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Christian Day School Report—2006

Introduction

From the beginning of its 150-year history, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has had a reputation for its strong commitment to Christian day school education. In response to overtures from churches and classes, Synod 2000 appointed a committee to “study the support for distinctively Reformed Christian day schools by the Christian Reformed denomination and its local congregations.” Synod said this study was needed because

- a. no study had been done since 1955,
- b. significant changes had occurred in the denomination and society,
- c. rising tuition costs and diversity of income could create tension in the local church, and
- d. Church Order Article 71 calling for officebearers to support Christian day schools was no longer being read literally.

The study committee’s mandate was to name the “biblical, theological, and confessional bases for Christian day schools” and to describe the relationship between a congregation’s baptismal vows and its support of Christian schools. At Synod 2003, the committee presented its report with recommendations. The report included analysis of numerous factors:

- cultural, ethnic, and demographic changes in North American society and in the denomination
- financing of Christian schools
- the variety of educational choices CRC parents have
- the bases for Christian day schools

Synod 2003 adopted some of the recommendations—particularly by affirming the bases for Christian education (covenant, kingdom, and mission), making a change in Church Order Article 71, and acknowledging the communal responsibility of a congregation to financially support Christian day school education. However, it directed the same committee to take two more years to be clearer about the “churches’ commitment to Reformed Christian day schools and the churches’ work of doing evangelism”; to discuss how small, isolated congregations could fulfill their baptismal vows in relationship to Christian schools; and to address the “divisions and brokenness” in local churches with unequal resources and attitudes about Christian schools.

Synod 2005 adopted all the committee’s recommendations and commended the report to the churches for study. Fifty years after the last report, the CRC has reaffirmed its commitment to Christian day school education. However, the denomination and the world are far different from what they were “back then.” What follows is a summary of the 2005 report, with questions to promote discussion. This guide will help your congregation understand how and why the CRC has supported Reformed Christian day school education, and assist you in adapting this heritage to the current culture.

A Brief History Lesson

The CRC began in 1857. Just thirteen years later, Synod 1870 said that a Christian primary school is “the nursery of and for the Church.” It said that this education is to be free from the control of the state or church, and distinctly Reformed. In 1873, the general assembly said the need of free Christian Reformed schools ought to be “strongly recommended to the Congregations, and that Congregations take steps to bring such schools into being.”

Over the next two decades, the CRC continued to promote Reformed Christian schools, advocating in 1892 the establishment of Christian school societies, even pronouncing the name for them, “The Society for the Advancement of Christian Education on Reformed Principles.” Synod 1898 said, “Christian education according to Reformed principles is the incontrovertible duty of Reformed Christians,” and instructed all elders and pastors to “labor in the utmost of their power in the promotion of Christian education wherever and whenever possible.”

This commitment showed the influence of the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper:

1. “God’s Word requires that children be trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord.
2. Parents at the time of baptism of the children have promised before the Lord and the congregation to do this.
3. There may be no separation between civil, social, and religious life, education, and nurture.
4. Christian education promotes the honor of our King who has been given all dominion in heaven and on earth, including the realms of education and nurture.”

The CRC had early on adopted the articles of church order from the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), including Article 21, which said that consistories shall see to it that there are “good schoolmasters, who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and the Catechism.” Synod 1914 changed that article to read that consistories should see to it “that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.” In 1965 this article became Article 71 with a change that put the focus on members of the congregation rather than the consistory: “The consistory shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish good Christian schools, and shall urge parents to have their children instructed in these schools according to the demands of the covenant.”

Two more synods advanced the CRC’s commitment to Christian day schools. Synod 1936 expanded the term “schools” to include all levels of general education and the word “support” to mean “wholehearted and unreserved moral backing to existing Christian schools,” financial help to those in need, and discipline by the classis for a congregation that did “not support the cause of Christian schools.” Synod 1955 addressed the growing secularism in the culture—“the absence of biblical truth as normative for thinking and acting”—and declared that the CRC stands “committed to the Christian school as the

agency that can make Christian education effective in the totality of life.” Finally, this synod said that because the “Christian school is the only agency that can provide a Christian education for the youth of the church, the church is duty bound to encourage and assist in the establishment and maintenance of Christian schools.”

The Three-legged Stool: Church, Home, School

Back when farmers milked cows by hand, they sat under them on a three-legged stool. If one leg were longer than another, or one broke, the “sit” was uncomfortable or impossible. Today the appropriate metaphor is a photographer’s or surveyor’s tripod. If the church, home, and school legs were balanced, a child would see the world rightly and live in it well as a citizen of Christ’s kingdom.

But which of these agencies has the *main* responsibility for the schooling of children and youth? The CRC has persistently said all three have roles. In one sense, the primary responsibility for a child’s nurture is her parents. But the covenantal community certainly also has a fundamental responsibility (see Deut. 6). Some believe that God has ordained various institutions (government, labor, law, education), or “spheres of sovereignty,” that must remain separate in their work; in practice, the church is a separate sphere from school so that it has no business, *as a church*, influencing Christian schools.

