

T h e r o l e o f F a i t h

**in the lives of young people
in the Canadian Reformed
Churches**

i n t h e F r a s e r V a l l e y



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The committee members have published this report in order to serve their church community and have made all attempts to keep it affordable for every one. They will reap no monetary benefit, but do hope to cover the cost of producing this document.

To maintain the integrity of the responses to the survey they should be read in the context of the whole report.

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Introduction

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck."

Mark 9:36 & 37 & 42

During the summer of 1995 several of the undersigned found ourselves engaged in a discussion about the difficulties young people in our churches face today. One of the topics of discussion was "What does it mean that 'faith comes by hearing'?"

Since each of us, whether as parent, teacher or pastor, is in some way involved as a teacher of children and teens, each has a vital interest in answering what this question means in the life of our Canadian Reformed young people. It seems natural that all parents would be interested in reflecting on what means the Lord uses to cause faith to develop in our children. They are on their way to mature adulthood and a meaningful place in their church community and society at large, but in the process they often hurt, are confused, are rebellious or noncommittal.

We share a concern about their spiritual growth as it relates to their lifestyles. We set up an ad hoc committee and have had regular meetings since then. To keep itself on task, this committee drew up a mandate with specific goals. For quite some time we worked quietly, hoping to lay some firm groundwork before going public.

Our mandate can be summarized as follows:

1. To study the role of faith in the lives of young people in the Canadian Reformed churches of the Fraser Valley and to consider the following four areas:
 - a. scriptural principles
 - b. stages of faith development
 - c. cultural influences and traditions, attitudes and lifestyles
 - d. local context
2. To formulate and conduct a survey among the young people of our church communities to consider their experiences regarding the instruction in the Christian faith by parents, teachers and ministers; the modeling in the Christian faith by parents, teachers and ministers; the development, the meaning and the importance of their faith; and their joys and frustrations in the church.
3. To present the findings of the study to the Canadian Reformed community in the Fraser Valley in order to share the results and to get feedback.
4. To identify and celebrate strengths and consider recommendations for improvements helpful to parents, teachers and office bearers.

Rev. Jack Moesker delineated the covenant of grace as the Biblical foundation of any faith development and the necessity of reflecting on this faith development. Hugo VanderHoek focused on some literature that deals with the development of faith in children. Pieter Torenvliet considered our unique cultural influences and traditions, attitudes and lifestyles by reflecting on the past 45 years of Canadian Reformed history since our post-W.W.II immigration to the Fraser Valley. Sarah Vandergugten researched the more recent local context, highlighting activities - both positive and negative - in which our young people have been involved, as these have been reported in the local Church News, Information, and school newsletters.

Simultaneously, we began research for the drafting of the survey. What we set out to do has been done before in other settings. In December 1983, the Committee of the Central Diaconal Conference of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) published the results of a survey done among young people of the same churches¹. In the introduction A. Kooij wrote,

"The reader is of course cautioned not to confuse norm and fact. A collection of facts may not be used, based on the greatest common denominator, to prescribe whether something is right or wrong. If sixty per cent of the young people report a certain behavioral pattern, that doesn't make that behaviour normative. Results from a survey have to be used in a common sense manner; they only report on trends.

On the other hand, it would not be wise if we as adults in the lives of our young people would only want to know about the norms and put our heads in the sand when it comes to the real world in which the young people live. We can only serve them effectively if we know where they are at, what occupies their minds and how they view their world. Effective nurturing requires knowledge of the sheep and the lambs.

The Dutch researchers who conducted the survey introduced their intent saying:

"In order to understand the youth of the church it is important to know what they think about. We want to hear how they speak about the things that matter to them and what role their faith plays in it. We hope that this will be helpful to the young people themselves and that we as adults will learn to understand them better. We would be happy if the information we provide might improve communication between parents and children."

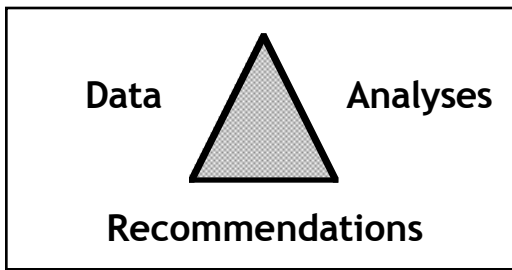
This survey of the role of faith in the lives of young people in the Canadian Reformed Churches of the Fraser Valley follows these same principles.

It attempts to draw an overall picture of the world in which our young people live and give a profile of our teenage community.

It offers the young people's opinions about things that concern them.

It is intended as a tool for parents, office bearers and teachers to help them in their communication with the young people in their trust.

¹ Jongeren en geloof, 'Dienst', 1984, Vol 32, nr 1.



Research reports will ordinarily have three sections: data, analyses and recommendations. This report is unlike the usual research projects in that it omits the final chapter with recommendations. It has been our conscious decision not to publish such a chapter in this report, though we can think of quite a number of recommendations that become readily apparent from the survey responses.

In chapter one, two and three we present a great deal of data. Chapter three and four contain analyses of the data as well. The summary in chapter four makes a beginning at linking the data from the survey to some of the information of the articles in chapter one. To apply the potential of this report to one's own situation the reader will need to go the next step. For example, there is much to be gained by parents when they compare what they know about their own children and what they learn in this report to the stages of faith development as they are described in chapter two.

It is important to us as researchers that parents, office bearers, teachers and school board trustees will be able to do some of this work themselves without being prompted by what recommendations we would make. It is our hope that specific recommendations will be formulated as a result of discussions that this report may engender.

May our cooperative efforts serve the good of our Canadian Reformed community in the Fraser Valley and beyond. Our goal is to serve this church community and above all give honour to the Lord of the church. More than to anyone else, the youth of the church belong to Him.

We thank the members of the community who have expressed their interest and support for our work. It is our prayer that the information provided here will be seriously studied, considered and used by all the adults who play a role in the lives of our young people.

