

Press Release of the
meeting of the combined committees of the
Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches
to propose a common church order
held November 11-12, 2008
at the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed in Burlington, ON

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 Romans 13:1-7, and prayer.

The minutes of the August 22-24, 2006 and October 27, 2007 meetings were reviewed and approved, as were the agenda and timetable for the next two 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. Official communications regarding the PJCO is to proceed from and through consistories to the PJCO Committee. Further, that the Committee be authorized to hold no more than eight regional conferences to present and discuss various provisions of the PJCO. So far, the Committee received letters from seven Canadian Reformed churches and two United Reformed churches. Regional conferences have been held so far in Ancaster, ON; Abbotsford, BC; Edmonton, AB; Lethbridge, AB; Winnipeg, MB. All conferences were well attended with good representation from consistories and interested members of both the URCNA and CanRC. Requests were received from consistories in the United States for similar conferences to be conducted there.

Most of the time of the two day-meeting of the combined committee was dedicated to the letters received from the nine consistories and the comments and feedback from the conferences. It was decided to set up and maintain a two-column document with the original 2007 PJCO in the one column and a proposed 2010 PJCO in the second column for easy comparison. The second column would reflect changes made as a result of input from the churches. The input received covered a wide spectrum of the PJCO and it is not possible in a press release to provide all the details of the discussions and decisions. The following are some of the main points.

The status and function of the Foundational Principles were questioned. It is to be understood that they function as a basis for the Church Order and are also meant to be didactic in nature. To prevent the suggestion that they also have a quasi confessional function it was decided to change the name to “Foundational Statements”, and to change the first line in Article 58 to “These articles, relating to the lawful order of the church, having been adopted by common consent, shall be observed diligently.” Scripture references were added to other articles in the Foundational Statements and some factual and spelling errors were corrected.

The requirement of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity by office bearers was added to Article 2 and removed from the individual articles dealing with the offices.

Article 4a, Theological Education, may require revision, but it is impossible to finalize this article at this time. The Theological Education Committee will need to provide input.

Article 7, An ordained Minister without a Congregation Entering the Federation, was changed to make a distinction between ministers coming from a federation with which ecclesiastical fellowship is maintained and those from federations not in ecclesiastical fellowship.

The provisions in articles 17 and 25d regarding the duties of the elders to “promote confessionally Reformed schooling at all levels”, and for classis to inquire whether “confessionally Reformed schooling is wholeheartedly promoted” resulted in a considerable reaction and requests for clarification. Other than to drop the adjective ‘wholeheartedly’ from art. 25d, it was decided to leave the wording as is. The phrase ‘at all levels’ is to be seen as a general directive. It is arbitrary to restrict to a specific level of education such as primary or secondary.

Article 21c included the requirement for each delegate to broader assemblies “to indicate his agreement with the Form of Subscription.” It was agreed to delete this sentence from the article. It is to be considered that the churches delegate these men. The broader assemblies do not have the authority to ask this question nor to discipline those who might be at odds with the Form of Subscription.

In order to clarify the intent of Art 31 Ecumenical Relations, it was decided to divide the article into two sections. The first section deals with ecumenical relations on the local level, while the second deals with ecclesiastical fellowship with other federations.

Regret was expressed that both Synod Smithers 2007 and Synod Schererville 2007 expressed an opinion regarding Article 35 Psalms and Hymns without the benefit of the rationale of a majority report.

Several consistory letters questioned the wording of Article 41 Admission to the Lord's Supper. Also at the conferences this article received a lot of attention. All feedback was duly considered by the committee and some changes were agreed to. The article now reads: "The consistory shall supervise participation at the Lord's Supper. To that end, the consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those members who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Visitors may be admitted to the Lord's Supper provided that the consistory has secured confirmation, by means of letter of testimony or interview, regarding proper profession of faith, their godly walk of life, and their biblical church membership."

It was agreed that Article 55 Appeals and Procedures does not belong in the section dealing with discipline. It will be put under the division of Assemblies. This will result in a renumbering of the subsequent articles. Also specific references to appendices by number will be removed from the church order.

The wording in several other articles were changed to provide clarity and to prevent misinterpretation, without changing the original intent of those articles. The committee has been made aware of additional correspondence coming from the churches which may result in further changes to the PJCO.

Some discussion took place about the appropriateness of organizing churches as a corporation. It is not clear if this belongs to the mandate of the committee. Since it is of concern among the churches this matter deserves the attention of CERCU and the coordinators of the CanRC. They will be informed accordingly.

Work on regulations for synod, credentials for delegates to broader assemblies, and appendices was assigned and will be on the agenda of the next meeting of the committee.

To complete the mandate given by the respective synods, the committee agreed to dates for additional regional conferences. The churches that requested these conferences will be contacted.

The committee set up a web site which has the Proposed Joint Church Order and the 4-column comparison report available for downloading in preparation for the regional conferences. The address is <http://sites.google.com/site/churchorderpjco>

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.

For the committee
Gerard J. Nordeman