

GOD'S UNIVERSAL CHURCH: A REPORT ON THE 2018 BRF CONFERENCE

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“I believe an holy catholic church.” We say these words every Sunday while reciting the *Apostles' Creed*. We hear in the preaching that God gathers His people from every nation, tribe and tongue. We take collections for mission fields and sister churches. We are reminded in so many ways that, indeed, God's people are all across the world. Yet do we truly grasp the reality of our confession? There is a sort of knowledge but how deep is the understanding? My understanding of God's universal church grew when I attended the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Conference at Hebron Hall in Dinas Powys near Cardiff, Wales.

Fellowship. It's in the very name of the BRF and is something I was blessed to enjoy for an entire week. The fellowship was shared with not only people from the greater Grand Rapids area but also with saints from Western USA, Canada, the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Brazil, Singapore and Australia. The attendees ranged from infants to the elderly and all ages in between. Every morning began with group devotions and every evening ended the same way. We sang together, read the Bible together, ate meals together and had great conversations. It was wonderful to be able to spend a week meeting so many people who share the same faith!

With such a large gathering from so many parts of the world came a variety of background stories. God blessed me with Protestant Reformed parents who came from Protestant Reformed parents and who sent me to our Protestant Reformed schools and raised me in the Protestant Reformed churches. Every possible resource was available to me, such as the church library, catechetical instruction, lectures, pamphlets in the back of church and more Reformed literature at my fingertips than I could read in a lifetime. For many, though, such things that are readily in front of me are not as accessible or even pos-

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sible. God calls to Himself young adults whose parents scoff at their faith. He calls to Himself families who attend churches they can't quite fully agree with but which they attend because the preaching is the closest to the truth they have in the area. God gathers His people through an on-line sermon heard or a book read or a conversation had, followed by an invitation to church. God stirs in His people a passion to learn more and more of the truth of the Scriptures, and that energy was evident in the week spent at the conference. It was a powerful display of God's providence and irresistible calling to see His people gathered together, both from inside and outside the line of generations.

The theme of the conference was "The Reformed Family—According to the Word of God." We had daily speeches given by Rev. Lanning and Prof. Engelsma that addressed many aspects of the Reformed family. We learned of the divine origin of the family and of the unique callings of a husband and a wife. We heard warning of the dangers of spousal abuse and how to help those who are victims of it. We were reminded of the joy found in a God-fearing family but also of the blessedness of being a single person in God's church. The speeches also emphasized the need to stay true to God's definition of family and to keep the marriage state pure, avoiding all the evils that today's society deems acceptable. The speeches focused on our earthly familial relationships but they cannot be separated from the truth of our brotherhood in Christ. What a comfort, especially for those whose earthly families do not share their same faith. We have been adopted into something so much better!

In addition to the speeches, we also enjoyed two organized day trips and lovely sunshine. On Monday, we loaded into a couple of coaches to visit the Raglan Castle ruins. There is something so neat about touring an old castle, trying to imagine what it once looked like in all its original grandeur. From there we headed to Gloucester to see beautiful architecture, wander the city and, for some of us, find ice cream. Rev. Stewart livened up the ride by delivering fun facts and a quick history lesson. On Wednesday, we loaded the coaches once again and headed to St. Fagan's National Museum of History. One could easily spend all day wandering the beautiful gardens and walking through a large variety of old buildings.

We were also given plenty of free time, which many of us utilized by taking the train to other towns. One direction led to Cardiff, a large city and the capital of Wales. There was plenty to see with the general bustle of shops and people.

2018 BRF Conference Report

Another option was Llantwit Major, which is quite the opposite of Cardiff city centre, quiet and with an historical feel. It also has a beach within walking distance from the train station. Should you ever visit, keep in mind that it has a very aggressive tide, something that this Michigan girl didn't take into consideration. I was quite amused to see Rev. McGeown's shoe floating out into the ocean until I remembered his shoes were near my backpack, which was (originally) well away from the water line on a rock. My phone and passport took a good soaking but both survived ... just about! The lot of us had a damp walk back to the station, but even that couldn't ruin the enjoyment of the day and good conversation. All the memories continue to put a smile on my face.

At every given moment, I had such a great time at the conference. I enjoyed the learning opportunity of the speeches, the mealtime conversations, wandering around new cities with new friends and even losing at table tennis. Repeatedly. I know that God puts us in different situations but, if given the means and opportunity, I strongly encourage attending a BRF Conference.² It was such an uplifting experience that I wish it happened more often than once every other year. I left Wales with a much deeper appreciation for the blessings I've enjoyed my whole life, as well as an incredible love for the people I met. Paul, inspired by the Spirit, mentions the body of Christ in a few of his inspired epistles. He writes in I Corinthians 12:12-14:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.

Paul goes on to describe the various situations and callings of each member, all working together to make up God's church. Even though the members are unique, they fit together perfectly being united to Christ, so that they suffer with one another and rejoice with one another. There was much rejoicing that week at Hebron Hall!

² The next BRF Conference is scheduled for 11-18 July, 2020, in Castlewellan Castle, Co. Down, N. Ireland. Prof. David Engelsma and Rev. Andy Lanning are the speakers, and the subject is union with Christ.

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In attending the BRF Conference, I was privileged to see the earthly diversity yet spiritual unity of the body of Christ. We are united by one Spirit, so that, even upon meeting so many new faces, there was already a certain familiarity and love for those brothers and sisters in Christ. What a blessing we enjoy in belonging to God's holy catholic or universal church!
