

Press Release of the  
meeting of the combined committees of the  
Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches  
to propose a common church order  
held March 24-26, 2009  
at the First United Reformed Church in Chino, CA

Present were: Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Harry Van Gorp representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

Dr. Kloosterman opened the meeting with a brief meditation on Jonah 1, and prayer. The minutes of the November 11-12, 2008 meeting were reviewed and approved, as were the agenda and timetable for the next three days.

The respective 2007 General Synods of the two federations had adopted the recommendation to present to the churches the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) and the four-column comparison report for discussion and evaluation. Further, that the Committee be authorized to hold regional conferences to present and discuss various provisions of the PJCO. Thus far the Committee received thirty-two letters from Canadian Reformed churches and thirteen letters from United Reformed churches. In addition to the regional conferences in Central and Western Canada in 2008, conferences were held in Iowa, Illinois and Michigan (March 11-13, 2009) and California (March 23 and 24, 2009).

The PJCO committee has received numerous communications from churches which have raised questions or registered concerns over a perceived development of hierarchy in the PJCO. At the heart of these concerns lies the desire to defend the authority of the consistory against encroachment upon that authority by a classis or a synod.

The following statements on the nature of broader assemblies are understood by the committee to underlie the Reformed church polity of the church order of Dort, and are thus reflected in the PJCO according to the committee's mandate to follow the principles of Dort.

**PJCO committee statement on the authority of broader assemblies.**

1. The authority that Christ gives to His church rests with the consistory (PJCO 22, cf. Foundational Statement 6). Therefore when broader assemblies are convened they do not take over or replace the authority of the consistories.
2. The churches give broader assemblies the jurisdiction (i.e., the mandate to make decisions) only to deliberate and to make decisions on all matters lawfully placed before them (PJCO 21.d.). The Church Order, as agreed to by all the churches (PJCO 58), stipulates what matters are lawfully placed before the broader assemblies.
3. Members of broader assemblies are those who have been delegated by narrower assemblies (PJCO 21.c.). Once a broader assembly is constituted, the delegated brothers become members of that assembly. Therefore, each member of a broader assembly serves the good of all the churches with respect to the matters lawfully placed before that assembly, rather than represent the interests of his sending body.
4. Broader assemblies are deliberative in nature (PJCO 21 a). Whereas a consistory may give input and direction concerning overtures on the agenda to the men it delegates, it may not bind their votes. Rather, it should write a letter to the assembly concerning its conviction. Binding votes would negate the need for deliberative reflection on the issues, and consistories could then simply send in their votes by written ballot. The size of broader assemblies should not impede careful reflection and deliberation, by being either too large as to make broad participation in such deliberation by its members unwieldy and impossible, or too small as to lack in depth and breadth of wisdom.

5. By common consent the churches agree to abide by the decisions of a broader assembly because a matter to be decided upon at the broader assembly has been lawfully placed before it by way of a consistory's request or an appeal.
6. The decisions of a broader assembly must be considered settled and binding, and must therefore be implemented, unless found to be in conflict with Scripture, the Three Forms of Unity, or the Church Order (PJCO 21 e).

Most of the available time was used by the committee to deal with many of the letters received from the churches and the comments and feedback from the conferences. While each member of the combined committee had been given copies of all correspondence, the CanRC brothers had prepared proposals for dealing with the input from the Canadian Reformed Churches, and the URC brothers had prepared proposals for dealing with the input from the United Reformed Churches. These proposals were discussed in detail by the combined committee and, where deemed necessary, changes were made to the PJCO. It is not possible in this press release to provide all the details of these discussions and decisions. However, the following are some of the main points.

In order to clarify the language and to be more specific in its wording, minor changes were made to articles **PJCO 2, PJCO 10, PJCO 21.d, PJCO 24, PJCO 25.c, PJCO 26, PJCO 29, PJCO 30, PJCO 31, PJCO 36, and PJCO 43.**

More substantial changes were incorporated as follows:

**PJCO 3** -To included with the duties of the minister the following phrase: "visiting the members in their homes," and to change "catechizing the youth" to "catechizing and instructing the youth in the doctrines of Scripture."

**PJCO 4.a** -The committee agreed that the last sentence regarding theological students needed clarifying. It now reads "The consistory with the deacons of his church shall help him ensure that his financial needs are met, if necessary with the assistance of the churches of classis."

**PJCO 7** -Regarding an ordained Minister without a Congregation Entering the Federation it was further stipulated that he may be declared eligible for call only after becoming a member of a congregation in the federation, only after an adequate period of consistorial supervision determined by his consistory, and only after sustaining an examination conducted according to the regulations adopted by the federation in the applicable examination regulations. Appropriate changes were made in the respective examination regulations to clarify that such a man should be installed, and not ordained.

**PJCO 11** -The committee agreed that it is more appropriate to require classis involvement only when the temporary release of a minister is of a time period greater than one year.