The report from Synod 2005 asserts that the nurture of children in the believing community is a covenantal responsibility of both the parents and the larger community. In addition, the report maintains that the Reformed vision of life—Christ is Lord over all creation—is best made clear by Christian schools.

Yet how do we address the idea that each social sphere (church, home, school) is directly responsible to God and should not control another? The concept of sphere sovereignty, made popular by Abraham Kuyper, arose out of concern that the state was controlling non-state social spheres like the family, schools, and the arts. The CRC has fostered Christian day schools but has not controlled them; the local church has no business telling an independent, often parent-controlled, school what its curriculum should be or which teachers to employ.

On the other hand, the church has had a great interest in educating its children in a Reformed vision of the kingdom of Christ. Church Order Article 71 calls for the “members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools.” There is no separate Church Order article regarding a congregation’s involvement in voting, agriculture, art, or other spheres. Why does Christian schooling get the church’s special interest?

For starters, the Bible’s pictures of the church intimate that it is both familial and schoolish in character. The church is the family of God, the Father of his people (Eph. 3:15; Matt. 6:8-15). The church is the household of God (Eph. 2:19), led, ruled, and served by those who have proven themselves capable of doing that at home (1 Tim. 3). Teaching is a prominent feature of the church in the New Testament (e.g., Col. 3:16; Eph. 4:20-24; 2 Thess. 2:15).

The CRC really has three main interests in supporting Christian day schools:

1. The church needs educated leaders. Obviously, the church itself educates its youth in the Reformed faith, but Christian day schools can help illustrate how this faith expands into a Reformed worldview. The church can give broad instruction about the Reformed faith, but it needs the schools to apply these principles in physics, language, art, psychology, and so on.
2. The church needs to educate its members to be more effective witnesses to the world. Christian schools, from kindergarten on, assist the church in educating its youth to connect the Word of God and Reformed principles to the “stuff” of culture.
3. The church more effectively discipled the nations through Christian schools. Discipleship for Reformed people is not only a personal walk with God. It is also developing our abilities so that together we can be instruments of light in a variety of callings: plumbing, healing, caretaking, homemaking, and so on. Our world belongs to God! It is in Christian schools that our children are fitted with the “spectacles of Scripture” to see sparkles of Christ’s light in a dark world—from asteroids to zebras, from economics to Ecuador.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the report’s stance on the respective roles of home, church, and school in the mission of Christ’s kingdom is to consider them from the point of view of the child who is being taught the faith. It starts with the child’s parents announcing that “God has given us this child.” For this reason, the child is taken to an assembly of God’s people where the child receives the sign and seal of covenantal promise in the water of baptism. Not only the parents but also the Christian community vows in reliance on the Holy Spirit to do all in its power to instruct her in the Christian faith, to receive the child in love, help instruct her in the faith, and to encourage and sustain her.

All three agencies educate her in the same story, the story of God and his people. As she matures, she sees how she is an active participant in the narrative, using her gifts and talents to extend Christ’s kingdom until he comes again, fixing what is broken, or healing what is hurting, or lighting a corner that was dark before.

The church, home, and school cannot be competitors. The church must avoid the temptation to educate its youth toward either the ordained ministry or piety only. The home can fall into the trap of leaving “spiritual” education to the church. The Christian school cannot “possess” our youth by scheduling activities that usurp the roles of home and church. The balanced three-legged stool is possible only when all the agencies “seek first the kingdom of God” and educate all of God’s children into it.

Three Pillars: Covenant, Kingdom, and Mission

Synod 2000 mandated the study committee to name the “biblical-theological foundations for Christian education.” The word “foundation” suggests the firmness of bedrock, with pillars driven deep to allow the building to withstand the winds of a secular culture that threaten it. The committee studied the 1955 report and reaffirmed its two pillars of CRC

support for Christian day schools: covenant and kingdom. And the committee added a third pillar: mission, seeing the Christian day school as an additional agency to carry out the church's mission to call people to salvation in Christ and to help equip them for discipleship.

Covenant

The covenant is God's promise to his people and God's command that we and our children obey him. It's not a contract, two sides negotiating a legal agreement. It is God's promise of love and expecting our love in return. God says in many places in his word, particularly to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you . . . to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. . . . You must keep my covenant" (Gen. 17:7, 9). God explains it further through Moses, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5).

God connected his covenant of love to the nurture of children with more specific commandments: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 6:6-7). In 1955, the CRC said that those given the first responsibility for educating children into this covenant are the parents. The report said, "Children born of Christian parents are members of the Church of Christ," and their education must be in keeping with that "covenantal relationship." However, God does not make his covenant with solitary individuals or even individual families but with the *people of God*, his church. Thus, the 1955 report also said the church needs to support parents in fulfilling their vows. It went on to say that Christian schools were the places in which "the covenant child's life in Christ can develop in all areas of living."

Kingdom

If covenant is the basis, the parental and church reason, for Christian day schools, kingdom is the *content* of the education. Christ's kingship is over everything. Jesus himself used the word "kingdom" and described its character often (see Matt. 4:23; 5:3, 19; 6:33), making clear that this kingdom will last forever. Synod 1955 caught this point in its report when it said that Christian education is necessary because "secular education divorces an area of life of the child in Christ from Christ Himself. Christian education is education in Christ for those who are in God's providence placed in relationship to Christ." It is for this reason that the CRC stands committed to the Christian school as the agency to make the Christlike life effective in the totality of life for every covenant child.

