Toward a New Reformed Community in Canada

Good morning. My name is Everett Vander Horst. I am a co-pastor at Meadowlands Fellowship CRC in Ancaster. I've also been blessed to serve as part of the leadership team of Toward CRC Canada.

I want to extend my deeply heartfelt greetings and thanks to each of you for coming. I can't tell you what it feels like to finally reach the summit—it's been a long climb.

I look around this room and I see family, old friends, colleagues, teammates, zoom screen "squares", new friends and the unfamiliar faces of people I look forward to sitting down with. Having spoken with many of you, received your email messages, liked your Facebook group posts, and read through your registration form comments, your hopes and aspirations, I can assure all the rest of you: this is no mere crowd of strangers: this is a gathering of people that love Jesus, and love his bride the church, and just want to serve them both well, and with the joy that comes of led by the Holy Spirit.

How did we get here, and what are we to do with this time together, this gift?

One answer is that we've come here by way of the work of Toward CRC Canada. Many of you know the story. Toward CRC Canada launched just over two years ago, in October 2023 with a letter to the Canadian Ministry Board, signed by 70 people – many of you here, today, put your names to that letter. In that letter we called for the exploration of a Canadian CRC, a separate sibling denomination to our American cousins. That started a conversation not only with the Canadian Ministry Board, but one that stretched across the country and over the border. We worked to make the case that the unique history and culture in Canada requires a free hand to make our own decisions about things like cross-country collaboration and Church Order, and so on. Along with building a case, we've also built an organization, and a community.

In time, a formal request for action went to Synod 2025, by way of Overture 28. Meadowlands Fellowship Church asked for a restructuring of the CRCNA into two equal partner denominations, one in Canada and one in the US, to facilitate local ministry decision making and an equal, cross-border ecclesiastical relationship. But already in March, when we as the Toward Board looked at the list of delegates chosen to go to synod, we could see that the overture, and our original goals, would not be adopted.

So as a leadership team, we had a decision to make. To wrap up operations, and fall in line, or splinter each in our own direction. Or to pivot.

We pivoted. We decided that the best next step would be to call together a gathering of Canadians to explore a new possibility. We have been convicted that there is a need for a **new** community of Reformed congregations in Canada. We see that in the growing number of churches that have completed, begun, or are discussing the process of disaffiliation.

One of the recurring questions you and others across Canada have been asking is, “Are you starting a new denomination?” And the short answer has been… maybe? Will a denomination or a network or a federation or a confederation come from all this? We don’t know. The reason that we, as Toward CRC Canada, don’t know the answer to that question is that it’s not for us to answer.

But we did think that we had enough resources and momentum to bring people together to wrestle with the question and imagine what could be. We have talked about how perhaps we could set the table for some fellowship together.

Admittedly, some wondered why we’d set a table at all, when there are already other tables filled with good food, with places open, and fellow diners ready to welcome us to join the feast already spread and underway.

Why not together join with another existing denomination? Or network? Surely Canada does not need yet another denomination. Especially yet another Reformed denomination. Why not join with the Reformed Church of America, or the Presbyterian Church of Canada, or the Good Table or any of a host of other options? Because starting something new is a big ask for a community that is already feeling wrung out.

We have considered that. There is definitely an appeal there. To settle in amongst welcoming friends. But clearly, we didn’t do that. Why not? Why not investigate the options, and like a losing political candidate, endorse the best one and direct everyone aboard the new ship.

We need not spend time in those weeds. More broadly, in each case, each one has a history, a theology, a culture and a whole trajectory all their own. There are challenges to being absorbed into a much larger body, or overwhelming a much smaller one. And after feeling betrayed by my own family, I’m not ready to move into a house of strangers, as friendly and welcoming as they may be. Each family has its own stuff, and I don’t know what their stuff is. There may be good reason and the right opportunity to join or merge with an existing body in the future, but we felt now is not the time.

But the biggest reason to come together and explore something new together, among us, among friends and as family, is this: we believe that when we come together, we have something unique to offer. To our own people, to our communities, to Canada, and to God.

We have been entrusted with a legacy, a vision, a theology, that is both powerful and endangered. We have shared roots in a view of the world and the kingdom that is positive and realistic, Biblical and contemporary, grounded and hopeful. And we think that is a gift and a task that the Spirit of God can continue to use to bless Canada.

This past summer, perhaps out of a sense of synodical disorientation, of maybe just homesickness, Marja and I put together a worship series on Reformed theology at our church. It was intended as an

orientation for newcomers to Canada, and a reminder for old-timers. And it was based on the book *Creation Regained*, by Al Wolters.

Entering into that series, we were first reminded that "In the beginning was the Word." The world is not an accident; it was spoken into being by Christ Himself. Every law of physics, every moral intuition, every flower and atom—each bears His imprint.

Think about what that means. If that's true, then there is no "sacred" versus "secular." There's only one world, and it all belongs to Jesus. Every square centimeter of it. Our work, our relationships, our art, our institutions—everything is included in His good creation and remains under His care. The task of human beings, created in God's image, is to be gardeners and culture-makers, cultivating the world so that it flourishes under Christ's reign.

It's a tricky task, because as we all know all too well, creation is… bent. The whole world groans under the weight of sin. Every part of life bears that twisting—our politics, our relationships, even our imaginations.

