

March 2012: Interview

Presbyterian Conversations: An Interview with Laura Smit

by Scot Sherman

(Laura Smit is a Professor of theology at Calvin College and one of the leaders of the Theology Project.)

In January, more than two thousand people attended the Covenanting Conference of the Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) to hear about and consider participation in the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). *Perspectives* board member Scot Sherman recently interviewed Laura Smit, who teaches religion at Calvin College, about the ECO and her role as one of the principal drafters of the FOP's theological document (www.fellowship-pres.org).

SS: What has led and motivated you personally to take leadership in the ECO?

LS: I wouldn't consider myself a leader in the ECO, particularly since I'm not yet a member. Becoming a member would be a process with several steps, involving both the ECO leadership and my current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presbytery, and this process has only very recently been opened up on the ECO's end as something for which one can apply. I do anticipate that at some point I will be a full member of the ECO, but at the moment I'm simply a member of the Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP), which is not a denomination and which is open both to PC(USA) and ECO members. I have had some leadership in the development of theology for both the ECO and the Fellowship. I ended up on the theology team because I was complaining about not hearing enough theological conversation at the first Fellowship gathering in Minneapolis last August. I happened to complain to someone who really was and is a leader, and so was appointed to a small group to draft initial theological documents.

The process of working on the theology team has been deeply rewarding for me. This is precisely the sort of work that I have always longed to do within the church, whether in my local congregation or my presbytery or my denomination. But within the PC(USA), I have found little interest in serious theological engagement (other than the wonderful work of the denomination's Office of Theology and Worship) and virtually no interest in reaching any kind of theological consensus. When there is a rare opportunity for theological conversation, the assumption seems to be that theological diversity is a good in and of itself, that in fact theological diversity should be encouraged as a goal. I don't understand that view at all. I do theology in order to understand my faith more clearly, more truly. Granted that there is a perspectival dimension to the truth that I am seeking, I still expect to stand in agreement with other Christian theologians and with the great tradition of Christian thought that stretches back to the early church. The people with whom I am

working in both the Fellowship and the ECO share that expectation. I find that refreshing.

SS: What are the prime concerns and priorities of the ECO?

LS: I'm not a spokesperson for the ECO, but I'll tell you which concerns and priorities most draw me toward this new denomination. I love the serious engagement with theology. As I have already mentioned, this has been missing in my past experience of the PC(USA). It's something I've always longed for, ever since I was a young pastor in a tiny church, desperately lonely for some intellectual community.

I love the commitment to small presbyteries in which there is mutual accountability fostered by a shared life of prayer and study. This is very different from my experience in either the PC(USA) or the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In the PC(USA), our presbytery is large, the substantive work is done mostly in committees and by professional staff, there is too much theological and ideological diversity for the body to work as one, and so we do very little genuine work when we gather. In the CRC, non-parish clergy simply have no role in the classis, at least none in my experience (other classes may be different), and so I have no collegial ministerial body of which I am a part. I love the ECO's commitment to evangelism and the planting of new churches. Of course every denomination talks about doing this, but from what I've seen, the folks who are most drawn to the ECO are precisely those people within the Reformed world who actually know how to do it and do it well.

I love the unambiguous affirmation of women in ministry. Doing meaningful ministry is already difficult without having to convince one's own colleagues in ministry of one's right to be at the table. I've had to do that; I don't intend to do it again. This is why, for me and many other women, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is no option.

SS: Can you give us some of your impressions coming out of the Covenanting Conference in Orlando?

LS: It was very exciting to be at such a positive event, where there was really no time for anger or recrimination because people were so intent on joining together to do some new things, or—more accurately—to return to doing some very old things and doing them together. It was also exciting to hear from so many people that theology genuinely matters to them and to their congregations. I especially appreciate hearing this from ruling elders, which happened frequently in Orlando. There was also strong commitment to staying connected to one another, even though we are not all making the same decisions about our denominational futures. Like many other church gatherings, the Orlando gathering was marked by wonderful times of shared worship and a great deal of prayer throughout. I left uplifted and hopeful about the future.

SS: Do you have any concerns or foresee any potential dangers for the new denomination?