Baptism is the introduction of children into the covenant; Christ's kingdom is the other bookend. The story of God and his people is creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. It's a four-part true drama. God made everything good; human beings made themselves and his creation bad; God gave his son to redeem us and his creation; he will surely come again to make all things new. It's the time between his first coming and his second coming that we and our children live. What do we educate our children for?

To what end? It is for each of us to serve the King as his agents to establish his rule more firmly over all things.

This work in the kingdom, often called the cultural mandate, was introduced early in the story: God blessed Adam and Eve and commanded them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28). This command suggests that the stewardship means “shaping” and “directing.” Christ is Lord of all things; we are his agents.

It is the church that preaches and professes this cosmic view of the world; it is the Christian school that makes this world-and-life view specific in all areas of study. It is the Christian school that educates the child to see the world “through the spectacles of Scripture” (John Calvin), to find his place in restoring creation and extending the kingdom. “In education we seek to acknowledge the Lord by promoting schools and teaching in which the light of his Word shines in all learning, where students, of whatever ability, are treated as persons who bear God’s image and have a place in his plan” (*Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, st. 50).

A Reformed understanding of discipleship is a seamless web: Christ is Lord of all; and family, church, and school together serve the mission of God and his people. Faith in Christ as King does not just apply on Sunday, but also the rest of the week in geography, spelling, art, and ethics. Christian schools help students to weave this understanding of Christ’s kingdom into the things they do each day.

Mission

Just before he returned to his Father, Jesus left the disciples with the Great Commission: “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” (Matt. 28:19-20). It is often called the mission mandate of the church.

If a covenantal emphasis in the CRC focuses attention on “our” children, an emphasis on mission and evangelism focuses the church’s attention on people outside the church. The first emphasizes the cultural commandment; the second emphasizes the mission commandment. The 2005 report suggests that separating the cultural mandate from the mission mandate is a mistake. Both are rooted in kingdom and covenant promise.

The report describes the tension that the CRC has experienced lately when evangelism and Christian day school support become competitors. Children of the church are integral members of the Good Shepherd’s flock (John 10). After the resurrection, Jesus reminded his disciples that while we are fishing for men, we must also feed the flock (John 21). Pastors need to remind us that the church’s obedience to evangelize and educate is not an either/or but a both/and.

Certainly in a Reformed view of the world, the church is the primary *institution* for evangelism, not the Christian day school. This is important to emphasize because there

are Christian schools, tied to specific congregations, who do see the task of the school as primarily evangelism. Although it is not their prime purpose, Reformed Christian schools are mission fields in that some of the students have never felt the Spirit's urging or have hard hearts. They may learn to become Christian disciples before choosing to be one—discipling is a process, not a once-and-for-all single event.

Reformed Christian day schools also encourage students to be witnesses in the world, as evangelists directly and in their vocations. These schools tell their students to “Go.” These schools demonstrate a passion for the world and tune their students' talents to be emissaries of light—as zookeepers, homemakers, pastors, pharmacists, or farmers.

The salvation of a child's soul or mission outreach is not the main reason for a school in the Reformed understanding. Nor is catechism or faith nurture, both properly the responsibilities of home and church. Similarly, it is not the church's task to teach science and geography. The Christian school and the church are not competitors but partners in the Great Commission to disciple the nations and teach them all he commanded. We reach out, disciple, and teach. The very presence of Christian schools is an evangelistic witness. In the missionary causes of the CRC, Christian day schools are a valuable instrument to extend the church of Christ. And Christian day school teachers are missionaries to children and young people in their talk and walk.

Christian Education in Today's World (“The times, they are a-changin’”)

No one will deny that institutions change as the culture changes. Certainly the world, the CRC, and Christian day schools changed between 1955 and 2005. The report suggests that these changes have influenced CRC congregations, the family, and the Christian nurture of children significantly. It is important to remember that Reformed Christians accept the responsibility to discern what is good and what is evil in culture, to resist the temptations of both withdrawing from it or wallowing in it, and to be active participants in transforming it for good.

Changes in Society: Secularism, Consumerism, and Relativism

In 1955, the children in the CRC were nurtured basically by our churches, homes, and schools (the “three-legged stool”). But there was always another leg, less noticeable in 1955 but now very prominent: the mass media—television, movies, music, and the Internet. This media leg unbalances the other three legs by its overwhelming presence and by its content that subverts Christian values.

First, this mass media seeks to remove religion from the public square and relegate it to the private sphere. Often representing faith as for fools, it touts individualism, consumerism, hedonism, and relativism as tantalizing idols. Christianity is depicted as exclusive and divisive. Yet separating faith into the box of piety clashes directly with the Reformed conviction that Christ is Lord of all. Many CRC members have subtly bowed to this secularization of culture or at least the notion that faith is private and separate from most of daily living. This secularism is a major threat to Christian day school education, which exists because “Christ is Lord of all.”

