

### **The Story of Synod in Short – Press Release of Synod Burlington May 11-26, 2010**

On Monday evening May 10, 2010, brothers and sisters from across southern Ontario came together for a special prayer service prior to the convening of General Synod Burlington 2010. Rev. Douwe Agema, who had been chairman of Synod Smithers 2007, led in prayer and preaching. The sermon text was taken from Nehemiah chapter 1 with supporting readings taken from the Psalm 90 and Ephesians 3:14-21. Rev. Agema highlighted how Nehemiah began his work as a servant of the Lord, deeply aware of the need to rely on the Lord. Nehemiah's prayer reflects his dependence on God's covenant of love. Such dependence on God demands humility. Nehemiah was completely aware of his own inadequacy and confessed his own sins and the sins of God's people. His prayer addresses God in the confidence that the work that lay ahead of him could only be accomplished in the strength of the Lord.

All those in the audience were encouraged by the message and were convinced that if the delegates of Synod would keep this message in their line of vision throughout the days and weeks of Synod, the Lord would surely bless the outcome.

#### **Preparation and opening**

In the months and weeks and days prior to the convening of General Synod it became increasingly obvious how much work had been done to get everything ready for Synod. The convening church took the brunt of the work! Binders of incoming mail were organized by a team of men headed by brother Gerard Nordeman and passed on to the delegates for their reading pleasure! The material that arrived at the doorstep of the convening church was categorized into sections that corresponded with the reports of the synodically appointed committees. A special section was set aside for appeals.

Besides getting material ready for the delegates the convening church worked hard to look after the physical needs of all present. Menus for daily meals were prepared by a team of women from the Burlington-Ebenezer church.

On the morning of May 11 the delegates arrived with laptops and large binders in hand! At 9:00 a.m. the delegates were seated and officially welcomed by the convening church of Burlington-Ebenezer. On behalf of that church, Rev. Nederveen opened Synod. He gave a brief meditation on Psalm 93 in which he encouraged the delegates to do their work under the sovereign kingship of the Lord. The credentials were checked and it was determined that the primary delegates were present. The following brothers were chosen to serve as officers of synod: Rev. Richard Aasman as chairman; Rev. Peter Feenstra as vice-chairman; Rev. Andrew Pol as first clerk and Rev. Douwe Agema as second clerk.

To facilitate the work, the officers of synod divided the items of the agenda into five advisory committees. Each committee wasted no time and set out to do the work the churches in the federation had delegated them to do. Good work was done in the committee rooms, allowing the agenda items to pass quickly through plenary session. This did not always make it easy for the audience, who may have expected to hear extensive debates on the floor, but instead heard us speaking about the wording of "consideration 3.2" or about "recommendation 4.1.3."

The details of each decision Synod made regarding reports, overtures, submissions from the churches and appeals from individuals and churches are found in the Acts. These Acts are already available online in an "unofficial" format and will be made available to the churches once they have been edited. With regard to

the printing of the Acts Synod decided that they should be published digitally on the federational website and that printed copies be made available upon request of the churches.

The following is a summary of some of the main decisions that were made by Synod Burlington 2010.

### **Theological Seminary**

On the evening of the first day of Synod a major decision was already made. Synod directed the Board of Governors to appoint Dr. Jason VanVliet as professor of Dogmatology and Dr. Jannes Smith as professor of Old Testament. With thankfulness to the Lord both of these men saw their way clear to accept their respective appointments.

The faculty and senate of the Theological College, together with their wives, joined the members of Synod for dinner and the evening session on May 16. In plenary session Dr. Jason VanVliet, as the newly appointed professor of Dogmatology, addressed Synod. He spoke about his commitment to teach at the seminary in subservience to Scripture and the confessions of the church. Dr. C. VanDam, as the retiring professor of Old Testament, addressed Synod as well and was publicly thanked for the many years of faithful service at the College. Rev. VanDam will receive a high quality reproduction of a Rembrandt painting (Belshazzar's feast).

Throughout the days of Synod it was evident that our churches have a deep love for the work done at the Theological College and treasure this institution as a place where men are trained to preach the Word. A number of decisions were made with regard to the Theological College, pastoral training and future developments.

