

REPORT OF THE DEPUTIES FOR STUDENTS TO THE MINISTRY - 2014

The Reformed Theological College

During the past inter-synodical period we, Revs John Haverland and Michael Willemse, have made annual visits to the Reformed Theological College in our capacity as Deputies for Students for the Ministry. In 2012 and 2013 we sent our reports of our visits to all the sessions. At the beginning of April this year we made another visit, which was timed to coincide with the visit of our Australian counterparts, the CRCA Candidacy Committee, so that we could also meet with them.

We visited Luke and Danae Scheepers who come from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bucklands Beach. Luke completed his M.Div in mid-2013. He then spent three months (July – September) providing preaching and pastoral supply in Bucklands Beach under the supervision of Rev John Haverland while Rev. Dirk van Garderen was on long service leave. Shortly after Luke returned to Australia, he was diagnosed with cancer. He has since undergone treatment, including chemotherapy, which appears to have been successful.

Luke and Danae have remained in Geelong and have recently purchased a home in Corio, north of Geelong. Luke is pursuing Ph.D studies with the Melbourne School of Theology. He is doing a thesis on *Cosmology and eschatology in the writings of the apostle Paul*, under the supervision of Dr Colin Kruze. This will occupy him for the next three years. Alongside this, Luke has been employed for 20 hours per week by the Reformed Church of Geelong for pastoral and preaching work. Given his extended time in the CRCA we suggested that Luke also come under the supervision of the CRCA deputies and he was happy to do so.

We also visited Graeme and Amanda Zuidema and their two young children. They attend the South Barwon Reformed Church. This year Graeme is our only ministry student studying at the RTC. He comes from the Reformed Church of Bishopdale and is now in his second of four years of study. Graeme is a disciplined student, a hard worker, is doing well with his studies and achieving good results. The RTC faculty spoke appreciatively of Graeme's character and his contributions to class discussion.

During our four days we attended as many lectures as we were able to and sat in at least one class of each of the five lecturers. We found the lecturers well prepared and the lectures informative and interesting. There was lively interaction and we were impressed with the calibre of the students and the quality of discussion. Classes range in size from 4 to 14 students. We also met with the faculty to discuss how our students were getting on and matters relating to the college in general.

The change of faculty members due to the retirement of previous members has gone well and the RTC continues to have a gifted, mature and unified faculty. The three most recent faculty members are Drs Phillip Scheepers and Martin Williams and Rev. John de Hoog. All demonstrate a thorough knowledge of their subject areas, an ability to convey this in an engaging manner and a passion to apply it pastorally. We are very thankful for the quality

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of the men with whom the Lord has blessed the RTC and with the high standard of theological education offered there.

The RTC offers B.Th and M.Div degrees for those training for the ministry or other areas of Christian service. One third of these two degrees are available as distance education courses. The college also offers a one year Graduate Diploma for those who have a prior degree; the entire diploma is available as a distance education course. Distance education gives members of our churches the opportunity of doing some biblical and theological study while remaining at home. We currently have four RCNZ members enrolled in RTC distance education courses. These courses also allow students for the ministry to do preparatory courses that will later cross credit into their degree. This has the advantage of allowing a session to make a careful evaluation of their candidate while he remains in his own church and in the RCNZ. It has the disadvantage of missing out on the more specialised training offered by a theological college.

At present there are 48 students studying through the RTC in total; 19 of these are studying full time; 22 come from supporting churches. There are currently three men studying for the ordained ministry and a further seven who are already engaged in study (five of them in Task 3) who may continue on into study for ordained ministry. Over the past five years student numbers have steadily increased but the Equivalent Full Time (EFT) has remained fairly static i.e. the RTC has more people doing less subjects.

We were heartened by our visit to the RTC and recommend the college for our students who wish to train for the ministry and for our members who wish to expand their knowledge of the Bible. Our only real concern is that, despite the RTC offering a very good theological education for ministry students, both the RCNZ and the CRCA are sending less men there to train. We believe there is a real risk that our churches could lose the tremendous benefit of having our own college because we are unwilling to support it by sending our students there.

The last RCNZ synod approved a voluntary contribution to the RTC of NZ\$65,000 per annum. We note that a few of our churches have redirected their contribution to support students who have gone to MARS. The actual amount the RTC receives from our churches is around NZ\$50,000 each year.

The changes to the RTC NZ Office have gone smoothly and are working well. Invoices for the voluntary contribution are now sent out by the RCNZ synodical Treasurer, Alice Saathof. Simon Edwards, the RTC Business Manager, spoke very appreciatively of her work.