The pressure for Christians to divide the sacred from the secular is intense and affects the church, home, and school. Leaders in government, business, and media persuade the majority of people to keep their expressions of faith private. Public education in North America is *institutionally committed by law* to secularism. A spate of books about religion, particularly regarding teenagers, give sociological evidence that a majority of Christian young people are God-believers and attend church but see the rest of life the same way secularists do. This trend clashes directly with Reformed Christianity that is cosmic in scope and public in its expression.

Numerous books have been devoted to describing the drift toward secularism in educational institutions, particularly Marsden's *The Soul of the American University*, Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light*, and Benne's *Quality with Soul*. Resistance to the siren calls of secularization requires the close cooperation of church and school. Says Benne: "One decisive mark of secularized schools is the lack of mutual recognition and care by both school and church, when neither sees the other as crucial to their mission." The Reformed Christian school needs a healthy Reformed Church for the sake of its own health—and vice versa.

A second force that threatens the CRC's commitment to Christian day school education is consumerism. Both church and school have become just one more choice in a vast array of services one can take or leave. Parents need to use discernment to make biblical choices for the education of their children. Even in choosing among Christian schools, parents may choose between a school that only puts a layer of Christian values on a secular-curricular cake and one that truly integrates the Christian narrative into the entire curriculum. A school may stress academic excellence, athletics, or social activism at the expense of a balanced, integrated Christian curriculum for all children.

Beyond Christian schools, parents now can choose charter schools that emphasize family values. Home schools, virtual schools, and mix-and-match schools increase the choices. In all these options, parents may run the risk of seeing education as just one more consumer product, a bit like shopping for a car or a house, and thus judge the value of the education by consumer standards: Is my financial investment in Christian education going to get my child a well-paying job? Will my son or daughter get more playing time at this school rather than that one? Christian discipleship may become hostage to consumerist goals. Christian schools themselves may begin to judge their success by athletic, art, or college placements.

A third related force that affects the CRC and Christian day schools is relativism—the conviction that truth is in flux. Although the word *postmodernism* is hard to pin down, almost everyone would agree that it contains the idea that no person (or community) can claim to have objective truth. No single narrative of life has any more validity than another. Each person's history shapes her own thinking—hardly understood by another, let alone shared.

The mass media persuade us and our children that personal feelings are more important in decision-making than religious commitment. As Charles Colson has noted, we have

adopted a therapeutic mindset in which being happy rather than holy is the ultimate religious goal. We run the risk of becoming so self-absorbed that we fail to see the larger spiritual conflicts. For our young people, the pressure of relativism pushes them toward moral and religious pluralism. They swallow everything because their spiritual taste buds are dulled.

Changes in the Christian Reformed Church: Diversity and Identity

In the past half-century, the CRC has become more diverse. In 1955, a visitor from a Christian Reformed church in British Columbia to another in New Jersey would have felt at home with the order and style of worship. All the churches had a recognizable liturgy and used the same hymnal, thus keeping all congregations in the CRC “on the same page,” no matter the geography. Today the order and content of worship, of oral instruction, and of congregational singing widely varies.

Back then, congregations were mainly racially white (with exceptions such as the churches of what is now Classis Red Mesa) and ethnically Dutch. Now the CRC is, and is becoming, more multiethnic and multiracial. It has not been easy. Minorities can easily feel as if their music and other traditions are ignored by the majority in worshipping God. The racial and ethnic majority is shrinking and can too easily feel threatened by including the traditions of minority groups. Even if most profess inclusion, the road toward it has been bumpy.

The cultural context for the people in the pew is different from what it was in the 1950s. North American culture seeks to persuade us that faith is private and individualized. Congregations may desire preaching that massage their feelings instead of directing them to confront the idols of this age. The individualism of this age comes to bear in church life with more focus on congregational needs than denominational ones, producing local churches that feel less involved in churchwide ministries. The result has been a loss of CRC membership over the last decade. Denominational ministry shares are down even though affluence is up.

In 1955, the CRC communally supported Christian day school education to a greater degree than it does now. Consumerism seems more prevalent in the local church, and stewardship has waned with our confessional heritage. Consumers buy for themselves and for immediate payoffs; kingdom citizens work in concert for the good of the kingdom with patient persistence for a promised blessed future. It will be very hard in today’s culture to maintain the vision for and a commitment to a community of belief and its countercultural witness as a signpost of Christ’s kingdom if Christian day school education becomes just one more individual choice like a cottage, car, or computer.

How do these changes affect Christian education, and how should the CRC respond? The study committee calls the CRC to renew its denominational covenants and confessional commitments, including its 125-year history of encouraging its members to educate its youth into a Reformed worldview in Christian schools, from elementary through college. This has specific implications:

- Officebearers and parents must be faithful to the vision of Christian education stated in Article 71 of the Church Order: *The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools where the Reformed vision of Christ's lordship over all creation is clearly taught. The council shall urge parents to have their children educated in harmony with this vision according to the demands of the covenant.*
- Increasing diversity means that many new CRC members are unfamiliar with Christian day school education. Each congregation must clearly articulate a Reformed world-and-life view of cultural discipleship and using Christian schools as an integral part of that education.
- The CRC and its congregations must foster the close, symbiotic relationship between the denomination and Reformed Christian schools, which helps the CRC retain its confessional identity in the next generation.
- Local churches should provide resources to these schools because the schools aid the church in preparing its next generation of leaders to perpetuate this Reformed vision of life.

