

BOOK REVIEW: A SPIRITUAL HOUSE PRESERVED

>>Chua Lee Yang



Chua Lee Yang is a member of CERC and is the chairman of Salt Shakers.

A Century in the River's Bend

For its 100th anniversary last year, Hope PRC (Walker, MI) published *A Spiritual House Preserved* (Kalsbeek, 2016) to commemorate the occasion. The cover carries the following introduction:

"This is the story of a church of our Lord Jesus Christ with very humble beginnings on the extreme western edge of Kent Country... On one occasion the church's membership of mostly poor farmers recorded in their minutes, "The question was asked if we were going to continue as a congregation, and the answer was yes."

With that "yes" recorded in the tenth year of their existence they plodded on as a fledging congregation with little hope for the future. But God is at times a God of little things. Little did they know, or could they have imagined at the time, that God had many years in store for them...

...this one-hundredth anniversary book of Hope Protestant Reformed Church is more than a record of Hope's history. More importantly it reveals the secrets of why she continues as a faithful church of our Lord Jesus Christ today: secrets which

if heeded gives Hope and like-minded churches hope for tomorrow."

For a church to exist as a distinct entity for 100 years is remarkable in itself – but for a church to remain true and faithful to her Lord for 100 years is nothing short of a miracle of grace. That alone should make us want to read this book. While the world notes the course of what is trending, famous people, inventions, sports championships, wars and rumours of wars, the centenary of a comparatively small, solidly Reformed church passes by quietly and largely unnoticed.

Not entirely unnoticed, however, and certainly not by us here in Singapore. *A Spiritual House Preserved* should be essential reading for all of us in CERC, for our own spiritual heritage can also be traced through all the way to the small, isolated group of poor farmers by the river's bend, which once held worship services "under the big tree in Richard Newhouse's yard". Indeed, the book itself contains detailed historical perspectives of Hope's official labours in Singapore between 1979 to 2005 by Rev. den Hartog as well as Rev. Jason and Jean Kortering. These perspectives are extremely interesting and profitable reading for both old and new members of CERC.

In her 100 years of history, Hope has been the mother of three daughter congregations whose names and ministers are not at all unfamiliar – Faith PRC (Rev. Lanning's previous congregation before accepting the call to CERC), Grandville PRC (Rev.

Kenneth Koole) and Grace PRC (Rev. Ronald Van Overloop). As CERC has, over the decades, been a clear beneficiary of the direct labours of Hope and her daughter congregations, it would be correct to identify CERC at the very least, as an adoptive daughter or granddaughter of Hope. Hope PRC's rich chronicles are deeply relevant to us here in Singapore, inasmuch as they are a part of our own heritage.

This book of Hope PRC's story is a gem. A brief glance through its contents impresses upon the reader the comprehensiveness of its scope – in how many books can one find a serious doctrinal discussion right alongside one young man's desperate flight from a tornado?

"The tornado was huge, monstrously huge. It was not the slender, curved, even graceful cloud of the painting. It was hardly a funnel. Rather, it was an enormous, squat column, nearly as wide at its bottom as at the top... it was a deep and fearsome black – the black of the third horse of the Apocalypse."

"... for a church to remain true and faithful to her Lord for 100 years is nothing short of a miracle of grace."

“Each section is succinct and easily digested by even the young reader..”

....The response of the young man was not so much fear, although he was afraid, as awe – awe as before Jehovah God of Israel come to judge the wicked world in the wrath of his holiness.”

– Prof. David J. Engelsma in *Memories of the Tornado of 1956* .p.347

Each section is succinct and easily digested by even the young reader, especially as much of the book reads as one story to another. Topics range from the serious to the everyday and humorous (“*Rumour has it that Rev. Slopsema was asked while in Singapore, “Are you the tallest man in the world?”*”), with numerous accounts by or of those, whose names are familiar to us in Singapore, especially those of former ministers of Hope or sons of Hope in the gospel ministry (Rev. (now Prof.) Herman Hanko, Rev. Jason Kortering, Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, Rev Slopsema, Rev. (now Prof.) Russell Dykstra, Prof. David J. Engelsma, Rev. Kenneth Koole...).

Besides the doctrinal issues surrounding the controversies on God’s grace in 1924 (common vs. particular) and on the covenant in 1953 (conditional vs. unconditional), the reader is offered an intimate view of the struggles of living

through those times, as well as through the war years and the Great Depression.

On losing the church property to the minority group who stayed with the CRC denomination in 1925:

“...Although it is important to a congregation to have a church building as a meeting place in a community, the congregation had to go forward in the knowledge that even without a building a church continues to exist.