Soli Deo Gloria

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1 Background

I will sing a new song to you, O God; on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you, to the One who gives victory to kings who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword. Deliver me and rescue me from the hands of foreigners whose mouths are full of lies whose right hands are deceitful. Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace. Our barns will be filled with every kind of provision Our sheep will increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields; our oxen will draw heavy loads. There will be no breaching of walls no going into captivity, no cry of distress in our streets. Blessed are the people of whom this is true; blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.

Ps. 144:9 - 14

Scriptural principles

The covenant of grace as basic principle.

The covenant is the basic principle behind all instruction of the youth of the church in the essentials of the Christian faith, and the call to a heartfelt faith. A covenant is a legally established relationship between two parties. The Bible refers to the covenant of marriage in Malachi 2:14. Promises and obligations are set in place to which both parties are bound. In the covenant of grace, the parties are God and believers and their children. Children are included with their parents and so are reckoned as heirs of the treasures of God's grace in the kingdom. In Mark 10:14 Jesus says, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*

The covenant originates with God. In His grace He initiated the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. In Gen. 17:7 the LORD says: *“I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants ... to be God to you and your descendant after you...”*

The covenant is a two-way street. There are obligations within the covenant of grace that are to be fulfilled if the blessings promised are to be received. In Gen. 17:9 God says to Abraham, *“As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.”* Keeping the covenant means keeping faith in the promises of the God of the covenant and therefore also seeking to walk in His ways. It also includes passing that covenantal faith and repentant walk of life on to the next generation, since the LORD includes the descendants throughout their generations in the covenant of grace. In Gen. 18:19 the LORD says that He has chosen Abraham *“that He may charge His children and His household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has promised him.”* Children of believers are “automatically” included in the covenant with their parents, but as they become responsible for themselves, they are not “automatically” recipients of the covenant blessings. They need to appropriate the covenant promises and blessings by a living faith. They need to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. As the Form for the Baptism of Infants states (p.584 Book of Praise), *“First, we and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we are born again.”* Regeneration is necessary, also for children of the covenant. They need to come to and

continue in living faith to receive what was promised them. As the Lord Jesus Christ said in John 3:3, *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* Regeneration is the ultimate aim of Christian nurture.

The implications of this for parents

Believing parents therefore are obliged to convey to their children the privilege of being covenant-children, and also the necessity of living according to God's will and Word in order to receive the covenant blessings. The LORD says in Deut.6:6 and 7, *"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."* In the Form for Marriage (p. 637 Book of Praise) it is stated that part of the purpose of marriage is to continue and increase the human race, and it is stated then that, "if it pleases God to give them children, they shall nurture these children in the true knowledge and fear of the Lord." This obligation of believing parents is repeated in the Form for Baptism (p.587 Book of Praise) where the parents are asked to answer positively to the question: "...do you promise as father and as mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?" This is in line with the promise made in Psalm 78, where one generation promises to make known the blessings and obligations of the covenant to the next generation. *"We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and His might, and the wonders He has wrought. He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise to tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments..."* (4-7)

The knowledge of God's works and laws are not only to be passed on in such a way that the children keep the commandments, but before that yet, that they "should set their hope in God". This is not only an Old Testament obligation, but is repeated by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:4: *"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and fear of the Lord."* Parents are warned that they ought not to neglect or improperly fulfill their obligation with respect to their children.

The true aim of instruction

The special invitation and command of the covenant is basically contained in Prov. 23:26, *"My son (or daughter), give me your heart."* A life of humble repentance and obedience to God's commandments is certainly the issue of a heart that has been given to God. It says in Prov.3:1, *"My son do not forget my teaching, but keep my commandments in your heart."* However, the goal of all instruction of covenant children in home and church and Christian school is that they may give their hearts to their gracious covenant God. In other words, the aim of all Christian instruction is that they have the knowledge they need to **love** their God.

Be sober about the results of instruction

Parents cannot actually give their children faith or even force their children to believe. They have good reason to expect their children to follow in the way of the covenant, since their children have also received the promise at baptism that the Holy Spirit will work in their hearts.

But there is no guarantee that the children will actually embrace the promises and obligations of the covenant. There can be many other things that influence them to reject those promises and obligations. Not all covenant children are elect people of God. This should make us sober in our consideration of the transmission of the faith. There is no method which can guarantee that all covenant children will come to faith. On the other hand, we certainly need to consider how best we can give our children what is needed to appropriate the covenant promises and obligations for themselves. Having done our best, we can leave the rest to the Lord, praying as righteous Job did for his children (Job 1).

Covenant sanctions

If a child of believing parents willfully refuses to walk in the way of the covenant, God will face him with covenant sanctions. This is mentioned among other places in Lev.26:27 where the LORD says to His covenant people, *“If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over.”* And in Matt-10:15 Lord says to covenant people who refuse to accept His teaching, *“But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you”* ().

Good and bad instruction

Good transmission of the covenant promises and obligations to children is mentioned positively in Scripture. In 2 Tim. 1:5 where the apostle writes to Timothy, *“I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”* Paul also comments in 2 Tim.3:15 how Timothy knew the Scriptures which are able to make wise for salvation from infancy. For the failure to transmit what is required to believe, we only need to turn to the book of Judges, chapter 2: 10 and 11 where it says, *“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what He had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.”* There was no transmission of the knowledge of the promises or obligations of the covenant. The result, time and again in the book of Judges and the further history of Israel, was disaster for the next generation and for the church. Think also of the sin of Eli, who did not give good and firm guidance to his sons. But Samuel also, though he had seen what happened with Eli and his sons, was not able to communicate the faith to his own sons. They acted no different than the sons of Eli. This points not only to the need to have instruction in the ways of the Lord, but also the need to consider how the knowledge necessary for faith is to be passed on to the next generation.

The Synod of Dordt: decisions about instruction in faith.