Conflicts about Christian Education

Since 1955, the partnership between the CRC and Christian day schools has changed, partly because of conflicts that have arisen. First, it used to be that the congregation and Christian school families were almost identical. Today the CRC, with its growing diversity, has parents with little background or understanding of the Reformed world-and-life view. At the same time, Christian schools now have many participating parents with no background in this Reformed outlook on life.

Second, because in most communities Christian day school education has become costly, financial disparity among families presents a conflict.

Third, other conflicts in churches (e.g., women in ecclesiastical office or worship style) sometimes lead pastors and councils to be neutral for fear of causing more conflict. This neutrality may easily migrate to parishioners' choices for the education of their children.

Fourth, the committee learned from its surveys of CRC councils and pastors that they feel that supporting Christian education and evangelism may be at cross purposes. It's certainly a perception among some pastors that parents who have come into the church through evangelism will go out if the church also encourages all parents to use Christian day schools.

Fifth, because the CRC is more diverse than it was in 1955 and the school choices for parents are broader, the local church's job of encouraging Reformed Christian education is harder and needs to be tuned to the times. Not all Christian schools are alike. Some only retain the name and not the character; some add strong piety (chapel, prayer, singing) to a secular curriculum. Church Order Article 71 puts the focus for the church not just on *schools* but on any means, including home schooling, both instead of other schooling or in addition to it, to make sure that its youth are learning a Reformed world-and-life view.

Choices in Education

Five decades ago CRC parents had two choices for educating their children: a private school or the local public school. But the state or province mandated—and still does—that children from approximately five years old to youth in their teens had to attend either of the two schools. Now there are a variety of choices:

- Government schools—schools most commonly known as public schools and controlled by state and local governments.
- Charter schools—schools permitted to operate with individual, corporate, or government ownership, funded by state or provincial taxes, and to educate in non-traditional ways.
- Alternative public schools—Christian or other religious schools that function within the structures of a public school board (e.g., Edmonton or Red Deer, Alberta).
- Private or independent schools—schools governed by a society of supporters (parents and others) or by a founder and followers of a certain philosophy of education.
- Parochial schools—schools governed by a denomination or independent church.
- Home schools—schools wherein one or both parents teach the children, usually in the home.
- Virtual schools—systems of education that can be purchased using the Web or other electronic transfer.

At the root of this array of choices is a growing dissatisfaction with public schools. In the past, the public school in both Canada and the United States was seen as the place to enculturate society's youth into a generally accepted common moral order and a vision of a good society. This common school would draw in immigrants with differing languages and subcultures into one vision of a good society. It would also be the place where the poor and the rich would have equal opportunity to learn.

Now there is little agreement about what that “good society” is; besides, multiculturalism emphasizes the protection of the peculiar differences among cultures so that *pluralism* and *tolerance* trump the word *common*. Within cities, suburbs, and rural areas, there is injustice in opportunity, facilities, and teaching prowess. Even within a given school, there are competing visions of what constitutes a good society and what kind of education is needed to achieve it.

With the proliferation of choices, the CRC needs to help its parents make wise choices for the education of its children. The church needs to help parents be discerning, offering advice and more.

The “more” ought to include a specific financial plan for a congregation to support parents so that all the children have access to this Reformed education. Parents with limited resources essentially do not have a choice. What is most discouraging is that the

disparity between those who can afford the cost of tuition and those who cannot often falls along racial lines. When race, class, and poverty mix, there is real potential for tragic conflict between brothers and sisters in Christ. Synod 2003 adopted the recommendation that congregations show their commitment to diversity and justice by communally providing the funds so that all the church's children and youth can benefit from a Reformed day school education.

Congregations must also encourage their members to work for greater educational justice in North America. Good governments seek to provide balanced support for all citizens, especially by providing for the poor. In the public arena, parents living in poverty have very limited choices for educating their children. Churches need to educate their people to seek justice for other people's children. It is unjust to have Christian education only available for only the well-to-do.

Supporting Christian Schools Today

With its confessional commitment to perpetuating a Reformed Christian worldview in its churches and children, a commitment other denominations envy, how can the CRC tune its theme songs of covenant, kingdom, and mission to today's circumstances? In CRC churches where there are "divisions and brokenness, where not all families have equal resources, commitments, and sensitivities regarding Christian day school education" (*Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 631), how do we work together, support each other, hold together?

If the CRC wants to bear compelling witness to the grand themes that every inch of creation has the stamp of God, that all of God's children need to see this through education and have their gifts tuned for service in this glorious kingdom, it cannot be neutral on the issue of Christian education. As a denomination we have again recommitted ourselves to fostering this worldview in our children.

