

NORTHERN IRELAND'S NEW REFORMED CHURCH

COVENANT PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH OPENS AT BALLYMENA, COUNTY ANTRIM.

After several years of patient consolidation and growth, the Covenant Reformed Fellowship at Ballymena was officially instituted as a Reformed Church on the evening of July 24th 1996.

The ecclesiastical formation of the new congregation was supervised by Professor David J. Engelsma, of the Theological Seminary of the Protestant Reformed Churches of the U.S.A. The event filled the minor Town Hall at Ballymena with a congregation of approximately one hundred interested and enthusiastic members, adherents, and friends, some of whom had travelled from the Mid-West of the U.S.A. to be present.

The new congregation received greetings from the Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A., this being the Church which had effected the enterprise in Northern Ireland through the denomination's Mission Committee.

Formerly known as the Covenant Reformed Fellowship, and affiliated with the British Reformed Fellowship, this new Reformed congregation is of special significance in that its formation completely bucks the trends that are evident so widely today even amongst already existing Churches that claim the name "Reformed". Whilst most other denominations are reporting ever-reducing rolls, and even closing churches, it is startling to see a new church beginning in the midst of today's prevalent apostasy. Furthermore, whilst even in many so-called Reformed Churches a plethora of modern ideas and even gimmicks have been added to the worship in order to maintain contemporary appeal, Ballymena's new "Covenant" Protestant Reformed Church is unashamedly sticking rigidly to the "old paths". The doctrinal position of this new Church is clearly expressed as Reformed, Calvinistic and Paedo-baptistic, this position being articulated in the Canons of Dordt and the Belgic Confession, which documents form the doctrinal subordinate standards adopted by the congregation. The Regulative Principle of Worship is the rigidly governing rule for all worship. Exclusive a cappella Psalmody, using the Scottish Psalter is the rule, and the Authorised Version of the Bible is the sole version of the Scriptures used publicly and privately. One finds the majority, if not all, of the women attend the services wearing head coverings. A reverent and solemn

atmosphere characterises the services. The Bible is extensively expounded in depth through the sermons of the Pastor, the Rev. Ronald H. Hanko. As if in head-on defiance of all the trends of social logic, instead of these "old-fashioned" features being a cause of repelling the modern generation, the contrary is indicated by the presence of a large number of young people, teens and twenties, married and singles, attending the services faithfully, and with evident enthusiasm at that. "Covenant" is a congregation which is growing steadily, and a marked feature of its growth is the presence of young men, many with advanced professional qualifications, and all filled with enthusiasm for the cause of Christ and the Gospel.

Amongst "Covenant's" youth, five of their youngsters have this month manifested a further, and massive, "bucking of the trends". Whilst catechising has died the death almost universally in the main Churches of our realm, these five youngsters represent the first of a crop of youth who have learned the Westminster Shorter Catechism all the way from Question One to Question One hundred and seven! It is startling, and refreshing, to see such serious application to God's truth amongst a rising generation.

At the inauguration service of the new congregation, Professor Engelsma preached a powerful sermon expounding Matthew 16 : 18 "upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". Emphasizing that the text specifies Christ, not Peter, or Rome, as the Rock, this giant preacher with the leonine mein and voice hammered it home that *Christ* is the builder, not man, and that the Church is *His* Church, it belongs to *Him*, not to anyone else. And Christ's Church *must* be built, and *will* be built, by Christ, in Christ's own way, as revealed in His Word. Man, he insisted, has utterly no business to intrude into this realm with his own ideas!

Following the service of worship, Prof. Engelsma then supervised the election of elders and deacons. Two were elected to the Eldership, Mr. Desmond Callender and Mr. John Clark, and two were elected as deacons, Mr. Jonathan McAuley and Mr. Ivan Reid. They were thereon ordained to those offices by Prof. Engelsma, the Pastor Ron Hanko, and Mr. Al Rau of the Protestant Reformed Domestic Mission Committee.

This was truly a joyous event, one that the people at Covenant had been waiting and working for for something like eight or ten years. A long road lies behind them that was filled with obstacles, discouragements, and disillusionments. A small group of families, convinced that the modern Calvinist churches left much to be desired, have struggled valiantly for the cause of Christ, working and praying patiently to reach this day of establishment as a Congregation. To this day they suffer misrepresentation and villification from quarters where one would least expect it, but of a truth they can all say today with the Apostle of old:

"The Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (*II Tim. 4 : 17*)

With a fervent evangelistic outreach, and a mail ministry that reaches some 500

Covenant Protestant Reformed Church, Ballymena

or more addresses in the British Isles, the congregation has grown steadily and firmly under the leadership of Protestant Reformed Missionary Pastor Ronald Hanko. The pastor's labours over the last three and a half years have been nothing short of herculean, a salient example to not a few other incumbents of the pulpit distributed around our islands! Rev. Hanko is also a family man, and eight children add to his round of responsibilities considerably! His ministry is profound and well appreciated, not only at Ballymena, but also across the other side of the Irish Sea as well. The loyal and gracious support of his wife, Nancy, has certainly made a deep impression on all of us who have come to know them.

The support and ministry of the Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids in Michigan has been both extensive and self-denying in no end of ways over the years. Hudsonville loaned their pastor, the Rev. Gise Van Baren to the folk in Ireland for months at a time. His solid work, together with that of others that gave their ministry, was foundational. One remembers too, that Professor's Hanko and Engelsma, Rev. Ken Hanko, and several others all gave of their time and energies to Ballymena during the years of waiting, struggling, and building.

Representatives of the British Reformed Fellowship were present at the inauguration service, as were delegates from the Protestant Reformed Churches of the U.S.A. There were also, amazingly, representatives from a newly emergent group of Reformed Christians from the Republic of Ireland. It was good to meet them all, and to witness God's glorious hand reaching with salvation power across the borders that divide man from man, and bringing His people together in Christ in fellowship and love in this way.

Covenant Protestant Reformed Church worships at the moment at Fountain Place Sunday School Hall in Ballymena, every Lord's Day at 11.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. A week-day meeting for prayer and bible study is held every Wednesday at 8.00 p.m., and numerous other meetings are held at various venues, including catechism classes, and special one day conventions. The church is active in out-door services evangelising local communities within the Ballymena area and beyond. With its steady pattern of growth, it needs somewhat larger premises, and has been preparing to purchase a plot of land in Ballymena on which to build a church, and, eventually, incorporate therein a small Christian school. Their concerns about the education of their baptised covenant children, that they should be brought up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6 : 4) has prompted the inauguration of a society at Ballymena for the development of a Christian school. Matters are as yet only in the planning stage, but one looks forward hopefully, and prays that the Lord will prosper these nascent aspirations.

Pastor Hanko and the new Consistory at Ballymena will no doubt exhort that we all rejoice with them in Christ, and render thanksgiving to Him, to whom be all the glory. Yea, truly: **When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.....**

SOLI DEO GLORIA !