On the recommendation of the Board of Governors Synod decided to change the name of the seminary from "The Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches" to "The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary." Synod noted with gratitude that the now mandatory Pastoral Training Program continues to be very beneficial for the students and for the churches, and that the appointment of a committee to look after the funding of this program is working well. Synod instructed the Board of Governors to continue the "Review and Accreditation process" as mandated by Synod Smithers since it will be a valuable exercise that will benefit the well-being of the churches in the future. This process has already provided convincing arguments to work towards the appointment of a fifth professor, rather than rearranging the workload among the four current professors.

Synod noted as well that the process implemented after a vacancy was declared in the department of Old Testament shows that the Board has significantly improved the transparency of the appointment procedure for faculty members. Synod recommended that the Board of Governors inform the churches of the adopted policy, ask for their input and submit this to the next General Synod for its review.

### **Needy Students Fund**

Synod decided to appoint a church in proximity to the Theological College (the church at Grassie) as Committee for Needy Students of Theology to look after extending financial aid to those students of theology who are in need of it. This church was given the mandate: to advise each classis in the federation of its existence and synodical mandate and to seek their cooperation in setting up and maintaining one general fund.

### **Ecclesiastical Fellowship**

With thankfulness to the Lord ecclesiastical fellowship was maintained with all churches with whom such a relationship had been established at a previous occasion. In a number of different ways Synod reaffirmed and strengthened the bond with the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. Synod solicited the help of these churches in third party relationships, particularly our relationships with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the Reformed Churches in Indonesia and the Presbyterian Churches in Korea.

With regard to the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa (FRCSA), Synod again highlighted the financial needs of these churches. A mechanism has been put into place to collect monies in Canada for this cause. Synod decided to recommend the FRCSA to the churches as worthy of continued financial assistance, to help them support the needy churches in the federation, and to assist them with their extensive mission work and relief efforts among the disadvantaged and sick in South Africa.

Some years ago the Free Church of Scotland experienced internal difficulties that resulted in the formation of the Free Church Continuing (FCC). Contrary to the recommendation of the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) Synod Smithers 2007 decided not to maintain a relationship of fellowship with the FCC. The Free Church Continuing contested this decision because, as they pointed out in their correspondence with the CRCA, it was made on the basis of misinformation. On the recommendation of the CRCA, Synod Burlington rescinded the decision of Synod Smithers 2007 and re-instated a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the FCC. This allows the CRCA to deal with both the Free Church of Scotland and the Free Church Continuing in a fair and just manner. Synod also mandated the CRCA to encourage the FCS and the FCC to work earnestly at reconciliation and reunion.

Furthermore, Synod decided to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (RCI). In their report to Synod the CRCA stressed the importance of ecclesiastical relations with faithful federations in Indonesia given the current involvement of the church of Smithville in mission work on the island of Timor. The churches being established through this mission work need to align themselves with an existing, faithful Reformed church federation.

Synod decided not to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). The main reason Synod came to this conclusion was the RPCNA's practice of ordaining women deacons. Synod stated in its considerations:

- The churches are legitimately concerned that the ordination of women as deacons contradicts the teaching of Scripture that deacons ought to be men (1 Tim. 3:8-12).
- The official RPCNA position is that women deacons do not govern or exercise authority over men; in practice, however, it would seem that they do. If this is the case, this would conflict with Scripture (see 1 Tim. 2:12 and 1 Cor. 14:34 and cf. Article 30, Belgic Confession).
- It would be inconsistent and confusing for the Canadian Reformed Churches to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with a federation of churches which ordain women as deacons while Synod 2007 cautioned the Reformed Churches of New Zealand about their relationship with the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia due to their practice of ordaining women as deacons.

### **Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN)**

With regard to our relationship with our sister churches in the Netherlands (RCN) Synod decided to express our prayerful concern for our brothers and sisters in the Lord that they be committed to the

Reformed faith. Synod appointed a temporary sub-committee to investigate further the situation in our sister churches in the Netherlands. This Committee will also seek contact with the GKH (the churches that left the RCN). The committee consists of Rev. J. de Gelder, Rev. J. Moesker, br. G.J. Nordeman and Dr. C. Van Dam. Among other things, this committee was mandated to express our grave concerns that:

- Synod Zwolle of the RCN did not demand that Dr. Harinck, a professor associated with the Theological University in Kampen, retract his controversial remarks;
- the Theological University did not exercise greater care in the case of the appointment of Dr. Paas as lecturer

Synod considered these matters to be of such a serious nature that the RCN be urged to deal with these matters as yet. Furthermore, the Committee was mandated

- to express and discuss our grave concerns about a change in how biblical hermeneutics are functioning in the RCN;
- to pay special attention to the upcoming report on the role of women in the church.