However, inequity of resources, competing visions about the ministry of the church, and increasing choices in education have clouded this vision. Within this context, the CRC's church leaders must provide pastoral guidance by clearly and enthusiastically proclaiming the Reformed faith. If pastors and elders are hesitant about supporting Reformed Christian education, our Reformed identity is at risk in the next generation. The church and the school stand together in this Reformed witness, and must work together to address several challenges.

The Challenge of Inclusion

Although today's Christian schools are becoming ethnically and racially diverse, just as the CRC is, the number of children from racial and ethnic minority groups is far less than in public schools. Because most of the students in these Christian schools are Anglo, students in the racial minority often do not feel at home. Seldom do their parents charge overt racism, but their children *feel* excluded.

The schools need to welcome minorities and promote cultural diversity not only in profession but in practice. In addition, Christian schools need to hire staff who are from

diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to demonstrate that they want their communities to be multicultural.

The Challenge of Finances

A second barrier to inclusion in Christian schools is plainly money. The trend has been that parents pay a higher percentage of the cost of Christian education: most Reformed Christian schools now depend on parents themselves to pay over 90 percent of the school's operating revenue, in contrast to 65 percent thirty years ago. In many Christian schools, the costs have risen to the point that many parents cannot afford to pay the tuition on their own. And too often congregations have backed away from former commitments to financially support Christian day school education as a community.

Synod 2003 adopted a recommendation that calls all CRC congregations to develop plans to lower the financial barrier for access to Christian day school education and thus carry out the baptismal vow of the congregation to help nurture the child in the truth. The following features ought to be part of all congregational plans:

- Provide access for every covenant school-age child, regardless of the financial ability of the parents.
- Include Christian day school support as an essential part of the congregation's general budget, just as for youth ministry, pastors' salaries, and evangelism.
- Encourage all parents to make use of Reformed Christian schools.

Generally, communities with Christian schools offer one of two options for those who need assistance in paying the tuition: the Christian school itself has a financial aid program funded by private and church gifts, proceeds from the school's foundation or endowment, or by other tuition-paying parents who pay more than the cost of education; or the family's local church has a tuition assistance fund, either through deacon benevolence or through a Christian education fund supervised by a committee. In both models, the usual recipients are those who, through application, can demonstrate financial need. They generally receive no more than half of the tuition cost, and their aid is limited to the balance in the fund, which depends on gifts and, for foundations, the performance of investments.

However, these solutions do little to highlight the idea that a congregation has a communal obligation to offer Christian day school education to all its children. Offering financial support according to financial need is demeaning to those who must ask, and implies a sense of charity rather than fulfilling stewardship commitments made by the whole church.

How a church should carry out this financial commitment will differ between the U.S. and Canada (differing tax laws apply, for example, on donations) and between congregations. Churches need not provide 100 percent of the cost of Christian school tuition in order to be covenantal in their commitment. The cost of the education and the overall financial ability of the local church must be considered.

The most recognized plan to demonstrate the CRC's financial commitment to Christian day school education is known as the *Covenant Giving Plan*. Based on promises made at baptism, in which both parents and congregation pledge to nurture the children in faith, the Covenant Giving Plan calls for the church to pay all or most of the entire tuition for Christian day school education for *all* school-age children in the church if their parents choose to enroll them. The Covenant Plan places a line item within the general budget of the church, like the pastors' salaries or utilities, solicits contributions and pledges as revenue for this budget, and disperses money to Christian schools as it would write a check to staff or the utility company. All congregants, whether or not they have children in Christian schools, are expected to contribute.

In Appendix C of *Agenda for Synod 2005* (p. 456) is a report from Deloitte Touche, a global accounting and consulting company, that gauges the tax implications in North America for donations to churches. (Also see pages 474 – 475 of the report for a helpful list of do's and don'ts for churches interested in the model.)

For some churches, however, adopting a Covenant Giving Plan is almost impossible because the church's resources as a whole are limited. However, some churches have found creative ways for "CRC congregations and groups of churches to assist students who will contribute to a greater and richer diversity (race, economic class, special needs, etc.) in Christian schools." In one instance, a group of Christian school-supporting families left a congregation with the Covenant Plan to start a Home Missions church, and a private Christian foundation offered to supply the same tuition aid to departing families for the first year, a lesser amount the second, and so on. In another example, a classis in the CRC set up a committee to establish a fund for financial assistance to churches facing difficult financial situations in meeting their budgets which included the Covenant Plan.

The Challenge of Choice

The first responsibility of a congregation is to see to it that all its children have the opportunity to receive an education in a Christian school. The committee believes that in a Christian school, children see a Christian worldview from different angles, test that worldview in a safe place, and learn from others the nuances of practicing that faith in a fallen world. In a Christian school students also have the responsibility to both learn from and give to others, thus underscoring the covenantal promise their parents make at baptism: "We do, God helping us."

Yet even when the opportunity and resources for Christian education are present, some CRC parents will make other choices. In these situations, congregations and parents must support each other. For example, some believe that the best way to carry out their covenantal obligations is to instruct their children at home. Congregations must respect this choice, and support them with prayer and encouragement to teach a Reformed view of the world. They also must encourage cooperation between Reformed homeschoolers and Reformed Christian schools. In the same way that parents who choose Christian day schools need to support homeschoolers, homeschoolers need to support Christian day school education. Christian education of all children in the congregation is a communal task.