The Synod of Dordt spent quite some time deliberating over the instruction of the youth of the church. Synod decided during its seventeenth sitting on November 30, 1618:

“In order that Christian youth, from early years onwards, may be carefully instructed in the fundamentals of the true religion and filled with true godliness, it is necessary that they be instructed in three ways: in the homes by the parents, in the schools by the teachers, and in the churches by the ministers, elders and readers or visitors (others appointed to instruct)...

The task of the parents is to instruct their children and whole household in the basics of the Christian religion, to do their best to instruct according to each's understanding, and to earnestly exhort to the fear of God and to godliness, to guide to holy private prayer, to take along to the preaching of the Divine Word, to discuss the sermons heard, especially the catechetical sermons, to read aloud or have read aloud parts of Holy Scripture, to have the most excellent parts of Scripture memorized by heart and to explain these passages so they are understandable to the youth, and thus to prepare them for further catechetical instruction and to confirm, encourage and strengthen them in that instruction. All parents must be seriously exhorted and admonished to this obligation publicly in the preaching as well as privately both at the visit before the Lord's Supper as well as on other proper occasions by ministers, elders and visitors. If there are parents who have professed the Reformed faith but who are found to be negligent in this holy work they shall be strongly admonished by the minister and censured by the consistory so they may again perform their obligations towards their children ...

The task of the teachers shall be to instruct their pupils at least twice a week, according to their years and understanding, in order to not only learn the basics of the catechism outwardly, but especially to understand it. To that end three formulations of the catechism suited to the various stages of youth shall be used. The first shall be for the young children, containing the Twelve Articles of the faith, the ten commandments, the Lord's prayer, and the sacraments and church discipline, along with some short prayers and simple questions about the catechism. Some excellent parts of Scripture could be added, to encourage to godliness. The second will be a short summary of the Heidelberg Catechism used in our churches ... The third shall be the Heidelberg Catechism adopted by our churches and in which those who have come to the age of discernment shall be instructed ...

The task of the ministers shall be to preach the catechism publicly, to keep these sermons fairly short, and to preach according to the understanding not only of the adults, but also of the youth of the church ... It shall also be the task of the ministers to go with an elder to all who are able to be instructed, of the church as well as other adults, and to call them together in a home or in the church to be instructed together in the main parts of the Christian faith, and according to understanding and ability instruct in the catechism and discuss the catechism sermons with them and make sure that all come to a clear and full knowledge of the catechism..."

Basic content of instruction

From the decisions of Dordt above, and especially from the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism, some of the basic content of instruction comes to light. The second question and answer of Lord's Day one of the catechism states:

"What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?

First, how great my sins and misery are; second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance." This is a Scriptural approach to the knowledge of our comfort in Christ. You find a similar setup (sin, deliverance and thankfulness) in Psalm 130 and in the whole book of Romans. This is the approach to Christian faith which reaches the heart.

Practice is necessary for good instruction.

It is important for a child not only to learn the truth, but also to see how it lives and is practiced by others around him. This is the thrust of what it says in Deut. 6:7 when it speaks about impressing the law of the LORD on your children when you sit at home or walk along the road or when you lie down or sit up. This is also the point, for instance, in Prov. 14:26. The first part of that verse states, *"He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress."* That means that when a parent places great trust in God in his daily life and shows respect for His will, that parent fortifies his child against all sorts of attacks of the sworn enemies - the devil, the world and one's own sinful flesh. Faith in that family is a fortress which keeps out disaster. And therefore the verse continues, *"... and for his children it will be a refuge."* Children are made secure when parents show Christian hope and values in their own lives. It says in Prov. 20:11 that *"even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right."* In other words, a child's conduct will generally reflect the influences to which he has been exposed. If he has heard all the right words, but did not see what he heard in action in those around him, that will show in his actions as well.

Communication is necessary

What is also needed to transmit the faith is good communication between adults and youth. When the apostle commands fathers in Eph.6:4 not to provoke their children to anger or not to exasperate their children, it means that they are to leave room for their children to express themselves and to communicate with them. Never listening, only commanding, can exasperate children. Good, open communication is a scriptural requirement for transmission of the faith to the next generation. Adults need to listen and to take interest and time in order to understand and empathize with the struggles of the youth in today's world and to help them come to grips with faith and the implications of faith for their lives.

Stages of faith development ²

Faith is a gift of God.

“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”.

Eph. 2: 6-10.

Faith develops.

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Eph. 4:14 - 16

An adult's faith differs from that of a child in that the adult has additional life experience and knowledge. Because the child knows relatively little and has not experienced the love and help of his Lord as much, his faith is very vulnerable; he can easily be influenced and swayed. (Matth. 18:6)

The fact that faith needs to grow and develop along with the person's growth toward mature adulthood does not mean that faith of a later stage is any better. A child's faith is not inferior to that of an adult, because the knowledge and life experience are not essential. Essential is the surety of hope and the certainty of what is not seen (Ps. 78:7, Acts 16: 31). In their trust in the LORD, many children are examples to adults.

Faith is a matter of the whole person. It deals with the mind, the emotions and the will: head, heart and hands (summary of the law Deut. 6:5, Deut. 10:12, Deut. 11:13, Deut. 13:3, Deut. 26:16, Deut. 30:2). Faith nurturing has to pay attention to all of these parts of the person's being: the feelings of the child toward the LORD and His service; the child's personality; his knowledge and insight in matters of the faith; his potential and his abilities.

² This section summarizes some of the literature that has been published on this topic. (See the bibliography)

Development of faith ³

Persons learn first through their experiences, then by imaging (stories), and last of all through the use of signs (conceptual language). For faith, it is therefore especially important to acknowledge that the most significant and fundamental form of learning is experience. Later a person may 'image' that experience, and even later conceptualize it. We begin by experiencing life in a community which seeks the good of others, then we learn the story, for example that of the Good Samaritan. Finally, through reflection on our experience, we symbolically conceptualize the community of God in terms of love, justice and equality. Each of these steps in learning occurs in order, and each is essential for the following step. But at the beginning is experience.

