

To: Byron Center PRC Consistory
From: Matthew Overway
Date: November 20, 2020

Dear brethren,

I have read the letter from the consistory to the members of Byron Center PRC dated November 12, 2020. I understand the communication to be informing the congregation that the consistory has decided to “require Rev. Lanning to resign as editor of the Sword and Shield publication for a time, and until such time that the consistory may approve of his involvement as editor.” The letter included two grounds for this decision.

I have concerns and questions regarding the contents of this letter. My concern is that the consistory has erred against Rev. Lanning and the congregation by this decision as well as by its publication. My questions and reasons for this concern are what follows.

In the first ground the consistory has stated that the “congregation is in a fragile state” and that “Rev Lanning has a flock that is in turmoil.” I ask the consistory what is the nature of this fragile state? What is the turmoil to which the consistory is referring?

Though it may be the consistory’s opinion that the congregation is “in turmoil” and “fragile,” the scriptures tell us we ought not hold off on our work because the conditions are not the way we want them to be.¹ If a farmer were to wait to sow his seed until all things were perfect he would never sow his seed. When spring comes, ready or not, the farmer must sow his seeds. God has chosen this time for Sword and Shield to be a tool in His hand to sow His seed of the gospel. Ready or not, now is the time God has chosen. God can use any man as a tool to accomplish his will. I ask the consistory to consider whether or not God at this time has chosen Rev. Lanning to be such a tool. If so, then is the consistory standing in the way of God’s work in His field by requiring Rev. Lanning to step down from being editor of Sword and Shield?

The church order in article 55 instructs us that: “To ward off false doctrines and errors that multiply exceedingly through heretical writings, the ministers and elders shall use the means of teaching, of refutation or warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family-visiting.” I believe Rev. Lanning

¹ Ecc. 11:4-6 “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”

was fulfilling his duties in this regard in part through his writings as editor of Sword and Shield. His articles have been insightful, doctrinally sound, presenting the truth as well as combating the lie. Does the consistory agree with my evaluation of the writings of our pastor in Sword and Shield?

The truth is what will strengthen our congregation and settle the turmoil. By reading the truth in Sword and Shield as written by our pastor our own congregation can receive the healing and strengthening of the gospel through this means as well. The more opportunities and avenues our pastor is given to teach his flock the better. I believe Sword and Shield is one such opportunity for Rev. Lanning to fulfill his duty and go in and out among his people to minister to them on a monthly basis. The consistory's decision ends the work of editor including "all activity normally required of, or assigned to, an editor's position." Does this decision then mean that Rev. Lanning may not write articles for Sword and Shield? Is he required by this decision to cease and desist all writing of articles for Sword and Shield whether as editor or otherwise?

Also, the flock is not just the flock of Rev. Lanning. The flock at Byron is the flock of the whole consistory. Attending to the health and strength of the congregation is the duty of all the office bearers, but especially the ruling elders. The ruling elders are to go in and out among the flock strengthening the weak and healing turmoil in her midst. Though the teaching elder assists with this work, the primary way he does this is by preaching.² I ask the consistory have the elders and deacons been actively seeking out those who are weak and hurting and offering them the balm of the Gospel?

The consistory gives evidence they understand the primary work of the teaching elder is preaching: "[Rev. Lanning's] focus must be on the preaching of the Word and care of the congregation." Following this comes a long list of the duties of an editor. The implication that is left is that ever since Rev. Lanning took up the labors of editor, his work of preaching and care of the congregation has suffered. Is this the evaluation of the consistory? Is it the evaluation of the consistory that Rev. Lanning has been delinquent or deficient in his duties of bringing the word of God in the preaching?

With regards to Rev. Lanning's preaching, it is not my evaluation that he has been delinquent. When Rev. Lanning was on vacation this summer and pulpit supply was unavailable, he gladly and cheerfully preached twice that Lord's Day. More recently when he was sick, rather than "calling in sick" he spoke a word of edification from his

² Acts 6:1-6 "...It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word..."

home to the congregation. I believe Rev. Lanning has gone above and beyond his duties in this respect.

Regarding the content of the sermons I also find nothing lacking. There have been calls to repentance for our sins.³ There have been calls to unity and instruction how to have unity within Byron church.^{4,5} There has been comfort for those who are fearful, sick and weary.⁶ There has been simply stated but deep instruction in the doctrines of our faith.⁷ And there has been the sharp preaching of the law as the way of obedience for the people.⁸

Besides the preaching there is the “care of the congregation.” I understand this to mean working on a personal level with members of the congregation seeking and helping those who need pastoral care. It appears from the grounds that it is more in this area that Rev. Lanning has been lacking due to his work as editor: “Being an editor reduces the important time spent with members of his own congregation, getting to better understand her concerns and needs and being more involved in shepherding the flock. The additional time gained from not being editor would allow this aspect of his ministry to more greatly flourish.”