The Challenge of Small Churches

One of the reactions of Synod 2003 to this committee's initial report was that the report assumed a context of *clusters* of churches rather than the small and/or isolated church. Must small, isolated churches be held to the same expectations for providing Christian day school education?

The study committee sent a survey to CRC churches that have fewer than 150 members; 26 responded. It learned that although these churches are small, they are not necessarily isolated: 18 had access to Christian schools. The same number of congregations said a "significant number of parents" used the public schools. When these small churches were asked what they did to implement Article 71 of the Church Order about "establishing Christian schools" or helping the children "learn a Reformed vision of life," 23 percent said they do little or nothing; 47 percent thought they did this through church youth programs; a few others said they encouraged the use of Christian schools.

We believe that all congregations need to encourage parents to establish Christian schools in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ's lordship is taught. For small churches that are financially unable to support Christian day school education, we believe there is a communal responsibility for the classes (organized regions) of the CRC to provide this financial assistance.

Practically, we offer small congregations the following advice:

- Continue to encourage preaching that is consistent with a Reformed world-and-life view.
- Urge parents to have their children educated in harmony with that vision.
- Encourage parents who need to supplement day school or home school materials with curriculum available from Christian Schools International or regional Reformed Christian school agencies.
- Use materials from Faith Alive Christian Resources based on a Reformed worldview.
- Encourage youth to attend Reformed Christian colleges by means of providing campus visits and scholarships.
- In adult education, promote the vision of Reformed Christian education through speakers, discussions of materials, and library offerings.

The Challenge of Balancing Christian Education and Evangelism

We see Christian education and evangelism as complementary, equally important, flowing from a Reformed understanding of discipleship. So they should get equal emphasis in the church. Clearly the church is the primary institution for evangelism, with the Christian school cooperating in this task; the Christian school is the primary institution for educating children in a full-orbed discipleship in all spheres of life. Both

institutions need to cooperate in, and be committed to, an explicitly Reformed set of beliefs and worldview grounded in the Bible.

In some mission situations, it may be appropriate for the official church to establish and support schools, as the CRC did in New Mexico, for example. It may also be worthwhile in some church plant situations to establish a Christian school that *precedes*, and may lead to, a fellowship of believers. If one sees North America itself as a mission field, just the mere presence of Christian day schools in our public square is an evangelistic witness to the power of the gospel of the kingdom.

Christian Reformed World Missions sees educational mission work as an important means of reaching many people with the gospel. CRWM supports the educational work of missionaries all over the world—Honduras, Nigeria, Lithuania, Japan, Nicaragua, Haiti, Hungary, the Dominican Republic. These schools have complementary educational and evangelistic goals. At the university level, people in these countries need to be educated into a discipleship that is more than piety. Stephen Noll, a professor at Uganda Christian University, says, “A new generation is seeking reality in their faith in the context of a revived and developing society.”

Although the CRC does not control Christian day schools, we think the denomination ought to encourage CRC members involved in Christian education to consider themselves evangelistic in three ways:

- in their personal lives as teachers to model Christ-following and to nurture it in their students;
- in their vocations as teachers to demonstrate the lordship of Jesus Christ in their subject areas; and
- in direct evangelism, such as in mission situations, teaching English as a second language, or having informal conversations with students.

The same Reformed witness ought to occur in North American Reformed colleges and universities. These Reformed institutions of higher learning are a bright witness to the true Light; they bear witness to an integral vision of Christian discipleship of the mind. We also recommend that Calvin Theological Seminary instruct its students in the CRC’s confessional commitment to Christian education.

Conclusion

Synod 2005 accepted all the recommendations of this report. The CRC judged Christian day school education to be an essential ministry of the denomination. Christian schools are necessary to help the CRC carry out its full-orbed, Reformed vision of Christian discipleship: God calls people to service in all vocations, not just the gospel ministry. Synod 1997 affirmed this idea when it adopted a new vision and mission statement for the church; under the category of kingdom extension, it said that the “CRC will develop a deeper understanding of and response to God’s claim to obedience in all areas of our lives (business, labor, government, media, health, education, justice, peace, affluence, pursuit of pleasure, earth keeping, racial relationships, etc.)” (*Agenda for Synod 1997*, p. 61). This calls for training by Christian schools at all levels.

Christian schools help the CRC train successive generations for leadership and membership in the church and for broader kingdom service. It is the Christian school, not the local church, that prepares Christians for discipleship in science, politics, art, medicine, and law. Congregations need to proclaim this vision of Christian discipleship and support Christian schools with their prayers and offerings. Throughout its history, the CRC has used Reformed Christian schools to teach its children what discipleship means, what faith in Christ has to do with the world, and what following the Lord to extend his rule in the world means. For the sake of Christ's kingdom, it needs to perpetuate this heritage in the future.