We should not underestimate the importance experience has in the shaping of our lives. Experiences in a community of faith are important for the development of the faith. We need to bring our experiences and offer them to others, not as a matter of mere human feelings, but under the judgment and inspiration of the Gospel.

Christian faith by its own nature, demands conversion. Conversion is turning from 'faith given' (through nurture) to 'faith owned'. Conversion (through a nurturing process) progresses through doubt and intellectual questioning, to experience, illumination, certainty and identity. True conversion involves personal and social life lived based on God's will.

Stages of Development

Cognitive development.

Bible study / education plays an important role in the first twelve years of a child's life. A strong foundation of knowledge needs to be constructed for use in the following years. The experiences of these years will always need to relate knowledge to the emotions of love and trust and joy, etc.

Up to age 12, a child thinks in fairly concrete terms. He can only consider what he sees, hears, feels, tastes and smells. The meaning of words such as sin, grace, justification, etc. can only be explained by means of concrete examples. Sin is what David did with Bathsheba and Uriah. Grace is receiving a free gift which you do not deserve, as the murderer on the cross did. The child's difficulty in thinking abstractly is the reason that most of a church service is beyond his grasp. Not only does he understand little of the Bible reading and sermon, also the words of the songs are generally too difficult.

The period of realism begins around age 9. The concepts of time and distance are well enough developed and the imagination is no longer boundless. The children are very inquisitive and have a good memory. They begin to see cause and effect. This is the time to provide more extensive Bible knowledge. They are ready to learn about the meaning and importance of people and events in the history of salvation.

The ability to think abstractly begins in early adolescence. Greater understanding of Biblical terms and concepts needs to be attained. These needs to be understood in relation to the concerns of regular, daily life.

Around age 15, reasoning skills are developed to such an extent that parts of sermons can be fairly well understood. The young adolescent learns to draw his own conclusions, and as a result he becomes able to form his own opinions and talk about them in discussions. This is a good time to begin participation in Young People's Societies.

³ Vrijmoed - de Jong

Social development.

Faith has a personal and a social aspect. Jesus teaches us to say 'our Father' and Paul calls the saints to strengthen and encourage one another. Christians need the work of the Holy Spirit and the support of each other to receive and keep the faith.

The 1 - 4 year old is centred on self. To develop his faith he needs the confirmation of parents and other family members.

The 5 - 10 year old is more sensitive to the togetherness in groups during worship, song and prayer. He especially needs the appeal to the emotions.

From age 10 into puberty the communal aspect of religious experience outside the family increases in importance.

During puberty the direction and attitude of the peer group and social environment become crucially important. It is very desirable that during this time the child belongs to a group which is active in positive activities. Young people at this age are very sensitive to communal expression of faith in the congregation. They need forms of song and prayer and witness that are fresh and stimulating, and that allow for personal expression of the faith experience.

The development of conscience.

The development of conscience ought to be based on Biblical values and norms regarding justice and injustice, good and evil, love and rejection. The main factor is the modeling of the parents in their daily lives. It is this modeling and the accompanying Biblical instruction that develop the awareness of sin.

- 1 Before age 3 a child has no awareness of sin. He only links the parents' approval or disapproval with certain things that should or should not be done.
- 2 At age 3 - 6 the child connects the command or prohibition with the person of the parent. (Dad does not allow that). He still does not understand sin as something that is an offense in itself.
- 3 In the period of age 6 - 9 the awareness grows. The child internalizes the commands and prohibitions and learns to let that direct his behaviour. If he does not live by a certain rule he feels guilty; with that the awareness of sin and guilt begins. This is the time to emphasize the concepts of sin, salvation and forgiveness. Now the stories of Christ's coming, His suffering, death and resurrection are much better understood along with stories about people who came with their guilt to Jesus to ask for His forgiveness.
- 4 During the ages 10 - 16 the child begins to apply those rules and laws to situations of which he has no prior experience. The conscience can be very strict and black and white. He will on purpose get into big arguments with his parents in order to test whether he wants those rules and laws to indeed guide his life. He knows the rules but needs to make them his own.
- 5 The conscience of the young adult matures and ripens, guided by God's Word and His Holy Spirit to give him the courage to make his own decisions. His personal trust in God is very important at this last stage.

Styles of faith ⁴

One style of faith is not better than another just as a young tree with one ring is no less a tree than an older one with four hundred rings. Experienced faith is not an incomplete faith. One seeks to act with other believers in community and hence to expand into new styles of faith, not so as to possess better or greater faith, but only to mature in faith.

For a tree to grow it needs a proper environment: light, air, food, space, etc. A poor environment arrests the growth of the tree. So it is with the nurturing of faith.

Just like the growth of a tree, growth in faith is a slow process which continually adds to what it already has. Progression from one style of faith to another does not discard the former but holds on to it and builds on it.

Experienced faith (usually during preschool and early childhood)

Experience is a foundation of faith: a person first learns Christ not as a theological affirmation but as an subjective experience. Experiences of trust, love, and acceptance are important to Christian faith. *“Be doers of the word, not hearers only; prove to me that the faith you speak of is real though not accompanied by deeds, and by my deeds I will prove you my faith.”* (James 2:18) God reveals Himself in His Word and His Works; it is first of all in His deeds that we begin to know Him.

God’s self revelation is an interaction with us which He has initiated. To be concerned about another’s faith is to share our faith with them in word and deed, and to permit them to share their faith with us in similar ways. We can share and respond, but the character of another’s faith can’t be determined. What we can do is provide an environment of sharing and interaction. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is important that we pray for the working of the Spirit in our children’s hearts.

Affiliative faith (usually childhood and early adolescence)

The person seeks to act with others in an accepting community with a clear sense of identity.