I would agree with the consistory that since Covid the ability of Rev. Lanning to freely and personally interact with members of his congregation has been interrupted. This, however, is not due to his editorship but to circumstances beyond his control. But I would ask the consistory has Rev. Lanning been unwilling to assist those who have requested his help? Or has he been unable to bring them the comfort of the Word of God when their needs have been communicated to him? Further, have you as elders when you have been going in and out among the flock directed Rev. Lanning towards members who may need his help?

From what I have observed I do not see a lack in the “care of the congregation” by Rev. Lanning. I have observed Rev. Lanning after church services. I have seen him going in and out among the sheep, male and female, young and old. He is seen welcoming new members and seeking out those who have been at Byron for many years. I am aware of several people who have called, texted, emailed and met with him that were given

³ The Tears of Bochim: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=119201646461657>

⁴ Respect of Persons: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=114181143235>

⁵ Brethren Dwelling Together in

Unity: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=111201617395941>

⁶ Beloved, and Yet Sick: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=71220175286255>

⁷ True Conversion: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=1018201528363444>

⁸ Keep No Company with an Impenitent Brother:

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=9272022597909>

ready and sincere attention to their questions and needs. Also, over the last year of our membership at Byron, my wife and I have personally visited several times with the Lannings. At these visits there were several couples (both old members and new) from our church.

I understand the consistory to be saying Rev. Lanning needs to attend to the “care of the congregation” more, but are the ruling elders leading by example? Are the elders striving to know and understand the concerns and needs of their flock? Are the elders using their time to intentionally cultivate this aspect of their work as undershepherds of Christ? Doing so would help Rev. Lanning and the congregation in their needs.

Finally, regarding the first ground, if it is the consistory’s evaluation that Rev. Lanning needs to apply himself more to his ministry, had this been communicated to him prior to this decision? Church Order Article 80 requires that: “The ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons shall before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in a friendly spirit admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office.” Was this done? Since Rev. Lanning became editor the consistory has had at least two opportunities to admonish him regarding the discharge of his office. Did the consistory give Rev. Lanning the opportunity to correct any failings in his ministry before he was, as I believe, implicitly publicly accused of dereliction of duty?

As far as the second ground, though I agree with the consistory that it would have been wise for Rev. Lanning to seek the advice and even approval of his consistory regarding taking up the work of editor of *Sword and Shield*, I do not agree that accepting the editorship without the consistory’s advice or approval was an error on his part.

Am I to believe that Rev. Lanning did not seek the advice of the consistory regarding the editorship of *Sword and Shield at all*? Did the consistory have no knowledge of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP) and Rev. Lanning’s involvement with this organization? Was Rev. Lanning not sharing anything with the consistory about what was going on in his personal life regarding these things? I would be very surprised to hear that the consistory did not know anything about these matters. If the consistory was aware of these things does this not indicate in the very least that Rev. Lanning was in fact seeking the advice and wise counsel of his consistory? And if the consistory was aware of these things, was it not the duty of the elders to proactively offer advice to Rev. Lanning about how to proceed?

Also, RBP and *Sword and Shield* are extra ecclesiastical. Though they are exclusively concerned with church related matters, they are not the church. The work done by Rev.

Lanning as editor is not the work of his ministerial office under the authority of the elders at Byron, but work he has chosen to take up as a believer and member of Christ's church. Though the contents of his writings are subject to consistory inspection and he is accountable to the consistory for the use of his time, the work which is done as editor is not the work of Byron church. Just as an elder may choose to go hunting or snowmobiling or serve on the RFPA board without consistory advice or approval, so also Rev. Lanning may choose to be an editor without the consistory's advice or approval. Office bearers do not need the consistory's advice or approval to do things that are extra ecclesiastical.

The time spent as editor of Sword and Shield is not taken from the work of the church but is taken from Rev. Lanning's own free time. Just as he chooses to use his free time in the spring to make maple syrup, so also he may choose to use his free time to be an editor for Sword and Shield. Both are extra ecclesiastical and both ought to be up to Rev. Lanning's own Spirit-led discretion.

Finally regarding the second ground, the first edition of Sword and Shield was published in June. The consistory decided on June 17 that: "Rev. Lanning erred in not seeking the advice and approval of the consistory before agreeing to take on the work of being editor of the Sword and Shield publication." It was not until November 12 that we had the consistory's decision to "require Rev. Lanning to resign as editor of the Sword and Shield publication for a time, and until such time that the consistory may approve of his involvement as editor." From June 17 to November 12 is nearly five months. Why did it take so long for the consistory to make this decision? If Rev. Lanning erred in June then why did the consistory not resolve this issue in June?

In this letter there are many questions asked, opinions stated and disagreements expressed. I ask the consistory to consider these things and to respond as they are able. It is my hope that the consistory reconsiders the decision regarding Rev. Lanning being editor of Sword and Shield. His work as editor has been as helpful for the growth of his own understanding and love of the truth as it has been for many of the people at Byron as well as the PRC denomination.

Respectfully submitted,
Matthew Overway