Summary of Recommendations

(It is in approved "recommendations" that the CRC establishes its positions as a denomination. Some of these recommendations are procedural; most are substantive. In the full report, many of these recommendations have "grounds" or a rationale for accepting them. Following is a summary of substantive recommendations from Synods 2003 and 2005.)

Synod 2003:

1. While "respecting the various educational choices made in good faith by families," the CRC reaffirms its "commitment to and promotion of Christian day school education from the elementary level through college and university."
2. The CRC reaffirms "that the Reformed emphasis on the covenant and the kingdom of God are foundational for Reformed Christian schools" and affirms mission as an additional foundational block.
3. The CRC "urges church councils to develop and promote plans for congregational financial support of Reformed Christian day school education" and to seek accounting and legal advice in drafting these plans.
4. The CRC encourages its "congregations and groups of churches to assist students who will contribute to a greater and richer diversity in Christian schools (in economic status, class, race, ethnicity, special needs)."
5. The CRC adopts the following reworded Article 71 of the Church Order: "The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ's lordship over all creation is clearly taught. The council shall also urge parents to have their children educated in harmony with this vision according to the demands of the covenant."
6. The CRC urges "pastors and councils to encourage the young people of their churches to attend Reformed Christian institutions of higher learning wherever possible."

Synod 2005:

7. The CRC “declares that the purpose of all Christian education, in the home, in the church, and in the school, is to tell the story of God, his people, and his world, with the goal that children become active participants in that story and accept as their own the mission of God’s people in his world.”
8. The CRC advises its members and churches “to consider the responsibilities they bear for Christian education and for doing evangelism as equally important and complementary.”
9. The CRC “urges all parents, as they face an increasing number of options for educating their children,” to (a) examine whether the schools are teaching “the Lordship of Christ over all creation,” (b) help these schools “retain their Reformed identity,” and (c) be “truly inclusive communities where diversity does not create unnecessary barriers to any student’s full involvement in the life of the school.”
10. The CRC advises its small churches to, “where possible,” encourage parents to establish Christian schools, and, if not possible, to encourage parents to “supplement the day school education” with Christian curriculum from Reformed Christian education publishers, promote the vision of Reformed Christian education in adult classes, and encourage young people to attend Reformed Christian colleges.
11. The CRC (a) declares that Christian schooling is a vital part of the CRC’s mission in the world as part of the denominational ministries in North America and beyond, (b) encourages its members in Christian education (from pre-K through college) “to consider their calling to be evangelists” in their witness to Christ’s lordship to their students, and (c) calls for all mission activity to “be guided by an integral vision of Christian discipleship” that leads to Christian communities and congregations.

Discussion Questions

1. “Parents are the only ones who are responsible for the education of their children. The church and the state ought to keep their noses out of this fundamental responsibility.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? What role, if any, do government and the church have?
2. In your community, are the three legs of the youth nurture stool—church, home, and Christian school—of equal length? Is that the way it ought to be? If the legs are of unequal length, which is the longest and which is the shortest? Do you agree or disagree

that media influence (movies, TV, Internet, music, advertisements) is stronger than the three legs in teaching our youth?

3. The report claims that the vow the congregation takes at baptism, especially to “help instruct them in the faith,” extends to Christian day school education. It is more than Sunday school, catechism, GEMS, Cadets. Do you accept that claim? Why or why not?

4. Following is Church Order Article 71 prior to 2003:

“The Council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools and shall urge parents to have their children instructed in these schools according to the demands of the covenant.”

The adopted change in the same article by Synod 2003 follows, with the added language in italics:

“The Council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools *in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ’s lordship over all creation is clearly taught.* The council shall also urge parents *to have their children educated in harmony with this vision* according to the demands of the covenant.”

What difference does this make, if any, in the church’s support of Christian day schools?

5. If you are in a small congregation that would have great difficulty starting a Christian school, how can your church respond to Article 71?

6. “Christian day schools are just private ghettos of education and hide young people from the world that Christ rules. CRC kids and their parents ought to be evangelizing within and transforming public schools. Besides, there are many Christian teachers in public schools.” How do you respond to this comment? How do you assess the claim that youth can best be equipped to evangelize through attending public schools?

7. In the report, *mission* is added to the CRC’s historical claim that Christian schools are based on the covenant and help the church teach youth the full-orbed idea of the *kingdom*. Do you agree with the report? To what degree should Christian schools carry out the Great Commission?

8. “My child just does not fit in the Christian school (is bullied; gets teased for being “different”; doesn’t get the help he/she needs for learning; etc.). It’s not a welcoming place.” What should a congregation do if one of its families has this experience?

9. “Christian schools do not expose children to a variety of people and worldviews, and therefore they have difficulty dealing with the “world out there” when they graduate.” How do you react to this statement?

10. Synod agreed already in 2003 that all CRCs ought to develop financial plans so that all children in the church may benefit from Christian education. The Covenant Giving Plan calls on the whole church, not just participating parents, to fund Christian education just as it does Sunday school or the pastors’ salaries. Do you accept the arguments for the Covenant Plan? Why or why not?

11. Of all the temptations in our current culture (individualism, consumerism, relativism, etc.), which is the most injurious to the church’s ministry of educating its youth? What should the church do about it?