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Grace and Truth Christian Congregation – An Overview of Its' History
May 1976 – December 2006

Our joy and calling is to give God glory. Grace and Truth Christian Congregation, founded in May 1976, will soon be celebrating its 40th anniversary. This is an occasion for reflection, gratitude and praise to God, as well as an opportunity to thank the many who played large roles in the life of the church. I have had the privilege of seeing many of the events unfold and can affirm without hesitation that Grace and Truth Christian Congregation today is the product of God's grace and truth to his people, kindly prodding by Christian brethren and stiff-necked stubbornness on the part of those involved.

First Steps

The idea was first broached by a friend and mentor Pastor Walter Chantry, who suggested that a Reformed and Baptist church be established in Israel. It was enthusiastically supported by then-Director of what is now Christian Witness to Israel (CWI), the Rev. Murdo MacLeod. Upon hearing of the suggestion, Rev. MacLeod happily concurred. He further conceded that the Society would stand by the church – literally: it would make its resources available, but under no circumstances control the church. Such were the principles CWI then embraced. For over three decades, from 1976 until my retirement from CWI in 2006, the Society adhered to those gracious, extremely generous and thoroughly biblical undertakings.

It is worth mentioning that Rev. MacLeod was a firm, heartily-convinced Presbyterian, as were and are many of those who later enlisted alongside Grace and Truth. But their ecclesiology was broad enough to embrace those whose understanding of the church differed, and their hearts more given to the glory of God than to the promotion of denominational interests. Their heart was for the Gospel. Over the years, Grace and Truth has been privileged to work with, learn from and be encouraged by Presbyterians, Baptists – Reformed and general – Pentecostals, Charismatics, Plymouth Brethren and many others. The church of Christ is beautiful.

Meetings began with my family, in my wife's living room, soon joined by Eli Ben Moshe, Arthur Goldberg, Dudu Tel Tsur and David Zeidan. It was agreed that confessional discussions would be conducted for as long as it took us to come to a shared understanding. For just over two years, careful study was conducted, in the course of which a Confession of Faith and a Church Constitution were framed while, one of us, much to the other participants' sorrow, chose to excuse himself from the process. The other participants found themselves drawn ever closer in agreement. By the time the Confession and the Constitution were completed, there were 19 families in the fellowship.

Grace and Truth Christian Congregation was formally constituted on May 1976, in a service to which all evangelical congregations in the country were invited. Three months later, three Elders were appointed, among which one was designated Pastor.

What The Church Would Be Like

It was agreed that the church would endeavor to reflect God's ultimate purpose in Christ – his own glory. As such it was agreed as follows:

- That the church must neither be Jewish nor Gentile. It must be Christian, incorporating Jews and Arabs and members of other nations and that, therefore, within the boundaries of the Gospel, it ought to reflect the cultures of our country and of our region without preference to either Jew or Arab;
- That the life and faith of the church would be based on a shared understanding of the word of God, expressed in a Confession of Faith and a Constitution; Those two instruments were in tandem with the consensus of historic Reformed Confessions.
- That it must be inclusive of all who love the Lord in spirit and in truth while true to its understanding of God's word;
- That its' worship should be God-oriented, biblically instructed, sober, warm-hearted and sincere;
- That it should be Christ-centered, noted for its' doctrinally informed worship, conduct, fellowship and expository preaching, all geared to cultivate holiness in the fear of God;
- That it should reach out supportively and respectfully to other evangelical congregations regardless of disagreement, seeking to be doctrinal but not doctrinaire, and
- That it should be frankly and extensively engaged in Gospel witness to our societies.

It was further agreed that membership transfers from other congregations would not be encouraged, nor would they be accepted unless the transferees came with the blessing of their previous congregations. Congregational oversight would be transparent, subject to congregational supervision and approval. All congregants would be encouraged to play an active role in the life of the church, with a few additional privileges accorded members. The officers of the church would be Elders, led by a Pastor, Deacons and Evangelists. Preaching would be a theologically informed, culturally sensitive and biblically focused expository undertaking. Church discipline would be loving, fair, firm and gracious, ever with the goal of restoring erring brethren.

