible the funding of projects that are planned by the Teacher Education and Development Committee (TED), the executive and steering committee of the federation. Most recently, these projects have included art curriculum guides

and summer seminars on biblical psychology. Currently, work has begun on the writing of a physical education curriculum guide. A seminar for the summer of 2005 is being planned on the subject "The Kingdom of God and the Protestant Reformed Christian Schools."

Teachers are encouraged by the boards, the TED, and the executive director to attend and participate in these activities. The funds for these activities are made available through the dues paid by the individual school societies.


The PRTI has remained a professional organization. The main activity of the PRTI is planning and executing the annual teachers' convention. In addition, the PRTI plans several after-school meetings each year for teachers in the Grand Rapids area. Since October 1975, the PRTI has become responsible for the publication of the quarterly, *Perspectives in Covenant Education*. The activities of the PRTI are funded through the dues paid by the members and the participants in the activities of the PRTI.

A major cost for teachers from outlying areas is the travel costs to attend the annual PRTI convention each fall. The FPRCS has assisted with the funding for these travel costs by making funds available for teachers from outlying schools to attend the conventions. We are happy to report that teachers from Washington, California, Colorado, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan attended the 2004 convention, and for many of them attendance was made possible by the funding provided by the FPRCS. This is a very important indication of the collaboration between the FPRCS and the PRTI.

The PRTI is also a seedbed for many of the ideas the federation attempts to use in the projects, workshops, and seminars that are funded by the federation.

Although there was some initial misunderstanding and some resistance by the teachers to the activities of the FPRCS, we have witnessed and experienced the development of a very healthy and helpful collaborative relationship between the PRTI and the FPRCS.

We pray for continued fervency and leadership in both of these organizations so that they will continue to serve the cause of the development of principles and teaching methods in our Protestant Reformed Christian schools.

To God be the glory, and to him we give all our thanks for having preserved these sister organizations for nearly fifty years. Our prayer is that as the Lord tarries we may continue to experience this collaboration. 

Endnote

¹ Cf. *Handbook of the Federation of Protestant Reformed Christian Schools*, 19, 20.