Affiliative faith has three characteristics:

1 A need to belong: We need to feel that we belong to a community and that through our active participation, we can make a contribution to its life. Persons with affiliative faith need to participate in the community’s activities, such as serving at a fellowship meal, singing in a choir, having a part in a Christmas celebration, participating in a service project, belonging to a group in the church where they know everyone’s name and where they will be missed when absent. Of crucial importance is the fact that we are wanted, needed, accepted and important to a community.

2 The importance of the heart, the feeling aspect: In terms of faith, actions in the realm of the affections are prior to acts of thinking. This is why participation in the arts - drama, music, painting, story telling - are important to the faith. Ceremonies and rituals are important because they are opportunities to act in ways that enhance the religious affections. Opportunities for experiencing awe, wonder, and mystery are needed by all of us.

3 A sense of authority and identity: The church must constantly be aware of its story and its tradition. We need to hear and tell that story, and we need to act so as to internalize our story. While faith is first experienced enactively, it is next experienced in images or stories. Learning the community’s story is, therefore, an essential of the faith.

⁴ Westerhoff

Searching faith (usually late adolescence)

Searching faith has three characteristics:

1 There is much doubt and/or critical judgment, the need to act over against the understanding of faith acquired earlier. In order to move from an understanding of faith that belongs to the community to an understanding of faith that is our own, we need to doubt and question that faith. At this point the 'religion of the head' becomes equally important to the 'religion of the heart'. Acts of the intellect, critical judgment, and inquiry into the meanings and purposes of the story and the ways by which the community of faith lives, are essential

2 Experimentation is common. There is a need to explore alternatives to our earlier understandings and ways and a need to test our own traditions by learning about others

3 There exists a strong need to commit our lives to persons and causes: young people may seem sometimes fickle, giving themselves to one ideology after the other, sometimes in rapid succession and on occasion in contradiction. That's how we learn commitment.

Owned faith (Usually early adulthood)

The movement from experienced faith and affiliative faith through searching faith to owned faith is what historically has been called 'conversion'.

Conversion (gradual or dramatic) involves a major change in a person's thinking, feeling, and will: his behaviour and needs are obviously different. There is a desire to put faith into personal and social action. Typically, persons with owned faith want to witness to that faith in both word and deed. They struggle to eliminate any dissonance between their faith as stated in their beliefs and their actions in the world. *"Whoever claims to be dwelling in Christ, binds himself to live as Christ did."* (1 John 2:6)

Owned faith, personal faith, is God's intention for every person. To reach owned faith (our full potential) is a long pilgrimage in which we need to be provided with an environment and experiences that encourage us to act in ways that assist our growth in faith. Christ died for all, no matter what style of faith we possess. None are outside his redeeming grace.

Summary

Because people in the church are at different stages in the development of their own faith, a combination of different 'educational' approaches is needed.

The Holy Spirit uses experiences to help believers move from one style of faith to another. This happens, under the authority of Scripture, through modeling and through engagement in situations that challenging to go beyond the present style of faith.

Consider adolescents in college. Some enter college ready to act with a searching faith, and we find them enrolled in college religion courses, chapel programs, calls to commitment, study of other religions, etc. where the intellectual approach to the Bible and faith meets their needs. There are other students who have never had their needs of affiliative faith met. They are attracted to various Christian groups that emphasize belonging, the religion of the heart, and the authority of the story. These students will give hours to social service projects, and they will talk about their belief.

In every church, therefore, we need a variety of educational environments and experiences that foster the expansion of faith.

Cultural influences and traditions, attitudes and lifestyles

After WWII, thousands of Dutch immigrants left the Netherlands in search of new opportunities. First WWII, and subsequently military service in Indonesia, had disillusioned many people. Unemployment was high, and numerous government restrictions appeared to prevent many people from reaching their potential. When the Dutch government offered emigration subsidies, numerous people eagerly responded. Thousands of men and women, often accompanied by their children, emigrated to Canada, one of the more popular countries of choice. Among these Dutch immigrants, there were also several thousand members of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), who settled largely in southern Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia.

Upon arriving in Canada, one of the first priorities for the Reformed immigrants was finding a suitable church community. The church struggle during the 1940s which led to the Liberation in 1944, had had a great influence on their spiritual lives, so that they were unusually sensitive to the importance of a number of doctrinal issues relevant to the Liberation. Consequently, when these immigrants visited Christian Reformed churches or Protestant Reformed churches, the same issues were often raised and vigorously debated. In neither the CRCs nor the PRCs could the new Reformed emigrants find doctrinal harmony. The only alternative, they felt, was to establish the Canadian Reformed Churches as a separate church community. On April 15, 1950 the first church was founded in Lethbridge, Alberta. Several others were founded soon after.

Looking back over more than 45 years of Canadian Reformed church history, the founding of our churches had a significant impact on the mind set of its membership. Not only were churches established as a product of their religious-cultural heritage, but also Reformed elementary and high-school were founded, specifically to educate the youth of the Canadian Reformed churches. The founding fathers of the Reformed schools were imbued with a sense of purpose and direction, because their leaders during the Liberation, such as B. Holwerda, dr. K. Schilder, dr. Van 't Veer, etc., had taught them that a strong confessional unity between the home, school and the church were of paramount importance to the spiritual health and welfare of the Reformed community. As a result of this church and school segregation, many Canadian Reformed young people primarily associated with peers of their faith and were taught exclusively by teachers and preachers of their faith. Though many laud the establishment of our unique Canadian Reformed organizations, and vigorously defend their continued existence, others have questioned whether the extent of protectionism has made the community too insular and too introverted. After 45 years, for example, the membership lists of these churches still portray a very large majority of Dutch surnames, usually at the exclusion of English or other emigrant surnames. Though the church of Smithers has actively pursued home mission among the First Nations citizens in the Bulkley Valley, most other Can.Ref. Churches have paid little more than token effort to out-reach programmes. The question is often posed: are we rooted in a doctrinal protectionism or isolationism, or have our Dutch immigrant origins left us too introverted to accept non-Dutch people into our community?