High standards were set due to the conviction that God deserves our sacrificial best, and far more than our best.

Growth and Challenges

Attempts at harassment by enemies of the Gospel came to naught when it became clear that the congregation refused to be intimidated, and that every such attempt only provided opportunity for further witness.

When the congregation became too large to meet in a home, a one-room store-front was used, with the toilet alternating between its original purpose and a Sabbath School classroom. Failed efforts by the Orthodox to have the congregation evicted resulted in the first of a string of legal precedents the congregation premeditatedly sought to establish, in order to blaze a path for other congregations in the country. The ruling in our favor was a tremendous encouragement, after we continued to pay rent for a property we were unable to use for the duration of two years, while we fought the legal battle.

A painful schism occurred in the mid-1980's, when membership of the church dropped from about 70 to 7, but God in his kindness sustained us and, after a healing period, we began to grow again. When the store-front, in turn, proved too small, a house was rented. Foolishly, we had not ensured that zoning restrictions permitted use of the house for worship. Following another period of harassment, the congregation chose to leave rather than threaten the income of the widow who had rented us the building and was experiencing pressure from the Orthodox community.

Until a suitable location was found, we met each week in different locations and, when the weather permitted, in parks and public spaces. After some two years, CWI generously purchased a property that met more than its' own needs dictated, and hosted the church for well over a decade, never requesting payment. However, as soon as it could, the church assumed responsibility. It commenced paying an increasing portion of its Pastor's salary, for

electricity, city tax and a large portion of maintenance costs. In addition, tens of thousands of Shekels were given CWI each time a sizeable contribution was received by the church.

Immigration from the former Soviet Union faced us with a significant challenge: while committed to what is known as a Reformed Confession of Faith, we were no less committed to loving our brethren and welcoming them into the fellowship of the Gospel. They did not share our theological convictions. We were also used to conducting ourselves in one way, and the Christian immigrants in another. All of us were therefore repeatedly challenged as to the reasons for our convictions and our practices, in the course of which we discovered that some of our set ways could and should be improved upon, that there were better, more biblical practices we should adopt. On the other hand, the immigrant brethren were invited to examine our convictions in the light of God's word, and an overwhelming majority of them came to embrace the doctrines of God's sovereign grace.

The Church Facility

A building fund was established, but every time it was thought enough had been collected, the price of land had risen. What finally made the difference was the loving generosity of Christian friends and societies. Robert van Kampen stepped in with a gift of \$350,000 which enabled the congregation to purchase land on which the church home now stands. An anonymous gift of \$800,000 made the commencement of design and construction possible. A similar gift of a smaller but significant size was repeated by the same anonymous individual. Patmos International, a Finnish Christian organization, contributed hundreds of thousands of Dollars and the Isaac da Costa Fund, established in the Netherlands, commenced its substantial support by having Pastors from the Gereformeerde Gemeenten undertaking a corporate personal loan totaling 200,000 Euros.

Alongside these there were private individuals who went to great lengths for the church, such as Jim Jackson, Eckhard Meier and Jerome Lund. Special mention must go to Jennie Potter, who laboriously knitted and sold bookmarks, and sent the returns to the Building Fund. The last I heard she had contributed over 2,000 British Pounds

The building was designed to serve as a landmark. It would be cheap to maintain, multifunctional, attractive, obviously meant to serve religious purposes but neither typically Jewish, Christian nor Muslim. It be characterized by Middle Eastern architectural features such as domes and arches, with a main auditorium in which the pulpit was centrally located and the congregation just about surrounding it, and with acoustic qualities that rendered a sound-system unnecessary: God's people around God's word. A swimming pool and classrooms were also included so as to render the building multi-functional.

Shortly after construction commenced, a stay-order was issued by the Court. The Orthodox contested the church's building permit and, much to the delight of the congregation, fought the various Courts' favorable decisions all the way to the Supreme Court – only to face a precedent-setting decision from Israel's highest judicial authority.