### **Fraternal delegates**

Throughout the days of Synod foreign delegates came and went. These churches updated us on recent developments within their churches and passed on their greetings and well-wishes to our churches. Three churches passed on their greetings by letter, namely, the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, the Free Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Synod received greetings and was addressed by a number of fraternal delegates.

The following men addressed Synod on behalf of their churches.

- Rev. Bernard Westerveld – l'Église Réformée du Quebec
- Br. Wayne Pleiter – Free Reformed Churches of Australia
- Rev. Dirk Boersema – Free Reformed Churches of South Africa
- Rev. John Bouwers – United Reformed Churches of North America
- Rev. Jack Sawyer – Orthodox Presbyterian Church
- Rev. Jonathan Merica – Reformed Church of the United States
- Rev. Dr. Kyon Ho Kwon – Presbyterian Church of Korea

Rev. DongSup Song addressed Synod as an observer from the Reformed Churches in Korea.

### **No different approach or rearranging of the Committees**

In its report to Synod, the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad drew attention to the fact that in our relations with other churches we only have a relationship known as “Ecclesiastical Fellowship.” The CRCA proposed establishing four kinds of relationships: Contact Churches (Churches being considered for ecclesiastical fellowship), Fellowship Churches (Churches in ecclesiastical fellowship with us), Associate Churches (Churches that are fellow members with us in the ICRC and NAPARC) and Churches Raising Concern (Churches currently in ecclesiastical fellowship with us but who give reason for serious concern).

Synod did not adopt the proposal for two reasons. First of all, no response from the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA) had been forwarded to the churches. Since the proposal of the CRCA involves the CCCNA it would have been inadvisable for Synod to make a decision on this matter. Secondly, the churches in general were not keen on the new structure of four kinds of relations; others disagreed with some of the categories. Synod saw no need for the category “Churches Raising Concern” because churches raising concern are covered by the Rule 1 of Ecclesiastical Fellowship: “The churches

shall assist each other in the maintenance, defence and promotion of the Reformed faith in doctrine, church polity, discipline and liturgy, and be watchful for deviations.”

### **The CRCA and the CCCNA remain the same**

For many years all of the relations with other churches whom we recognized as sister churches were channelled through the CRCA. In 1998 Synod Fergus decided that a re-structuring was necessary and appointed a Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas (CCCA) which is now known as the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA). The result is that there are two committees maintaining contacts with other churches: the only distinction is geographical. In its report to Synod the CRCA suggested some re-structuring would take place. Sometimes the work of these two committees overlaps and causes confusion. Synod, however, decided not to take over the suggestion of the CRCA since there was not broad support from the churches for the proposal of the CRCA. Synod, echoing the sentiment of the churches, considered the present two committees have a good handle on their mandates and the churches with which they are dealing.

### **North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC)**

In 2008 the Canadian Reformed Churches became members of NAPARC. At the annual meetings of this Council, Reformed and Presbyterian churches meet. This is an opportunity for the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America to formally meet with their counterparts from the ERQ, OPC and RCUS. Synod mandated the CCCNA to continue representing the Canadian Reformed Churches at NAPARC. Moreover, the committee is to investigate the status and the implications of two statements, namely the Golden Comity Agreement and the NAPARC Agreement on Transfer of Members and Congregations. This mandate comes in response to questions raised by several churches. The CCCNA will need to determine whether or not these agreements interfere with the independence of the CanRC in regard to establishing relationships of ecclesiastical fellowship with other federations.

### **United Reformed Churches of North America**

Synod spent considerable time on our contact with the United Reformed Churches of North America. It was decided to continue ecclesiastical fellowship with the URCNA under the adopted rules and to declare that as Canadian Reformed Churches we are still committed to the goal of federative unity and to ask the URCNA whether they are still committed to this goal, too. A letter signed by all the members of Synod will be sent to General Synod London.

After the URCNA Synod 2007, held in Schereville, concerns were expressed by our churches about the status of the so-called “Nine Points of Schereville.” Synod Schererville adopted a nine point statement and presented it to the URCNA churches as “pastoral advice.” Seeing that the expression “pastoral advice” was not explained Synod Burlington-Ebenezer therefore decided to request Synod London of the URCNA to clarify the status of the Nine Points of Schererville as a whole and to give a further explanation of Point 6 in particular.