It appears that the care taken to provide our children within the largely homogeneous culture of a Canadian Reformed community, has helped to perpetuate these community standards in behaviour and profession. The original vision which led to the establishment of

Canadian Reformed churches and schools still has its consequences today. Culturally, we can still witness a homogeneous community. Many idiosyncratic and quaint habits of expression and behaviour still persist quite strongly in our churches⁵. Customs and traditions which immigrants brought with them from the Netherlands are often unquestioningly continued here. Not only are these habits a clear indication of the insular character of our churches, but they could potentially be an indication of a meaningless conservatism. Only a few churches, for example, have begun to discuss and validate the liturgical practices in their worship services.

Whenever someone wants to initiate change, others will warn that the change will only be the thin edge of a wedge, or the beginning of a slippery slope. Though change should not be entertained for change's sake, conservative resistance to change can alienate young people who may regard some of the community's traditions as meaningless baggage from the Netherlands. Will they be willing to accept traditions which cannot be validated in a Canadian context in 1997?

Cultural Traditions Unique to our Community

A number of the insular traditions referred to above are unique to the Canadian Reformed churches. Though practising Roman Catholics maintain many independent (parochial) schools, they are open to non-R.C. participation. Mennonites have a strong community spirit, but they use their schools as out-reach organizations, and also appear to have dynamic out-reach and relief programs in their churches. A question which we face today is, "How successfully have we articulated the unique character of our schools and churches so that young people will share these views openly?"

Members of the Canadian Reformed churches have a unique reformed world view which has shaped their attitudes to schooling, stewardship, and most importantly, religious culture. Rather than simply accept the liturgical practices of indigenous churches, our leaders felt called to develop an English equivalent of the Genevan psalter, in the form of the *Book of Praise*. Additionally, they maintained and developed church liturgy similar to the Calvinistic practices of 16th century Geneva which they had brought with them from the Netherlands. In these practices, the Canadian Reformed churches stand out as different, unique. Though many leaders worked hard to maintain and establish these unique practices, how well are these practices accepted and validated by the young people who have often been exposed to traditions in other church communities? How valid are differences if they are only different but not better or more biblically sound? Young people are often unwilling to accept such idiosyncrasies, especially if they appear to be inconsistent with other practices, or if they appear to rest on feeble criteria.

Attitudes and Lifestyle

The Canadian Reformed community as it was constituted during the early years of immigration relied very heavily on the services of the very few theological professionals it had in its midst: the ministers imported from the Netherlands. By and large, the average Canadian Reformed immigrant was not well educated and lacked the English skills needed to provide leadership within our community. Therefore, for many years, meetings were conducted in Dutch and minutes of these meetings were written in Dutch. Often the unique

⁵ Even though most pastors are either second or third generation Canadians, they still use a number of Dutchisms in their spoken English: e.g. some Bible names are pronounced in a Dutch fashion (Cain, Sodom, apostle, one John 3, etc.)

customs practised by the immigrant families were perceived by growing young people as simply Dutch, and not necessarily Reformed or bound to Scriptural orthodoxy. During the 1950s, for example, before many communities had their own Reformed schools, most children attended public schools. During week days they had public school friends (“Canadians”), but on Sunday they had church friends (i.e. “Non-Canadians”). For some children this was an unacceptable dichotomy. More often than not, tradition won out over children’s practices. When most of our communities managed to establish their own Christian day schools, many of these perceived social problems appeared to evaporate. But collective attitudes toward the “Canadian” neighbours appear to remain ambivalent.

Two generations of Dutch-Canadians have grown up, and thus they have put a greater distance between the present and their post-war Dutch roots and traditions. Our young people are far more active in the heterogeneous communities around us, in sports, community services, jobs, or just “hanging out.” Some are struggling with the icons of our past, because they find themselves immersed in the dynamics of a secularized world where liberalism and consumerism mark the day. They have often heard the stories about the hard times and the hard work experienced by their parents and grand-parents. They have heard about living frugally to support growing families, the church and the schools. Many other families in our communities were involved in similar struggles.

Times have changed, however. If children were strongly encouraged to find part-time jobs in the past to help support the family needs, now they go out to support their own needs: stereo, computer, car and social life. This change in focus for many begs the question how successfully we have taught our children to be good stewards of the work and money they receive. We need to consider to what extent our children emulate consumer attitudes embraced by their secular neighbours. A question of equal importance might be what kind of an parental example is influencing the children’s search for financial security and material welfare.

The Local Context in the Fraser Valley

Setting the Scene: A Brief Historical Overview

Officially, the Canadian Reformed Church community in the Fraser Valley traces its history to December 17, 1950, when New Westminster became the first instituted church in B. C. Currently there are nine Canadian (American) Reformed Churches within an hour's drive of each other. The total church membership is 2,985 of which about 55% (1613) are communicant members ⁶.

The Canadian Reformed community--although still fairly identifiable as a Dutch-immigrant community--is well-established and has integrated successfully into the local community and economy. Many families own homes, farms and businesses. Only Yarrow and Aldergrove congregations do not have their own church buildings. The oldest Canadian Reformed school in Canada, the William of Orange Christian Elementary, celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1995. John Calvin Christian School in Yarrow celebrated its 25th, and, in 1996, Credo Elementary commemorated its 10th. Credo Christian High's first Grads left that school in 1981. The families of the Canadian Reformed community in the Fraser Valley have had ample help in the raising of their children, since it is common practice to send one's children to one of the three elementary schools and then to Credo Christian High. The Lord has provided richly.

In preparing an overview of this sort, it would be possible to make all kinds of negative statements about the Canadian Reformed young people in the Fraser Valley. However, a fairly thorough perusal of the 1995-1996 issues of *Church News* and of *Information* convinces one that, although there may be reasons for concern, there are also many reasons for thankfulness.