Fees at the RTC have been subsidised for some time. The RTC board has recently adopted the ACT fee structure for all students. However, students from supporting churches, including the RCNZ, receive a 10% discount and students training for the ministry from supporting churches a 25% discount.

Barkley Hall occupancy remains high and this continues to provide a substantial revenue stream for the college.

The RTC has continued with an annual "Fan the Flame" conference, now running at the end of each year, and offers a preaching workshop in September/October each year. These have been well attended and much appreciated by members and pastors of our churches.

Rev Dirk van Garderen continues as the North Island RTC board member and Mr Hans Berends as the South Island member.

Mid America Reformed Seminary

In recent years, around half of our ministry students have elected to do their theological studies through Mid America Reformed Seminary (MARS). This is also the seminary where Revs Peter Kloosterman and Peter Moelker, who are from North American denominations, and Revs Andre Holtslag and Eric Stolte studied as RCNZ students. At present we have two students at MARS, Albert Couperus and Joshua Flinn.

Rev. Willemse “visited” with both of these students and their families by Skype in April / May of this year – something we intend to do at least annually from now on.

Albert Couperus is from RC Palmerston North (Wanganui) and has recently completed his second of three years of study towards an M.Div. He is a disciplined student who works hard at his studies and is achieving good results. In 2013, Albert did a summer internship at Pompton Plains URC, New Jersey, and this year did one in Wellandport URC, Ontario. Albert and Hanneke and their four daughters have settled in well to life in the U.S. and are enjoying their time there. They normally worship at Redeemer URC, Chicago, and they appreciate the church. Their sense of calling to the ministry has grown during their time in Chicago and Albert appreciates the seminary education he is receiving. Lord willing, they will return to NZ in the second half of 2015 to take up a vicariate in one of our churches.

Josh Flinn is from the Reformed Church of the North Shore and has recently completed his first year of study at MARS. He and his wife, Hannah, also worship at Redeemer URC and have settled into church life well. They both feel that they have grown spiritually during their time in Chicago. Josh has come through his first year well and is working hard at his studies. In May, he sat, and was granted, his preaching licence in preparation for a summer internship in Abbotsford URC, British Columbia. Josh very much appreciates the training he is receiving at MARS.

The three year M.Div at MARS is a high pressure course and both men commented that the study regime is very intense and not for the faint-hearted.

Choice of Seminary

Churches and students have various reasons for choosing MARS or the RTC. We have noticed with disappointment that, in some recent cases, sessions and potential students have already decided where a student will study before we, as Deputies, are brought into the conversation. It is important to note that students’ training is a denominational matter which we, as Deputies, are mandated to oversee. Section A.2 of the Students for the Ministry section of the Office Bearers’ Handbook (quoted below) envisages the Deputies being consulted about where a student will study and we believe that it is important for us to be part of this process from the outset and especially before a final decision is made.

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2. Theological Training Institutions

Churches sending men to study for the ministry should first consider sending them to the Reformed Theological College in Geelong. Other institutions used by our sister churches may be considered in consultation with the Deputies for Students to the ministry.

Comparison: Studying at the RTC or at MARS

Over the past decade approximately half of our students have studied at RTC and half at MARS. It seems timely to reflect on and compare the experience of our students with these two seminaries.

Course of study

At present, RCNZ ministry students studying through the RTC normally undertake four years of study completing either a B.Th or an M.Div plus some additional subjects. Due to changes in Australian College of Theology (ACT) rules on cross-crediting, it is now also possible to do a B.Min / B.Th double degree in four years. There is some flexibility as to which subjects are covered as part of these qualifications, which allows us, as Deputies, to stipulate the core subjects that we expect ministry candidates to cover. This includes a strong emphasis on original language exegesis as well as a requirement to cover a number of subjects which are taught with a distinctive Reformed emphasis and also from an RCNZ perspective. We have discussed this with the RTC faculty and they have been most co-operative in making provision for our requirements. RTC students typically undertake 33 subjects during their four years of study. As part of this, they will typically spend 6 semesters (three years) in preaching class (though they only receive credit for one semester) which means they will cover the equivalent of 38 courses during their study – a total of around 1800 hours of class time.

Ministry students studying through MARS undertake three years of study, completing an M.Div which normally requires an undergraduate degree as a prerequisite. (We note, though, that on at least one occasion, MARS has awarded an M.Div without a prior undergraduate degree – something of an academic oddity made possible because seminaries in the U.S. are not subject to government accreditation.) The study regime at MARS is intense with a lot packed into the three years of study. Students have commented that this leaves little time for reflection on the material covered. The normal course of study also includes some summer classes so as to fit in as much as possible during a student's time there. MARS students cover the equivalent of 34 courses during their study – a total of around 1450 hours of class time.