### *Face-to-face*

Synod supported a proposal to have a face-to-face meeting between the members of Synod and delegates from the United Reformed Churches. Synod set aside approximately one hour on Wednesday evening, May 19, 2010 for the delegates from the United Reformed Churches to answer questions submitted to them by the churches. The members of Synod were given opportunity to ask supplementary questions.

This evening drew Synod's largest crowd and this dialogue was appreciated by those in attendance.

All the subcommittees were reappointed and we will wait and see whether Synod London of the URCNA will do the same.

### *Theological Education*

When, the Lord willing, we come to federative unity with the United Reformed Churches do we need to have a federationally governed seminary? This has been a thorny issue that has caused considerable debate. In their report to Synod the theological education committee stated, "As a fully independent model is not acceptable to the CanRC and a fully federational model is not acceptable to the URCNA, the only real viable choice of governance for theological education in a united federation would be a model where the united federation would operate with a model of two independent seminaries endorsed and approved by the general synod of a united church (i.e., Mid-America and Westminster California), with one federationally governed seminary (the Theological College in Hamilton) by way of a regional synod of Canada, or if deemed appropriate, by the general synods of the united federation meeting from time to time."

Synod Burlington-Ebenezer did not support this direction. Synod decided not to accept the regional synod model of theological education as proposed by the joint committee. The theological education committee was re-appointed and given the mandate to re-examine and discuss with our brothers in the URCNA the possibilities of operating at least one theological seminary by and for the churches, to ensure that such a seminary is accountable to and properly governed by the churches. The Committee was also instructed to encourage the brothers of the URCNA to examine and interact with the biblical, historical and practical reasons for operating one institution for the training for the ministry as described in Appendix 1 of the report of the Joint Committee, summarized in Lord's Day 38 (Question and Answer 103) and regulated in Article 19 CO of the CanRC.

### *Common Songbook*

During the past three years, the activities of the Committee for a Common Songbook were deeply affected by a change in direction and mandate given by Synod Schererville 2007. Synod Schererville 2007 affirmed an earlier decision to publish a new URCNA Psalter Hymnal. Synod Burlington-Ebenezer noted that the decision by the URCNA Synod with regard to the Songbook resulted in a changed mandate which has made progress impossible to date. Nevertheless, Synod considered that it would be beneficial to continue the Committee to work on further improvements as needed to the Book of Praise, positioning it in whole or in part for possible future integration into a common songbook. It would be advantageous to find ways to remain in contact with the URCNA Committee as well as to explore possible avenues of cooperation. Seeing the decision to develop a common Songbook has not been revised or rescinded, this should remain a stated objective within the context of a new federation. At the same time it needs to be realized that such an endeavour requires a considerable amount of time, manpower, and resources and thus will not be quickly completed either before or after merger is realized. Synod decided to state that the Canadian Reformed Churches remain committed to having a common songbook in a united federation.

### *Liturgical Forms*

According to the Acts of Synod Smithers the recommendation was made "to appoint a Liturgical Forms and Confessions Committee with the mandate to meet with their counterparts in the URCNA to come with

a unified text for creeds, confessions, and liturgical forms and prayers, for the proposed prose section for the Common Songbook.” The Committee never met with URCNA Committee but communicated by means of letters. In a letter dated October 27, 2008 the URCNA Committee noted that they were mandated to prepare liturgical forms and confessions for a URCNA songbook. They went on to state, “Therefore we do not see our mandate as entailing the production of a ‘unified text’ for all future liturgical forms as does yours.” In its report to Synod, the Committee notes that if it is to function there needs to be clarity from the URCNA whether they are prepared to work towards unified liturgical texts for a joint songbook. In response to this report Synod Burlington-Ebenezer expressed disappointment that the Committee was not able to make any progress. Synod decided, however, to retain the committee and to give them as part of their mandate: to review and compare the Creeds, Confessions, Forms, and Prayers of the CanRC and URCNA with a view to merger, and to make itself available to the URCNA as needed.

### *Joint Church Order*

Echoing the sentiments of the churches, Synod expressed great appreciation for the work done by the Joint Church Order Committee. Synod did recommend, however, a re-wording of several articles where the churches expressed major concerns. The final decision of Synod was: to adopt *provisionally* the proposed joint church order as the Church Order for a united federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America and the Canadian Reformed Churches. Synod also underlined the fact that currently the Canadian Reformed Churches are governed by the Church Order adopted at General Synod 1983, and it will remain so until such time as a future General Synod decides that agreement has been reached on merger. Then, and only then, will the text of the Joint Church Order be finalized and implemented.