The Positives

Every year there are young adults in each congregation who publicly profess their faith. Youth clubs plan various functions: ice skating, roller skating, hiking and study evenings. Members of these youth clubs help in the distribution of Vacation Bible handouts ⁷. CRUCS (Canadian Reformed University and College Students) hold regular meetings and retreats at which they address pertinent topics and provide support for each other. Young people are involved in "The Loft", a teen drop-in centre in Langley. Young women volunteer as Candy Strippers at Manoah Manor; other young people come to visit and sing ⁸. Those with musical talents organize praise and worship evenings ⁹. Catechism students do their work well. A minister commented: "I am pleased with the progress by the students and the efforts they put

⁶ 1997 Yearbook of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, Premier Printing, Winnipeg. MB

⁷ p. 8, C.N. Aug. 13, '95

⁸ p. 10 C.N., Apr. 9, '95

⁹ C.N., Apr. 23, June 18, '95

into learning their assignments”¹⁰. Bible study evenings continue at a regular pace, year in year out. Attending church services is a “normal” thing to do.

A number of our young people serve in areas focused outside of the local church community. Several young people have traveled to the mission field in Brazil to help in the nursery or to tutor the children of missionaries and mission aid workers. In the 1995-96 school year, a number of Grade 12 girls at Credo High spent an hour each week sewing children's clothes, destined for Brazil. Other young people have gone to the Dominican Republic, San Salvador, Surinam, Haiti and China to do their part in spreading the light of God's word in a visible, proactive and often practical manner. These young people have helped build simple church buildings, have provided nursing care and have actively distributed Bibles.

In the summer of 1996 a large contingent of young people traveled to Smithers to work in the Native Summer Bible Camp. A member of Smithers' congregation passed on this assessment: “What a fantastic group of young people! We had the best Bible camp ever!” There are a number of young men who are headed in the direction of becoming ministers. Currently, six of these young men are enrolled in New Testament Greek at Trinity Western University; five in Hebrew.

The Negatives

One of the regular events on the Young People's calendar is roller skating in the Lynden. In the early '90s there was a time when the proprietors of the nearby gas bars and corner grocery stores wanted to be warned when those “Canadian kids” were coming. They needed to put on extra staff to prevent shop lifting. Sometimes this did not even prove to be enough of a deterrent. The “Canadian kids” would later brag about what they had gotten away with.

In 1995, there were other incidents that gave the Canadian Reformed name a black eye. A group of Catechism students, aged 16 and up, (from two local congregations) were in the habit of meeting at the local McDonald's restaurant after class. Apparently these get-togethers were quite rowdy. The breaking point came when rough housing led to property damage (vandalism). For a period of several months these teens were banned from this McDonald's Restaurant.

Several other recent incidents stand out. One of the high school graduating classes openly chose against a “dry grad.” A large group of students are defiant when held to the school rules of smoke-free school excursions. Smoking in prohibited areas continues to be a problem: “It is a reason for sadness that also among us who call ourselves Christian there are those who have difficulty respecting those in authority, as well as being good stewards of their bodies” ¹¹. In February of 1996, several students at Credo High were expelled or suspended for involvement in drugs. A board letter which went home to all parents, suggested that only about 10% of students involved were found out.

Apathy for Bible study is not uncommon. Some young people's study groups have a hard time finding committed members and good leadership. In one congregation, the year wrapped up early due to lack of interest. In school, students treat Bible as “just another subject.” They learn the bare minimum in order to pass the tests and seem content with mediocre efforts. They can demonstrate a callous and self-centred lack of concern for peers who don't fit in. As far as dress and fashion are concerned, many of our young people

10 p. 23, C.N. Apr. 23, '95

11 p. 11 C.N., Mar. 26, 1995

demonstrate an astonishing lack of modesty. Many of them regularly attend the movie theatres, pubs, and rock concerts. They have money to spare for buying the latest CD's and violent computer games. In contrast, their contributions to church are often negligible or non-existent.

Of greatest concern are those young people whose lives are more in tune with the world than with the Lord. A most blatant example is perhaps summarized in "An Open Letter to The Party Animals." A party, unsanctioned by the parents, got out of hand. "Our house rules included no marijuana, no smoking in the house, no alcohol for minors, no drunkenness, and no coed sleepovers. All of these rules were violated. Our home suffered several hundreds of dollars of damage, public property was vandalized, our privacy was violated, and our reputation and relations with neighbours soiled. We hold all who attended the party responsible, but particularly the older crowd who 'crashed' the party...." ¹²

Summary

As stated at the outset, the picture is not all bleak. There are many reasons to rejoice at the devout, godly lifestyle demonstrated by many Canadian Reformed young people. Yet, there are many reasons for concern. Some young people feel that they can put a whole-hearted commitment to the Lord on hold. They seem confident that they can live their self-centred lives with impunity. After all, they are covenant children, aren't they? They do not seem to realize that Satan rejoices at their apathy. He knows that if he can manage to get a firm grip on their lives during these formative years, he will likely have them for good...or will he?

Sources:

- Church News 1995, 1996
- Information (Volume 4, 1995-96)
- Anecdotal evidence

¹² p. 2 Information, May 18, 1996

2 Survey Data Collection

Drafting of the survey

Formulating a survey that investigates various aspects of young people's faith life is an intricate activity. We consulted similar surveys done in North America and in Holland and formulated additional questions. All the while we tried to keep relevance to the local situation in mind.

It was decided to go with a two-part survey. The major part (qu. 1 - 76) consists of quantitative questions. A quantitative question poses a statement and asks the respondent to indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement. The response is marked on a Likkert scale, a little like a multiple choice test. The outcome of a quantitative survey can be reported in percentages, using mathematical calculations. It indicates averages and trends.