In the course of time the congregation grew so that, at one stage, it numbered 450, a third of whom were children and another third the fruit of God's blessing on the church's evangelistic endeavors. Five Elders worked alongside the Pastor: David Zadok, now pastoring the church, Alex Faibishenko, Eitan Kashtan, Vitali Reznitsky and Sasha Seriapov. There were three Deacons, Ze'ev Bern, Eddie Golder and Felix Volynsky and a supportive Diaconal Committee made up of Sasha Gurin, Vitaly Tsuriaik and Andrew Prochaska. Four evangelists were engaged in Gospel work: the previously-named Alex and Eddie, Sophia Levin and Natasha Kuperman; a work among the deaf was conducted, as well as various outreaches to meet pressing social needs. Committees were responsible for visiting the sick, caring for the Elderly, overseeing cultural events, promoting work among our children and youth and the such like. Social endeavors were carefully kept apart from evangelistic endeavors; they were expressions of a sincere social concern for the needy, not a leverage for evangelism. The Finnish and Dutch brethren helped to fund these endeavors generously.

Serving the larger Body of Christ

An extensive Sabbath School program for children, youth and young adults was designed and is still ably run by Eitan and Orit Kashtan. An Elders' Training course was devised, in which some of those who now serve the church were instructed. The publication of a Russian-language magazine was commenced and Sunday School material produced and

distributed to other churches. Further initiatives to promote cooperation between churches led to the founding of what is now the National Fellowship of Congregational Leaders in Israel, and to a pact between most of the congregations in central Israel, according to which the goals, grounds and steps of church discipline were agreed upon and the churches undertook to support as well as to oversee each other's disciplinary actions. The right of appeal before member churches to the pact was secured. Again, much of what was done is due to the generous support of Patmos International and the Isaac da Costa Fund.

We had no one in the country from whom we could learn. We had to frame our own Constitution and our own Confession of Faith. When the first burial service came along, we had to devise our order of service, and when the first wedding came along, that, too, needed to be formulated. Of course, we did not presume to begin from scratch. Rather, we learned from the best of our Jewish traditions and from those created by the church over the centuries. Each was designed to be a true expression of the Gospel and of our unity with the larger body of Christ, as well as a coherent expression of these to our nation by incorporating those elements from our tradition that are competent to serve to that end.

At one stage, overwhelmed by the need of the Russian immigrants who poured into the country in the 1980s, the church put out an appeal for help. The astounding sum of \$350,000 arrived in a very short period from all over the world. It was agreed that this was far too much to be held by the congregation and, in consequence, Keren Tkuma, a National Social Aid Fund was set up. By 2009 the Fund had enabled over 100 local Christian families to purchase homes and others to obtain a professional education or set up business.

In addition, although the extent was merely symbolic, the congregation took up the support of mission work in Kenya, sent teams to work in Kenya and aspired to send out its own missionaries. A daughter church was established in Holon, now worshipping in south Tel Aviv, and various national endeavors were undertaken on behalf of the church in Israel as a whole. When proposed legislation threatened to restrict freedom to preach the Gospel, the church initiated and actively contributed to the creation of a cooperative national body that successfully stymied the legislative effort.

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Grace and Truth Christian Congregation has far exceeded its founders' expectations. If it were not for the grace of God and for the many who instructed, encouraged, prayed, gave, criticized and advised nothing of what has been described would have become reality. If it not for the grace of God and for the many who will continue to instruct, encourage, pray, give, criticize and advise, nothing more will be achieved. There is more work to do – much more! Having put our hands to the plough, we must not look back. We must press for the mark of our high calling in Christ Jesus, reaching out for the prize of God's honor. Thanks are due to all who have made this possible, and – above all – praise to God.

As one who was privileged to witness God's grace and truth to the congregation, I offer to him my praise and thanks. Thanks are due also to those who served to those ends as instruments in his hands.

Our great God and Savior, Redeemer of sinners and Sanctifier of the unclean, who delights to bless the unworthy, you who have chosen to glorify your name by the grace you have shown this congregation, we bless, laud and worship you, joining our feeble voices with the thunderous praise of the angels and of all you have made. Heaven, earth and hell bespeak your glory.