**PJCO -14** -In this article as well as many others the term council is used. This may have led to confusion since council is not one of the four recognized assemblies in the church order. The PJCO attempted to clarify this in Art. 22. It is at times argued that Article 30 of the Belgic Confession speaks of the work of council as governing. However, a careful reading of Article 30 indicates that the church is governed by the polity taught by Christ, whereas it is only the elders together with the minister who are commissioned to rule in Christ's church. The three distinct offices and tasks are clearly defined. In this discussion it is important to begin with the concept of office. The office of elder and the office of deacon are distinct and each office has its own duties. (cf. articles 17 and 19 respectively) The duty of oversight and ruling belongs to the task of the elders. They shall ensure that their fellow-elders, the minister(s), and the deacons faithfully discharge their offices. The office of the deacon is not one of governing the church. Just because the deacons are involved when office-bearers are admitted to office that does not mean that they should be involved in discipline, e.g. Art. 54. Suspension and deposition are matters of discipline, which belongs to the office of elder. This does not make the office of deacon any less of an office. Deacons have their own tasks and need to serve the church in that capacity.

When PJCO 23 speaks about churches in which there are small numbers of elders, they may perform their duties with the advice of the deacons. The deacons do then not become elders. Similarly, when then the number of deacons is small, they may perform their duties with the advice of the elders. The elders do then not become deacons, they only offer advice. The deacons continue to be responsible for their tasks, as do the elders for theirs.

In view of the above, the committee agreed to change the wording in the PJCO to "consistory with the deacons" where currently the word "council" is used.

**PJCO 17** The phrase “promote confessionally Reformed schooling at all levels” was found to be somewhat ambiguous. It has been changed to: “and promote schooling at all levels that is in harmony with the Word of God as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity.”

**PJCO 21.g** The section dealing with the task of the clerk and record keeping was incorporated in section f.

**PJCO 50** -The Discipline of a Member was also the topic in many of the letters and discussions at the conferences. The meaning of the words ‘mature non-communicant member’, the ‘privileges of the church’, and the concept of the excommunication of a non-communicant member were not clear. It was decided to have one article about discipline with two sections: one for communicant members and the second for non-communicant members. To change the opening sentence in the first section to start with: “Any member, whose sin is properly made known to the consistory,” and to adopt the following wording for the sub-section Silent Discipline: “A member who persists in sin shall be suspended by the consistory from participating in the sacraments, and is thereby not a member in good standing. Such suspension shall not be made public by the consistory.”

The discipline of a non-communicant is now dealt with in a separate section with the following wording:

*A non-communicant member who is delinquent either in doctrine or life, who after repeated and loving admonitions of the consistory does not repent, shall be excluded from the church of Christ. The sinner’s impenitence shall be made known to the congregation by indicating both the offense and the failure to heed repeated admonitions, so that the congregation may pray for this member. In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall ordinarily not be mentioned so that he may be somewhat spared.*

*The consistory shall obtain the concurring advice of classis before proceeding, whereupon the member’s name shall be mentioned to the congregation and a date set for the excommunication, excluding him from the Church of Jesus Christ. The intervals between the two announcements and the excommunication shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.*

*The public discipline shall be done with the use of the synodically approved liturgical form.*

**PJCO 54** To further guard against hierarchy the words “No broader assembly may suspend or depose an office-bearer” was added to the third paragraph of the article, The Suspension and Deposition of an Office-bearer.

**PJCO 56** In connection with this article the committee was persuaded to change the heading to read: “The Reception and Departure of Members”, and to delete both section ‘c’ and ‘d’ from this article. A reference to members ‘withdrawing’ may tend to legitimize such action, while in fact it is a sinful act.

The **Appendices** will be referred to by name in the relevant PJCO articles, e.g. Examination Regulation, and Form for. . . ., and together with the Introduction they will be included in every printing of the PJCO.

In **Appendix 2** the words “A medical certificate of good health” was changed to: “a medical report of health”.

Br. Witten was asked to develop a proposal for credential forms for delegates to each of the three broader assemblies for the next meeting of the committee. These, when finalized, will then also be included in the appendices.

Some time was spent at the end of the last day on the function and importance of Regional Synod in the spectrum of broader assemblies. While this concept is new to the UNRNA, it has been part of CanRC ecclesiastical life from the beginning. They function in particular in speeding up the appeal process. Would the federation suffer without the benefit of regional synods? It is decided to revisit this matter at a future meeting.

It is clear that much work has been accomplished and significant changes were made in response to the feedback received from the churches. It must be remembered that these changes are not the final product and could be subject to further change as the committee deals with the remainder of the correspondence at the next combined meeting. This meeting has been scheduled for July 27-30, 2009 D.V., in the Grand Rapids, MI area.

Following prayer of praise and thanksgiving to our heavenly Father for the work that could be accomplished in brotherly harmony Dr. Kloosterman closed the meeting.

This press release, as well as copies of previous releases can be found at the following web site:

<http://sites.google.com/site/churchorderpjco>

For the committee

Gerard J. Nordeman