Synod mandated the Church Order Committee to give a final evaluation of the letters from the churches, to finalize those matters deemed to be yet unfinished and to adopt the changes recommended by Synod.

### **Bible Translation**

In its report to Synod, the Committee for Bible Translations made the churches aware of the fact that a new version of the NIV is to be published in 2011. Since current information about the upcoming new version of the NIV gives little indication of the nature of the changes being contemplated Synod mandated the Committee for Bible Translations:

- To thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV translation when it is released in 2011 and to produce and send a report to the churches within nine months of the release date.
- To investigate the feasibility of obtaining access to the printing rights of the 1984 edition of the NIV.
- To investigate further whether the ESV or the NKJV or the NASB could become the recommended translation for the churches.
- To investigate the possibility and feasibility of publishing an ecclesiastically-produced and owned Bible translation with the cooperation of English-speaking churches which are members of NAPARC and/or ICRC.

### **Book of Praise**

Though quite a number of churches expressed the desire to see a finalized publication of the *Book of Praise* after Synod 2010, at least ten churches urged synod to give the churches more time to test the revised Psalter and hymns as well as the additional hymns being proposed from the augment. A number of these churches suggested that a provisional edition of the *Book of Praise* be printed for the purpose of

testing in the churches, and for final revision and for adoption by synod 2013. Synod decided to pass on to the Standing Committee for the Book of Praise (SCBP) the letters of the churches with proposed changes to the Psalter and to the hymn section they have proposed and to empower the SCBP to incorporate any changes they deem to be improvements to their proposed Book of Praise. Synod instructed the SCBP:

To publish a provisional edition of the complete *Book of Praise*, including the changes adopted by this synod, with a renumbered hymn section for use in the churches per Article 55 CO. This provisional edition has been sufficiently prepared for the purpose of evaluation and will be amended by the SCBP and presented to synod 2013 for final approval and printing. Nineteen hymns from the Augment will be included in the provisional edition (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28).

### **Women's Voting**

One of the issues that lived on the hearts and minds of the brothers at Synod, and surely of the churches, was the matter of Women's Voting. As Synod drew to a close the advisory committee presented both a majority and minority proposal. The bottom line of the majority proposal was: to maintain the current practice of male communicant member voting. It was decided that Synod would vote on this proposal by secret ballot. As the voting took place and the outcome was tallied a hush came over the assembly. The majority proposal was defeated. Synod then turned its attention to the minority proposal and made the following decision:

- To affirm that based on 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33–35, and as stipulated in Art.3 CO only male communicant members can be called to the special offices of minister, elder and deacon.
- That any arrangement for the election of office bearers that goes beyond what has been agreed upon by the churches in Art.3 CO is a matter of the local regulations, adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons.

### **Future Synods and guidelines**

Synod adopted several changes to the Synodical guidelines which will affect how the churches will submit material to Synod. Synod added the following:

- For all matters of the churches in common, individual churches may address proposals or other significant submissions directly to general synod with the requirement that all such submissions are sent also to each church in the federation no later than six months prior to general synod.
- Since matters on the agenda of general synod involve the churches in common, it would be appropriate for regional synods to distribute copies of adopted overtures to all the churches in the federation no later than five months prior to the convening of a general synod.

The clerk of Synod spends a great deal of his time and energy on preparing the Acts and that can hinder him from participating in a meaningful way in Committee work and in plenary session. Synod, therefore, adopted the following addition to the guidelines, "The convening church shall arrange to have people present during Synod to assist the clerks in preparing the Acts and to do other paper work."

### **Conclusion**

For many days the brothers at Synod could do their work in good harmony and therefore it was not a surprise when the chairman concluded that censure according to Article 34 of the Church Order was not necessary.



Synod Burlington 2010 is now behind us. Not every decision may be met with the approval of all. The work was done by men who were painfully aware of their own weaknesses and shortcomings. We began and concluded each day with devotions, asking God to bless our work. Many times at Synod the brothers reminded each other that we were not there to get our own way, or to please people but in service of our King, Jesus Christ. Every decision that was made will ultimately come under the scrutiny and judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ. Soli Deo Gloria!

On behalf of Synod 2010,

Rev. Peter Feenstra