You have done on our behalf more than we could have ever imagined. You have blessed beyond our dreams. Be pleased to continue your blessing on this congregation and this facility. Make your presence known here. Save and sanctify the lost, hasten the day of Israel's redemption and be ever exalted through the members of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation.

*This we ask through the merits of your Son our Savior, Jesus Christ
the Righteous, Amen.*

Ministry and Family News

Marilia, my Administrative Assistant, is struggling with an ailment the doctors have so far been unable to diagnose or successfully treat. Your prayers on her behalf would be much appreciated, Newly-wed, in a strange country and far from her family, she needs our loving support. I am taking up the slack at the office. If you have heard from me or Marilia concerning the 2017 trip to the US and have not yet responded, kindly refer you letters to me at bmaoz@themaoweb.com. If you have responded, please be so kind as to resend your response as soon as possible.

At the end of this month I shall be concluding my term in teaching the church's mid-week Bible Study and will, instead, be teaching Sabbath School. My goal is to teach hermeneutics – the art of understanding God's word. I continue to preach on a monthly basis in the church and am working through Galatians.

It is with tremendous satisfaction that I can report that I have completed translating the book on CHURCH HISTORY and have begun work on three projects, alongside the translation of the New Testament: I am working on COMMENTARIES ON ZEPHANIAH AND GALATIANS, and have commenced writing the book on CHURCH LIFE AND FUNCTION. Meanwhile, my translation of THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW has undergone two additional editorial processes and MARK, LUKE and John have undergone one. I am presently putting the final touches to my draft translation of ACTS and reviewing comment on my translation of MARK.

"What characterizes us when we are elderly is that we look back on the dreams we have accomplished; what measures youth is the number of dreams we have yet to accomplish." Shimon Peres.

Bracha's health has improved somewhat. My own could not be better. There is little to narrate on the family front – all are well.

To those who inquired, contributions should be sent as usual to Berean Baptist Church. All details have remained unchanged but for the number of the bank account, which was altered due to suspicion it might have been compromised. Bracha and I are immensely grateful to those of you whose kindness in prayer and in giving makes our continued ministry possible.

How to pray for us

A close, discerning friend, wrote me the following.

"How I think to pray for you. I'm not sure it is accurate. I had to work on an extended project for a while a couple of months ago. Writing on this topic -- putting ideas together is like building card pyramids in your head -- was like submerging into a swimming pool with scuba gear and not coming up for long periods. When you do come up, it takes a while to turn off your brain and disengage -- the process is slower now than when I was younger. But I noticed that at those times it takes me a while to re-engage with the home surroundings and [my wife]. I don't ignore that but there are some physiological aspects that just take time.

"The nature of very much of your work is just that, I think -- occupying a different thought space like submerging in a pool -- and then later coming up to re-engage with surroundings. So your work is Bracha's work, too. it means that there are periods that are pretty lonely for both sides -- you with your thoughts and Bracha without your engagement. There isn't anything at all wrong with this, of course -- indeed, it is a calling -- but it is clear that it is a calling for both members of the couple.

"Recently I had a harder time, for some reason, coming out of the "pool" and felt

sorry for [my wife] since I was struggling to get my land legs for a bit. I realized that you and Bracha must experience that quite regularly and the commitment it takes from both, the personal strength it takes for both, the challenges it presents for both."

My response follows:

"Reading your letter below and noting the challenge you describe, emerging from being engrossed in writing into daily life and love, my first reaction was, "Wow, he's someone who understands!" My second reaction was, "I wish I was as intelligently observant as [you are]." Yep, it's no small challenge and I know I could do better in managing it, especially since Bracha has made the sacrifice of my engagement in ministry for so many years. Perhaps a time will come when I will be relieved of (released from) this sense of urgent drive and duty, so that I can devote myself more significantly to her."

So, brethren, pray for us. Yesterday I was at my desk at about 04:30 in the morning, emerging for two half hour bouts to eat, and returning to my lair until after 10 pm, and then I thought again about the letter quoted above. I must do something about this!

In Christ by grace,

Baruch and Bracha Maoz

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