

## *To Neerlandia & Back*

Home is a wonderful place to be! It's a truth we recall each time we return.

Grace and I had a truly enjoyable time visiting her parents in Canada last weekend. It was a busy trip for me, as I spoke at a Reformation Day event on Friday, Oct. 28, then preached three times on Sunday. But in the midst of work, we also had plenty of opportunities to see new sights and meet new people.

With the trip fresh in my mind, I thought I would give you all a glimpse of what we experienced among our brothers and sisters far to the north.

On Thursday, we flew from Sioux Falls to Edmonton (via Minneapolis), then drove the remaining 80 miles to Neerlandia – a small “hamlet” in central Alberta, a drive of about an hour and a half to the north of Edmonton.

Neerlandia was founded in 1911 by Dutch immigrants who dreamed of creating a “*zuiver Nederlandse kolonie*” – a “pure Dutch colony” where they and their children could live among Reformed neighbors without being corrupted by the worldly influences of the city.

To say the early settlers were hardy is an understatement. Although today much of the land around Neerlandia is cultivated, 100 years ago it was covered by a thick mix of trees, brush and muskeg (which is a kind of swampland). Every acre had to be cleared, often by hand. The settlers were poor, the winters were unbearably long and frigid, and civilization was impossibly distant.

Time and again, accounts of the early settlers testify to the fact that they survived only by God's grace.

Today, the town itself has about one third the population of Hills, with much of the population living in the surrounding countryside. Perseverance in clearing the land has rewarded today's farmers. But the winters remain cold and harsh.

My wife's parents moved to Neerlandia in 2008, when my father-in-law accepted a call to serve Emmanuel United Reformed Church. In addition to Emmanuel, the town is home to a CRC and a thriving Canadian Reformed Church, whose building is used by the URC. There's a small grocery store, a “Christian public school,” a farm implement dealership, a gas station, and an ice rink. A Canadian Reformed Christian school lies a few miles east of town.

Reformation Day was the main reason for our trip to Neerlandia. Apparently many members from the URC and from the CanRC congregations in Neerlandia and nearby Barrhead read my column in *Christian Renewal*, so they asked me to speak at their Reformation Day celebration.

Since it was sponsored by all three congregations, the Reformation Day event was well-attended, with 250 or so joining together for singing, fellowship, and an opportunity to consider further opportunities for reformation.

To that end, I spoke about the practice (common in both the URC and the CanRC) of ordaining elders and deacons for limited terms of service. While this practice dates back to the church of Geneva in Calvin's age, it's not universal among churches of the Reformation. Many of our Presbyterian siblings call elders and deacons to lifelong service, arguing that the Bible provides no evidence of ordination for limited terms.

My presentation was well-received, with many attendees noting that it gave them food for thought.

But the highlight of the trip, from a “work” perspective, was the opportunity to lead worship in the three churches.

Emmanuel Reformed Church is similar to the church in Hills, both in size and in worship. The congregation greets visitors with joy, and the liturgy is much like ours.

The Canadian Reformed congregations are fairly large, with the Barrhead congregation numbering about 300 and the Neerlandia church having about 500. Both congregations stretch the limits of their buildings to the maximum, with members filling most of the seats.

In some ways, worship with the Canadian Reformed strikes us as *different*. Rather than reciting the Apostles' Creed, they sing it. They rustle about a bit more in search of their peppermints. Their songbook is filled with Genevan tunes, sung more slowly than we typically sing.

But those differences are minor compared to the similarities we share. Like us, they place a priority on the reading and preaching of the Word. Their elders take a strong role in supervising worship. The members take worship seriously, recognizing that God has called them into His presence and to give Him glory.

In a sense, worshiping with the Canadian Reformed is like dating someone whose faith is the same, but who grew up in a different family. We believe all of the same things. We love the same Father, trust the same Savior, rely on the power of the same Spirit. We are “equally yoked” in every way that matters.

Yet we differ in minor habits of culture. The differences stand out for a few moments, distracting us – but they quickly fade away into insignificance.

After worship on Sunday, Grace and I had the opportunity to visit in the home of a CanRC family. With 10 children, the sounds of the house were music to our ears. (It’s amazing how much one misses the noise of children!)

Again, we found plenty of uniquenesses. The most notable was the fact that the children all spoke Dutch, their father being a first-generation immigrant.

But we also felt quite at home, the traditions of the household being similar to our own. They share our commitment to Christian education. They enjoy family devotions around the table. The bond of faith in Christ ties them closer than mere genetics ever could.

Grace and I had never been to her parents’ home in Alberta, so visiting with them was a great blessing. And it was a rare treat to spend so much time with each other, uninterrupted by our normal chores and distractions.

But as refreshing as it was, we missed our children – and our church family here in Hills. It’s interesting to see how others live out their faith. Yet it always causes us to recall how blessed we are to be part of *this* church family.

So thank you to each of you who opened your home to a Barnes child or who took on extra chores for us last weekend. And thank you to the Consistory for giving me permission to serve the saints in Neerlandia and Barrhead.

But most of all, thanks to all of you for being part of the precious Body of Christ here in Hills. God truly has blessed us through you.