

The Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America
meeting in London, Ontario, Canada
July 27 - 30, A.D. 2010

October 18, 2010

Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer, Second Clerk
227 1st Avenue SE
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To the Canadian and American Reformed Churches,

Esteemed Brothers,

We greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the king of the church, and pray that He will continue to fulfill His promise to “build my church” in your midst.

Synod London, 2010, received “with appreciation” the two letters of the General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches meeting in Burlington, Ontario in May of this year. Because our synod met only for four days, it was not possible to draft an appropriate and acceptable response in the space of that time and so it assigned the officers of the synod to draft a response to both letters, subject to the approval of the consistory of the calling church for our next synod. This is our response to both of your letters.

Our synod devoted much attention to our relationship with you as sister churches and to the matter of achieving a fuller expression of the spiritual unity we have in Christ.

On our first full day, we devoted a good part of the evening to hearing from Dr. Gerhard Visscher and Dr. Jason Van Vliet, who answered questions that had been submitted in advance by our churches. They also answered questions from the floor. We were impressed with their humility and patience and greatly appreciated the clarity with which they allayed the concerns of the questioners. The chairman of our synod responded to their work with words of gratitude and with a reference to the prayer of Jesus in John 17 and our need to give visible expression to our spiritual unity.

Regarding the work of the unity committees we jointly established in 2001, our synod took note of the fact that the Theological Education Committee has reached an impasse, and that the Songbook Committee had made little progress toward a united song book. In light of this, our synod terminated our involvement in both unity committees, although we continue to have a Songbook Committee for the development of a new songbook for our own federation. Although no longer working on a joint song book, the committee was reminded of the need to communicate with your churches according to the provisions of our current relationship of Phase 2, Ecclesiastical Fellowship. The churches were also alerted that proposed solutions to the impasse regarding the education of ministers may still be proposed by way of overture to future synods.

Although we have terminated our involvement in two of the unity committees, we have mandated the Joint Church Order Committee to continue to perfect their work for use by a united federation. We did this, in part, as an answer to an overture asking the synod to dismiss the committee. The rejection of the overture to dismiss the committee is a telling indication of our continuing commitment to eventual church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches, even though our progress toward that goal has been impeded by several obstacles.

As a federation of churches, we remain committed to working toward reconciliation in obedience to the ecumenical imperatives of Scripture, such as Ephesians 4:3, “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” and Philippians 1:27ff, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith.” In that spirit, we approved a recommendation “That Synod explicitly reaffirm our conviction that the Canadian Reformed Churches are a federation of true and faithful churches of Christ, whom we love and respect as fellow workers in the kingdom” (Article #47). We are not merely good friends; we are brothers and sisters in Christ, joined together in the bond of the Spirit, evidenced by a common confession of the faith and with you, committed to expressing our unity in concrete and discernable ways.

However, our situation is different than yours. While the vast majority of your churches know us well, through neighboring congregational relationships in Canada, nearly two thirds of our churches – those in the United States – do not have Canadian (American) Reformed congregations as near neighbors. This means that most of our churches are not intimately aware of how the faith lives among you. Such lack of information is, sadly, fertile ground for the seeds of both indifference and suspicion. Our situation is also different in that there is not among us the same degree of uniformity as is found among Canadian Reformed Churches. Unity committee reports regarding seminaries, songs and regional synods, for example, have sometimes raised concerns that our current freedoms would be curtailed in a way that would drive some of our own members to separate from us if a union were implemented in the near future.

Because of these differences, it has become evident that before we can move forward in building a single edifice in which we all can live together; we need to do more foundational work, especially at the local level. To that end our synod passed a resolution to “encourage the churches to facilitate further opportunities to interact with the Canadian Reformed Churches by implementing the essential work of organizing events, speaking at conferences, writing columns, filling pulpits, and otherwise building the organic, heartfelt unity on which federative unity must be built” (Article #47).

We ask that you be patient with us, recognizing that moving more slowly toward federative unity, may be the best way of ensuring that our actions result in a lasting unity that will truly glorify God and advance the gospel of peace in the world.

Regarding your second letter, of June 7, 2010, concerning the status of the Nine Points adopted by Synod Schererville and the significance of “pastoral advice,” we can state that some clarity was achieved, although the matter was also referred to our Synodical Rules Committee for further clarification. The Nine Points were also challenged by way of an appeal, directed not

at their content, but at the procedure by which they were adopted. The appeal was not sustained, so the pastoral advice remains.

You ask if such pastoral advice is confessionally binding. Although the matter of defining the nature of synodical pastoral advice was referred to a synodical committee for further work, by implication, it appears that such statements by our synod are not confessionally binding. We make that observation on the basis of the grounds attached to theological statements made by this year's synod. A study committee report submitted to Synod London asked the synod to affirm a list of theological statements, some of which were quotations from our confessions and some of which were not confessional quotations but statements summarizing the exegetical findings of the committee. Rather than affirming the entire list of theological statements, the synod responded by separating the confessional quotations from the committee's own summary statements and made the following distinction: "clearly distinguishing direct quotations from the Confessions from the formulations of the 15 points [the committee's summary statements] respects the binding status of our confessions as our doctrinal standards" (Article #113). Thus, the 15 summary statements affirmed by the synod were distinguished from the confessions which are binding.

You also ask if Point 6 of the Nine Points of Schererville was directed at the Canadian Reformed Churches and the view of the covenant upheld by the Liberation of 1944 in the Netherlands. No, it was not directed at the Canadian Reformed Churches or their view of the covenant. Synod Schererville addressed an error associated with Federal Vision which contends that in baptism a person is granted every spiritual gift, including a true and saving faith, the grace of conversion and justification. The Nine Points were made to uphold the doctrine that a man is justified *through faith alone*, and that God will never reverse His gracious declaration of justification concerning the believing sinner. Point 6 of the Nine Points of Schererville does not deny that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace. What Point 6 denies is that all baptized persons are in the covenant in *precisely* the same way *such that* no distinction is made between those who have the promises by covenant and those who receive by faith what is promised. It should be read in the context of Point 5 which rejects the error *that a person can be historically, conditionally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness* (underline added). We gratefully take note of the fact that when addressing our synod on behalf of your churches, Dr. G. H. Visscher expressed agreement with this understanding of Point 6 and our concern.

We join with you in praying that the Lord will bless our efforts for unity and give us the wisdom to know how to proceed and the courage to do what His Word commands. May God give us all grace to persevere in obedience to the command to "make every effort" (Ephesians 4:3), having as our goal the prayer of Jesus, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me" (John 17:23).

On behalf of Synod London 2010,

Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer (Second Clerk)