At what must have been one of the lowest points in the life of the small congregation, a congregational meeting was held on April 27, 1927, in the home of Deacon Moelker. The meeting was opened with singing verse 3 of Psalm 119 and prayer by the president, Rev. Ophoff. The minutes of that meeting are as follows:

Article 1. Rev Ophoff gave a short talk in which he explained the object of the meeting which was that our finance was nearly exhausted and to see if some means could be provided by which we could continue as a congregation.”

– David Moelker in *Hope’s Buildings: Dedicated to the Service of God* .p.86

And again in 1953:

“Although in the years between 1925 and 1953 the congregation of Hope had grown to about forty families, it shrunk again in size. About fifteen families left; the congregation was brought down to about twenty-five families, although a few other families also joined the church shortly after the split. But as was always true and remains true today, it is better to be small and faithful to the truth than large and apostate. No price is too great to pay for the sake of God’s truth.”

– Prof Herman Hanko in *Hope’s Involvement in the Controversies of 1925-1925 and 1953* .p.129

On the economics of the Depression years:

“Several hours later, and with daylight arriving, the disgusted farmers began to pack up and leave. I became desperate and sold the whole load to the lone buyer at 25c a crate. I was sick to my stomach as we made the transaction, for that price would hardly pay the cost for the sixteen containers... upon arriving home I told my father the circumstances of the deal. He estimated that the eight of us had worked that whole day for the sum total of \$1.50. Well, that was the last of the berry picking for the season. The younger children were glad and didn’t hide the fact either. We older ones were a bit more sensitive to the heartache and despair of our father and mother as they watched that bountiful red-ripe field shrivel and go to waste.

Incidents such as that were multiplied during the long, lean years and have made a lasting impression on me. Because the last forty years have been years of prosperity and influence, the majority of this generation’s teenagers find it next to impossible to visualize, let alone

“Countless other vivid and fascinating epithets like those above can be found in *A Spiritual House Preserved.*”

“Some other interesting sections include the accounts of young men of Hope who faced being drafted in various wars...”

sympathize, with the lifestyle of the Depression years and its lack of what is currently deemed a necessity.”

– Dewey Engelsma (father of Prof. Engelsma) in *A Teenager during the Depression Years* p.257

Countless other vivid and fascinating epithets like those above can be found in *A Spiritual House Preserved*. Rather than cite them all, which would be impossible, for there are so many hidden jewels, I strongly encourage you to read it for yourself! Besides the many oral accounts by members and ministers, the book also includes accounts of Hope’s participation in missions, of which Hope was the calling church for ministers-on-loan to Singapore for 15 years, and perspectives on Christian education (Hope was the first PR church in Michigan to start a school). Hope’s development as a “reading” church is also included, which is of course a matter of profound interest to the Salt Shakers. Some of us who may have had the pleasure of visiting Hope PRC can recall how strikingly deep the culture of reading and being well-read goes in Hope. Besides the distribution of various books to members at particular occasions (*Bound to Join* on the occasion of graduation from

high school, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church* on the occasion of marriage, and *Believers and Their Seed* and *Reformed Education* on the occasion of the baptism of a first child), a unique practice of Hope is how families will gather in the sanctuary on the Lord’s day half an hour before the service, and prepare for worship by silently reading Reformed literature. It is a matter worth thinking about for us in CERC too – are we a “reading” church? Do we want to be one?

Some other interesting sections include the accounts of young men of Hope who faced being drafted (called up to serve) in various wars, descriptions of all the societies and ministries in Hope, the work of the consistory, including a how-to guide for officebearers, and even some perhaps rosy perspectives on Singaporeans:

“I think that having been in Singapore gives me a more critical look at our churches. If the young people in Singapore have shown us one thing, it’s this: they are living much closer to God than our general population in the Protestant Reformed Churches. That’s at least what we consider to be true; we can’t read the heart. They are spiritual; they seem to be able to cast the world out.... I said to one fellow, “Do you keep up with the sports in Singapore?” He said, “No, God delivered us from all that.””

– Dewey Engelsma (Interviewed in 1985) in *Oral History Accounts of Hope*.p.254

Reading *A Spiritual House Preserved*, it is easy to see many parallels between what CERC and Hope have faced over the decades. We also gain insight into how CERC became what she is today, why she does certain things the way she

does (such as, why do we open our worship with singing the opening Doxology “Praise God from whom all blessings flow..? What do we consider an appropriate way to worship and why?).

However, we also see God’s hand in preserving Hope over the years, and just how we too stand in the line of faithful churches in the midst of this dark time. For us in Singapore, to read of the struggles and victories of our fellow sister (mother, or grandmother, perhaps?) church, is deeply encouraging. For though Hope PRC is far away in a foreign land, nothing can be clearer that we do share strongly the same hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Spiritual House Preserved can be obtained through purchase from the RFPA website: <https://rfpa.org/products/a-spiritual-house-preserved>. You may also borrow my copy, if available.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kalsbeek, C. (2016). *A Spiritual House Preserved*. Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association.