The RTC has a significantly larger component of original language studies, students spend more time in formal preaching training and Reformed distinctives are taught with a clear RCNZ emphasis. In addition, spreading the course over four years allows students more time to assimilate the information they are being taught. MARS has a larger church history component, devotes more time to theology and has the strength that all it does is train ministers.

Students only get one opportunity to lay a foundation for ministry and it is important that this foundation is well laid. We believe that both seminaries provide a fine theological

education and that both are preparing men well for ministry. Both institutions also seem very much on a par academically.

Summer internships

One of MARS' strengths is that, while there, students will undertake two summer internships (at the end of their first and second years of study), working alongside a minister in a church for around 10 weeks. The supporting churches of MARS do not have the 12 month vicariate requirement of the RCNZ and so these two summer internships comprise the only practical training most North American students will receive. This is certainly a good way to cement the things students have been learning and to help equip them for pastoral ministry. We do have some concerns, though, about students being granted a preaching licence and entering their first internship having written three sermons and preached two of them. We would like to see more sermons written under the tutelage of faculty before they begin weekly preaching.

RTC students currently can undertake summer internships though, until now, this has largely been left up to them. Because of geographical proximity and the relatively low cost, they are able to do internships "back home" in an RCNZ church, something which is not feasible for MARS students. As deputies, we see real value in being more intentional about arranging internships for RTC students after their 2nd and 3rd years of study. It is our intention to do this with current and future RTC students. Graeme Zuidema will be doing two internships, one in CRCA Blaxland this summer and another in New Zealand next year, DV.

Cost of study

MARS has been very generous to RCNZ students and, so far, all of our students have been able to gain scholarships which have made their study more affordable. Nonetheless, the total cost for a married student with children comes to around \$170,000 (NZ) for their three years at MARS. The cost for a couple without children comes to around \$120,000. Because RCNZ students are generally not U.S. citizens, they (and their wives) are unable to work while in the US and so offset their costs. NZ students at MARS are able to earn a limited amount related to pursuing their studies (e.g. they are paid for summer internships) and this amount has already been deducted from the above figures. The net result is that putting students through MARS involves a considerable financial commitment for the student, their family, their sending church and often their presbytery as well.

By contrast, RCNZ students with children who study at the RTC are immediately eligible for Family Tax Benefits and associated benefits from the Australian government. If a student or their spouse is an Australian citizen, they are eligible for further benefits such as Austudy and Parenting Allowance. These benefits are very generous and mean that it would cost a (non-Australian) family with four children around \$100,000 less to study for four years at the RTC than to study for three years at MARS. Additionally, NZ students and their wives are able to work in Australia and often with a better income than they could earn in NZ. Almost all of our RTC students in recent years have been largely self-sustaining and there has not been much call on the Student Assistance Fund by them.

When comparing costs, it must be borne in mind that the RCNZ continues to support the RTC with around \$50,000 annually. This amount may be viewed as largely offsetting the

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savings achieved by studying at the RTC outlined above. But it is worth noting that our support of the college also brings other benefits: we have a growing number of students doing distance courses at the RTC at discounted rates, each year a good number of our young people attend the *Fan the Flame* conference, many of our ministers attend the annual preaching conference and many of our churches have made use of the faculty in conferences / training days etc. Having said that, the best way to maximise the support we give to the RTC is, of course, to send more of our ministry students there.

Student Oversight

As Deputies for Students to the Ministry, we are charged with overseeing students preparing for ministry. Each year we visit the RTC for the best part of a week. During this time we visit each of the students studying at the RTC (and their families) to see how they are going both academically and spiritually. We also sit in on lectures from each of the faculty members to get a sense of how they teach their material and also the level of classroom interaction. During the week, we also meet with faculty and discuss both how our students are going and the direction of the college in general. In addition to this, the RCNZ also has two members on the board of the RTC. As a result, we have a close relationship with the RTC and a strong ability to ensure that our students receive a sound theological education with a strong RCNZ flavour.