LS: Both in the Fellowship and in the ECO we are still moving toward genuine robust theological consensus. There remains a great deal of study and deliberation ahead of us,

but I am hopeful that we will grow into an increasingly confessional body, with an increasingly informed embrace of the Reformed tradition. There appears to be a widespread commitment to that project. Both in the Fellowship and in the ECO we are still moving toward an understanding of what it means to be an Order, to live an ordered life together. Here too there is a widespread commitment to the project, even as we recognize how counter-cultural it really is. I am aware that we could end up with just one more Presbyterian denomination, not all that different in structure from what's already out there, but the possibility of ending up with something better, something that requires a higher level of commitment, accountability, and community than I see in other contemporary American denominations within the Reformed tradition—that possibility seems to me to be worth pursuing, even if there's a risk we won't attain it.

SS: How do you respond to accusations of being schismatic?

LS: First, all Protestants are on shaky ground in making this accusation. By our membership in a variety of denominations, we are all agreeing to the premise that there are matters that justify division. Suggesting that division is fine up to the moment when someone decides to divide from us sounds like inconsistent whining to me. I think the language of schism is most appropriate in instances of apostasy, which the ECO cannot be accused of. It is wounding and unhelpful language, particularly considering that the leadership of both the Fellowship and the ECO are remarkably consistent in refusing to give in to anger at the PC(USA), in expressing respect and love for those with whom we disagree, and in working very hard to construct ways in which we can still be in meaningful fellowship with one another.

For myself, I believe that Presbyterian polity requires me to leave the PC(USA), and it would be odd to label me a schismatic for being obedient to the denomination's polity. PC(USA) polity says that when I find myself on the losing side of a denominational deliberative process, I have three options. The first is that my own mind may have been changed by going through the deliberative process. I have colleagues for whom this has occurred, but it hasn't for me. The second is passive concurrence. I can decide that the disagreement is something I can live with. I do this all the time on all sorts of levels of church life, as do almost all church members. Say that I wanted the sanctuary painted one color, but the elders made a different decision; I sigh, and then I accept it. As a good church member, I don't keep talking about it, or trying to get the decision reversed, nor do I sneak into the church at night and repaint without authorization. I give in.

My understanding of our current disagreements doesn't allow me to give in, because I believe that the issue at stake is the nature of scriptural authority. That is simply too foundational a question for passive concurrence. If I find that passive concurrence is not possible for me, then there is only one option remaining, and that is to leave. Presbyterian polity mandates this. I'm not leaving in defiance of Presbyterian polity; I'm leaving in obedience to Presbyterian polity. A more progressive colleague said to me recently: "We stayed when we were unhappy with the way things were; why can't you stay?" And my answer is that they shouldn't have stayed. Progressives who found it impossible passively to concur with denominational decisions should have left rather than violating our common

life by living out disobedience. I've been offended by disobedient behavior for years, and I don't intend to start indulging in it myself now that the votes have gone the other way. Some people then reply that civil disobedience is a time-tested, morally exemplary way to produce social change, and that the progressives have simply been using this method. Civil disobedience is appropriate when disagreeing with one's government, but I do not believe that it is appropriate as a strategy for forcing change within a covenantal community of fellow Christians to whom one owes mutual submission. When the Christian Reformed Church refused to ordain me, I did not stay and seek illegal ordination; I left. That was the option that had integrity, and it's the option I took. I'm trying to show the same integrity now.

Then too I've been told that it's all well and good for me as an individual to leave, but that leaving as a group is different. Apparently leaving as an individual to join another already existing denomination is fine, but leaving as a group is schismatic. This makes no sense to me at all. If there are thousands of people in the PC(USA) who are in the same painful situation of having to leave the denomination we love as a matter of integrity and obedience, then why are we not allowed to cling to one another as we go? Why are we not allowed to salvage something of our fellowship by staying together as a body? How is it less schismatic for me to join the EPC than it is to stay in fellowship with as many other members of the PC(USA) as possible? One of my colleagues is fond of saying that it takes two to make a schism. Like many who have left the PC(USA) in recent years, I would argue that if there are schismatics in our denomination (though I would prefer not to use that language), they are the people who have hijacked our much-loved church, refused to abide by our polity, refused to practice passive concurrence when votes have gone against them, refused to abide by or enforce the decisions of the church's deliberative assemblies, refused to honor our historic confessional commitments, and refused to show any integrity by leaving. I ask myself: which side of our current division would Presbyterians from throughout history be more likely to embrace? The answer seems obvious to me. How is it possible that I'm a schismatic if I'm the one standing in continuity with the Presbyterian tradition? It is precisely my commitment to historic Presbyterianism that is making it so difficult for me to stay in the PC(USA) as it now exists.