Yet we remain a hopeful people, because, as Al puts it, sin's effect is total but not complete. Reformed theology teaches that while sin may corrupt everything, it destroys nothing. The structures of creation—family, work, governance, beauty—still exist and still whisper of God's design. Evil has not created anything new; it has only distorted what was good. Our calling is to discern the difference between structure (what God made) and direction (how it's being used). Creation has not been nullified by the fall—through Christ's calling on our lives, creation groans for us to reveal ourselves as hopeful "unbenders," working in forward-focused service to the coming King.

Just as Jesus is the One through whom and for whom all things were first made—so too, through his cross, all things are reconciled. Redemption is cosmic in scope. The cross isn't just for souls; it's for systems, for economies, for the environment, for art and science and governance and justice.

This is why I'm hopeful. Because the gospel doesn't shrink the world; it enlarges it. When Christ redeems us, He also reclaims the world we inhabit. And He calls us, he invites us, we get to join Him (!) in that work—patiently, faithfully, and joyfully. To retreat from the world in fear or loathing is not holiness; it's abdication. We are to be participants in the ongoing reformation of all things, witnesses to the renewal already underway.

This past summer, I travelled to Chatham to perform a wedding. Because of that long break between the end of the rehearsal dinner on Friday night and the beginning of the wedding on Saturday afternoon, I took my computer along to get some work done in my hotel room. And I foolishly brought my keyboard, the one that has served me faithfully since 1998. One of the legs broke when I pulled it out of the bag; it broke after nearly three decades of daily use.

I plan to fix it. Why? Not nostalgia—but respect. That keyboard, a Microsoft Natural Keyboard Elite was well designed and well-constructed. It is worth the effort of repair.

That's how we live into God's story. When we repair what's broken—whether it's a keyboard, a friendship, or the spirit of a congregation—we honour the design and craftsmanship of the Creator.

So we are called to faithfulness in whatever we do. Our integrity in "whatever we do" is our witness. Christ's mission is advanced when people build good things, love their neighbours well, seek truth and beauty wherever they find it, and point to Jesus to as the reason for the hope that they have.

That is, for me, the heart of a Reformed worldview. It equips us to engage culture, not escape it; to discern what is creationally good, to redirect what is misdirected, and to live as previews of the coming attraction, the eternal kingdom of God. Is is not just a conceptual framework, but a mandate for making disciples of all nations, pursuing justice in our world, and reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours.

This is why I am hopeful for the church in Canada. We stand within a theological tradition that insists Christ's lordship extends over all of life, and that His reconciling work is already renewing the world. As we gather in this summit, we are not merely rearranging dusty denominational furniture. We are trying to live faithfully into the gospel story—to bring the good news to bear on every square centimeter of our shared life in this land.

We need to understand ourselves as not reform*ed*, past tense. But reform*ing*—an ongoing action in the present that stretches in hope toward the future.

So how do we do that kind of work over the next four days? Well, we've got to get cooking.

To be honest, our talk about setting the table isn't really accurate. We haven't actually done that much. If we'd set the table, you'd all be here to eat, get nourished, go home fat and filled. But I think you'll find that there's a fair bit we've left unprepared. And that by design. What we've really done, I think, is we've stocked the kitchen. We've provided some raw ingredients, and you are the chefs. And together we'll decide what kind of menu we want to serve up together. But that's risky—we are a lot of cooks in one kitchen.

So my pastor heart says, let's name the possible pitfalls in the days ahead. In many dimensions, there is potential to be pulled in two different directions, as the working groups meet, discuss, deliberate and report. And as we, the whole body, listen and speak, in the ongoing work of discernment.

Here are some direction of pull. Some of you (I know because you've told me) believe that this is a time to get back to being the kind of thoughtful, active, Canadian CRC community that's been lost over the past decade, while others see an opportunity to be done with the whole Reformed endeavor, and create something new. Some of you have said, "Moving forward, I cannot be a part of anything

that has the name Christian Reformed attached to it." Others have said, "If in the end, it doesn't say Christian Reformed, then count me out."

We can sort through those conversations. But there's another pair of directional pulls we need to be aware of. There is a kind of two-directional pull that reveals the damage to our hearts.

Some of us have felt muzzled. We've missed the opportunity to engage in robust and honest discussions. We're glad for a place to talk freely about faith and church and mission with ministry partners and colleagues. But others of us have felt beaten. We are bruised reeds, feeling raw after several years of hurtful decisions at synods and classis meetings. We've been betrayed by our friends, and it is hard to trust.

As we come to the kitchen, and we begin to imagine what we might cook up together, we will see in these big conversations about important ideas that there are differences between us. And we will need to extend grace to each other, in our speaking. That kindness and gentleness characterize our words.

But we also need to be gracious in our listening. But what does that look like, really? I think it means that when we encounter someone who is speaking and communicating assertively, that we do not read it as aggression, but as perhaps the expression of one who has some pent-up enthusiasm for the kingdom of God. It also means that when we encounter someone who appears to be taking a defensive posture, or stepping back, that we do not read that as disengagement, but perhaps the necessary self-protection of one who has been wounded.

In the next few days, we will often experience two pulls, but when the Spirit is present, I believe it will be a part of one draw: to begin to imagine into existence a church community, one that captures the hearts and minds of members and leaders and churches.

In all our conversations, deliberations, worship and silence, joy and sorrow, may we be faithful to the calling we have received,

To be salt to preserve,
To be light in the darkness,
To offer a cup of cold water to the thirsty,
Among each other
For our congregations
In our communities
Across Canada
And around God's green earth.

To God be the glory, forever and ever.

And all God's people said…