Because of distance and cost, it is more difficult to oversee our students studying at MARS. We have kept in regular contact with our MARS students by email and have now put in place the practice of visiting at least annually with our MARS students by Skype. This has proved valuable and our students appreciate “seeing” someone from home. MARS also provides us with a brief annual report on our students’ academic progress. To date, because of the cost involved, we have not visited MARS in order to sit in on classes, meet with faculty etc. (The cost of airfares for two deputies to visit would be in the vicinity of \$6,000). This makes it hard for us to get a real feel for the theological education our students are receiving and difficult to interact meaningfully with the faculty. It also makes it hard for us to explore areas of concern we may have. MARS has informally offered the RCNZ representation on its board but distance and cost make it virtually impossible for us to have any meaningful involvement at this level. The distance also makes it difficult to significantly “New Zealandise” the course content. If, in the future, we continue to have around half of our ministry students training through MARS the synod may consider sending the two deputies to visit MARS, but would also need to weigh up whether this would be good stewardship of our resources.

Summary

As deputies, we believe that there are benefits to our denomination in having men who have trained for ministry through different seminaries. Currently we have men who have studied at the RTC, Westminster, MARS, Greenville, Potchefstroom and, no doubt, one or two others.

We believe that those men who train through MARS are receiving a solid theological education and laying a good foundation for ministry and we are thankful for MARS’ very generous support of our students. Nevertheless, we believe that there are good reasons why the RTC should remain our default choice for ministry training. We are convinced that the training men receive through the RTC and MARS is on a par, and we believe that there are distinct advantages in continuing to favour our own college. We see an advantage in men

having four years at seminary rather than three. Our close relationship with the RTC puts us in a much better position to oversee their theological education and to ensure that it is delivered with a strong RCNZ flavour. Our geographical proximity to and close ties with Australia also makes studying there more economical. By ensuring that our RTC students do summer internships, we can also add one of MARS' strengths to an already strong ministry preparation program.

Vicariates:

Our current and potential students for the ministry are:

- Albert Couperus from Palmerston North who will complete his studies at MARS in July 2015.

- Josh Flinn from the North Shore who will complete his studies at MARS in July 2016.

- Graeme Zuidema from Bishopdale who will complete his studies at RTC at the end of 2016.

- Luke Scheepers from Bucklands Beach who will complete his Ph.D. around the end of 2016.

- We are aware of another four men who are considering a call to the ministry and are in various stages of discussing this with their local session and with us as deputies.

Ben McDonald from the Reformed Church of Hamilton began a vicariate in Masterton in June of this year. The first of our current students will not begin a vicariate until mid-2015. Ideally, we would have six men ready for vicariates now to fill our current vacancies as well as another three to four studying in anticipation of upcoming retirements etc. We encourage you to continue to be on the lookout for potential ministerial students, to pray that the Lord would raise up such men and to encourage those that the Lord has gifted for this task.

We have been asking our MARS students (and others) if they know of any suitable men coming out of seminaries in the U.S. who may have an interest in serving here and our students have given us some names. The 2008 RCNZ Synod gave the deputies a mandate to investigate such men and then place them in a twelve month vicariate in our churches with a view to them being made available for call in our churches. Following that synod we actively corresponded with a few men but those leads came to nothing. In view of our current shortage of ministers we would ask the sessions to consider whether we should pursue this again.

During our visit at the RTC we also met with the Candidacy Committee of the CRCA. (We used to meet with them regularly but this has slipped over the last number of years.) We explained to them our procedure for supervising our students for the ministry and we agreed to notify the churches of both denominations regarding students who are available for a vicariate. This year (2014) the Reformed Church of Bishopdale applied to have Mr

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Julian Dykman as a vicar and the CRCA committee decided to place him there. The final decision about the placement of a vicar will rest with the denomination from which the student has come.

Recommendations:

1. *That Synod appoint two deputies (and an alternate) charged with supervising all RCNZ ministerial students wherever they are studying.*
2. *That the deputies interview in person each student annually where this is geographically possible and that they do this by Skype or similar means where it is not.*
3. *That two of the deputies shall visit the RTC annually to:*
 - a) *meet with RCNZ students;*
 - b) *discuss curriculum and student progress with the RTC faculty;*
 - c) *meet with the CRCA deputies to discuss vicariate placements.*
4. *That the deputies seek to arrange summer internships for RCNZ students at the end of the student's second and third years of study with at least one of these being in an RCNZ church.*
5. *That the deputies continue their responsibility for arranging vicariate placements.*
6. *That the Churches continue to support the RTC financially by a voluntary contribution of \$65,000 p.a. in the inter-synodical period.*
7. *That the deputies be instructed to make contact first with the principals and then with students of Greenville Presbyterian Seminary and Mid America Reformed Seminary to determine if there are men currently in training who would be both suited to and interested in serving in the RCNZ. After careful investigation such men would then be placed in a twelve month vicariate in our churches with a view to them being made available for call in our churches.*

Yours in His Service,
Rev John A. Haverland
Rev Michael Willemse