The latter part of the survey (qu. 77 - 99) has a qualitative character; it consists of open-ended questions. The outcomes of qualitative surveys are much clearer in the expression of the respondents' opinions in their own words. Such a survey challenges them to express the thoughts more fully. These outcomes can not be used to establish trends or to conclude how many respondents hold to certain views. They are useful to recognize commonalities among the respondents and to underscore findings of the quantitative responses in the respondents' own words.

The survey set-up

The respondents did not state their name, only their age and gender. They were assured of complete anonymity to allow them to answer honestly without feeling disloyal to or disrespectful of their church leaders, parents or teachers. Conversely, they could feel completely free to express positive, but perhaps sensitive, aspects of their faith in church, family and school without being identified. This does not mean that the survey is a secret one. Parents are encouraged to discuss with their son or daughter the questions asked and answers given.

Controls and other logistics

Surveys usually have controls built in which indicate whether the responses are valid or not. For example, if the respondent says to statement 34 *"I like to listen often to Christian contemporary music"* that he strongly agrees, then you'd also expect a response to question 71 that includes one of the Christian Radio stations.

In order not to steer the respondents in certain directions, negative questions are usually balanced with positive ones and vice versa. For example: (79) *If there is one thing that you could change about your family, what would that be?* balances out with: (78) *What makes you most happy about being in your family?*

Of the total of 318 surveys which were returned, 6 were rejected because they were clearly invalid. The controls showed inconsistent and contrary responses. Some had filled in both 'true' and 'false' (qu 61-66) and some had check marks for all possible responses (agree - disagree).

A few other respondents had apparently become confused on some questions. We did

not reject them because most of their responses were reliable, and we were reluctant to subjectively decide who we felt was confused in those instances.

Many surveys will reject the responses which do not complete the logistics that describe the respondent. In our case that would involve those who did not indicate their age (13%) or gender (8%). We decided to include those responses because they are generally consistent, and they contribute to the over-all picture. Their responses to some questions indicate stronger held feelings. We have included these responses in the general picture, and we have also shown their breakdown separately along with the other breakdowns regarding age and gender. (See appendix 2)

Procedure of administration

A major consideration was how this survey might take place. Ideally, it should take place at one particular time, with as broad a representation of young people as possible. Catechism classes were considered, but the logistics of such a plan would be difficult to implement--nine congregations, nine different venues, catechism at different times. We hoped that the high school board would be willing to make this part of our work much easier by allowing the survey to be done simultaneously by all students at Credo Christian High. We presented our rationale and our request to the board, and it agreed. In the last week before the Christmas break (December 18, 1996), the students completed this survey.

The high school staff was provided with information about the administration of the survey a few days prior. They had a written introduction as well as directions which they were to read to the students. The survey was taken during the first hour of the day in the students' homerooms.

Processing of the responses; the quantitative and the qualitative questions

The quantitative responses have been processed with the use of a database program. We built records that would allow us to report outcomes based on any of the different criteria which were provided by the students. Every returned survey was given an arbitrary number to ensure that responses would not be counted twice. For each survey question, we entered this respondent's number, the age, gender and the answer. Consequently, in the reporting we can call up the totals for each question sorted by each of these criteria. Appendix 2 shows the percentage responses in 7 groups: all, the 12-14 year olds, the 15 - 18 year olds, those who did not indicate their age, the females, the males, and those who did not indicate their gender.

Cautionary notes

A number of factors need consideration when evaluating the results of this survey. We intended to poll all the Canadian Reformed young people between approximately 12 and 18 years old in the Fraser Valley. By administering this survey at the high school, we have likely excluded some young people simply because they are not enrolled there or were not present. We do not believe that this small percentage difference, alters the general outcome in any significant way. Similarly, there are a number of respondents who are not members of any of the Canadian Reformed congregations in the valley but do attend Credo Christian High. Their responses are included in the survey because we do not expect that, for the purpose of this survey, their backgrounds and views are significantly different from those of their Canadian Reformed peers. Question 67 is likely the only one that would be impacted by this in any

significant way.

From the feedback we received from Credo Christian High School, as well as from the actual responses, we conclude that the settings in which the surveys were written were satisfactorily uniform and consistent to make the outcomes reliable and dependable. The only variable we found is that a few groups have a higher percentage of respondents who did not indicate their age and/or gender.

The survey was not exhaustive. A quick perusal of the questions that were asked will make it obvious which questions were **not** asked. To get a clearer picture of the lifestyle and life context of the young people one would also have to ask about their spending habits, Sunday observance habits, the influence of the media, the types of music they favour, their home and church situations, etc.

From the actual responses there is no reason to believe that the answers of those who did not indicate either age or gender are any less valid than the answers of those who did. (See appendix 2)

In at least one case two related questions did not actually balance each other as well as was intended. The words 'a Christian school' (qu 81) were by some interpreted in a broader sense than 'the school you attend' (qu 80) although for most respondents the school they attend is the only Christian school they are familiar with.

On the actual survey we used the phrase 'doesn't matter' for the middle position on the Likkert scale. For the purpose of reading the 'answers' that doesn't always make sense so we substituted it with 'neutral'.

It could be argued that some of the responses were made without enough information available to give a credible response. The issue of lack of exposure or maturity shouldn't really take away from the fact that the responses are a reflection of what these students believe and do. It may be true that with growth and maturation, they will develop their thinking and possibly answer differently a few years from now. Nevertheless, it was our purpose to find what lives in the minds of young people at this particular age. This the survey does.

The responses to the qualitative questions were not always clearly formulated, so that at times the answers had to be interpreted. Sometimes the respondents formulated their answers in such a way that it was difficult to decide whether they described a practice or a wish. Responses of which the meaning and intent had to be guessed were not used in the analysis of commonalities.

Throughout this report the respondents have been quoted directly as much as possible. Their comments are unedited. Only the more obvious spelling errors have been corrected. The language and constructions are their own.