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Thinking Deeply About Our Faith

so much depends on your standpoint when you start to tell what happened "once upon a time."

I thank God that a New Yorker like me was adopted by the God-fearing, Dutch-Canadian mavericks who began what has become the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. Just as parents in the United States formed Christian school societies to start Christian elementary schools, certain Canadian immigrants from Holland in the 1950s formed an Association for Reformed Scientific Studies to set up a Christian university.

I'd like to tell a few inside stories about people our Lord used to do a small, but mighty thing in the world.

**1960s: Roughneck Beginnings**

As a young philosophy prof from then-new Trinity Christian College in Chicago, I was made a trustee of the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies. I think I was appointed on the basis of my having spoken for the embattled Christian Labour Association of Canada.

In 1965 I flew in late from Chicago for my first board of trustees meeting in Toronto and was brought by trustee Rev. Peter Jonker to Rehoboth Christian Reformed Church, pastored by trustee Rev. François Guillaume, a survivor of the Dachau concentration camp.

As we entered the empty church building we could hear shouting going on behind closed doors. We entered the room, and there stood bookseller Peter Speelman and Professor H. Evan Runner shouting red-faced at one another amid a table of eight seated men.

This introduction came to epitomize for me the passionate motivations inspiring what later became the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

Grass-roots Speelman knew that the student generation of post-World War II Dutch immigrants needed a Kuyperian university training (see box) so they would not be lost to the church in Canada; hence, student summer conferences included speakers such as Hendrick Van Riessen, S.U. Zuidema, and Fritz von Meyenfeldt.

Runner knew that what was needed was a high-caliber academic center for advanced graduate studies that tackled current world problems, showing that an educated Christian, aware of history, could make a policy difference.

This double focus meant that the protégés of Runner who were first appointed to ICS—Bernard Zylstra, Hendrik Hart, and James Olthuis—had free rein to roam North America as stump speakers on many controversial topics, while also giving rigorous lectures in philosophy, political science, and ethics to disaffected college graduates crazy enough to come to this unaccredited place in Toronto.

Meanwhile, ICS students formed a kind of brigade in Toronto to, in effect, scratch the open sores of the local Christian Reformed churches—out of concern for the Church, of course.

**1970s and 1980s: Settling Down**

By this time, the trustees had set up a body of academically trained folks to oversee the workings of ICS professors, who now included Arnold de Graaff, C.T. McIntire, myself, George Vanderwelde, Albert Wolters, Paul Marshall, and, later, Bob Sweetman.

It was decided that the itinerant, circuit-riding professors should concentrate on teaching regular credit courses at 229 College Street in Toronto and on writing philosophical books, rather than roaming the continent connecting with the supporting community and raising the hackles of clergy.

When Calvin College administrators came to understand that the Toronto upstart was not going to solicit capital funds to build a university campus and would not much crowd Calvin's undergraduate turf, opposition to the institute muted—though Calvin professor Lester De Koster, as editor of The Banner (1970-80), vented vigorous critique of everything Torontonian.

And when James Houston, president of Regent College in Vancouver, spoke at the institute in 1974 and said, "I am glad you have stopped throwing stones at other people's windows; let our two institutions hold a conference together on the topic of Creation," the institute got its second wind.

Finally, with the formation of the Citizens for Justice and Liberty organization coming of age as a political voice in Ontario (1961-63), there seemed to be a Canadian Reformed mentality
congealing around the institute, though it still sounded a little foreign and brash to CRC believers in the U.S.

Lawyer John Olthuis and art designer Willem Hart were integral to the Toronto action. The few Americans busy in Toronto included Rev. Paul Schrotenboer, director, and Robert Carvill, editor of Vanguard magazine, and later Gordon Spykman as curator. Also, long before worldview became a household word in the American Reformed and evangelical communities, Iowan banker Glenn Andreas managed to get published the formative lectures given at the institute’s early summer student conferences—a series of Christian perspective books on “Life is religion”: politics, philosophy, art, sociology, and education (1960-68). Thus God’s Holy Spirit was mixed in with all the sinful, unwise, beleagured actions of the Toronto “movement” becoming an academic center.

The Fight for Certification

In 1975 the first Junior Member (so named to emphasize the communal nature of teaching graduate students) to have completed two years of courses at the Institute, plus a thesis, was Japanese native Masuo Miyazaki. But he could not go back to Japan without a formal, certified degree! So the Institute awarded him a master’s in philosophy.

When the Ontario government found out, it threatened to close down the Institute, calling it a “degree mill” because ICS lacked the legal authorization to grant degrees.

Thus began an uphill fight for legal recognition, led by John Olthuis, C.T. McIntire, Gerald Vanderveen, and director Robert E. Vander Vennen—a fight that took 10 long years. In Canada the provincial government has to pass a law to charter a higher educational institution. Even now, ICS is legally equipped (since 1985) to grant regular master’s and Ph.D. degrees, thanks especially to Harry Fernhout’s hard work, but it is carefully stipulated: no government money! (The Ontario government and universities were really afraid of granting “Christian degrees”—ICS’s scholarly credentials and quality of study were not in question.)

1990s and Beyond: Challenges for the Next Generation

When ICS president Bernard Zylstra (1982-85) was out raising money, something Institute presidents have to do relentlessly, he tried to explain why people should support a graduate-level Reformational studies institute, even though the donors could not understand what the profs wrote for their advanced students and secular colleagues.

Institute presidents Zylstra, Clifford Pitt (1985-89), Harry Fernhout (1989-2005), Morris Greidanus (2005-06), and John Suk (2006-08) also found that it can take years to live down a professor’s controversial remark or misstep in the area of leadership. Thankfully, followers of Christ continued to support and carry on building a school that bridges generations and outlives differing personalities.

Yet the vision of Speelman, Guillaume, Runner, and many others—including women like Marcia Hollingsworth and Barbara Carvill who were instrumental in developing ICS—is still underappreciated.

Worldview studies now are fashionable everywhere, but they need the sustaining rigor of Christian philosophically developed systematic thinking in order to pass muster in specialized fields of learning. Today’s culture rightly demands more than critique and generalities from scholars who believe in the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The “last word” in anyone’s higher education should be an outright communal Christian attempt to think through God’s world and its societal problems together with a Holy Spirit that affords surprises, tears and laughter, thanksgiving and wisdom.

Want to Know More?


For a jovial, offbeat account of the same history from a different perspective, see Bob Sweetman’s online story at www.icscanada.edu/events/20080510ami/.

A Kuyperian Trademark

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!”

—Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper was a Reformed preacher who became prime minister of the Netherlands (1901-1905). With Roman Catholic support, Kuyper helped pass into law a provision that schools would receive the tax monies of their respective Reformed, Catholic, Jewish, Humanist citizens for their respective faith-based schools.

Kuyper led God’s people to set up a “Free University” in Amsterdam. The university was free from direct ecclesiastical and political control, but was committed to be directly responsible to the Lord as an educational institution for training students who would be law-abiding citizens and devout believers.

What has become known as the “Kuyperian perspective” is the position that Jesus Christ claims all human activity. Homes, schools, businesses, governments, and churches are called by God to carry out their particular activities in a redemptive way.

—Calvin Seerveld

Calvin Seerveld was a Trustee (1965-68), chair of the Curators (1967-72), and Senior Member in Philosophical Aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto (1972-95).