

The 2011 meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) in Lawrenceville Ga. provided opportunity for personal and extended engagement between representatives from the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA).

All or most of the representatives from the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) and the Canadian Reformed Churches' Committee for Church Unity (CCU) and Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA) met on two separate occasions (on November 14 and 16). Those present from the CanRC were Rev. Willem Den Hollander, Rev. Clarence Vander Velde (from the CCU), Rev. Peter Holtvluwer, Rev. Eric Kampen, and Elder Henry van Delden (from the CCCNA). From the URCNA Rev. Greg Bero, Rev. Bill Boekestein, Rev. John Bouwers, Rev. Todd De Rooy, Rev. Bill Pols, Rev. Ralph Pontier, Elder Al Vermeer, and Rev. Harry Zekveld were present.

The purpose of the meetings was to discuss goals, expectations, frustrations and commitments regarding the relationship between the two federations. The meetings also presented opportunity for the representatives to develop personal relationships with and grow in appreciation for one another. A number of potential objections to the proposed merger between the URCNA and CanRC were discussed along with ways to constructively respond to them.

1. Getting to know one another.

It was observed that congregations do not affiliate in a federation on the basis of knowing every other congregation but rather on the basis of confessional agreement; something which does exist between the URCNA and the CanRC. Still, the representatives felt the practical importance of facilitating ways for ministers and congregations from the respective federations to get to know each other. In particular, congregations are encouraged to open their pulpits to ministers from their sister church. Classes are encouraged to extend invitations to fraternal delegates for the purpose of developing closer ties; classes in the USA are encouraged to receive members of the Canadian Reformed Coordinators for Church Unity as fraternal delegates to their meetings. Where feasible, classes are also encouraged to consider holding joint CanRC/URCNA classis meetings (business meetings would be conducted separately; devotions, meals, and other times of interaction could be enjoyed jointly. Such an arrangement is being planned for Spring 2012 between Classis East of the URCNA and Presbytery New Jersey of the OPC). As a step toward getting to know each other Rev. Willem den Hollander has given a brief presentation on CanRC/URCNA history and relations which can be viewed at Youtube.com. Lack of knowledge of one another may also contribute to the concern that our two denominations are simply too different from each other. In response, the CanRC delegates pointed out that diversity in the URC can be a strength provided that those who disagree on non-confessional matters make no attempt to bind the consciences of another.

2. Getting to trust one another.

There are some in the URC who mistakenly lump the CanRC with the Federal Vision (FV) stream of thought. Given the positions taken against FV by the URCNA and other NAPARC denominations, such a view naturally breeds distrust. Dr. Wes Bredenhof has written a series of articles to help dispel this misunderstanding by distinguishing the CanRC and FV (The first installment of which can be read at <http://www.reformedfellowship.net/articles/federal-vision-bredenhof-jul-aug11v61-n4.htm>). On the other hand there are some in the CanRC who are hurt to hear that they are not trusted. Such feelings have had a cooling effect among some in the CanRC regarding the merger.

It was also acknowledged that there has existed in the CanRCs an element of exclusivism which could also create disinterest among URCs to join with them. The old thinking that existed among some in the CanRC was that there could be only one visible manifestation of the true church so that every church, other than one's own, must be a false church. As Dr. Godfrey mentioned in his address to NAPARC the recognition of denominations entails acknowledgement that there are other Christian bodies that are faithful manifestations of the true church. The CanRC representatives humbly acknowledged personal and denominational development with regard to this view.

There is also a fear among some URCs that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) is hierarchical. It was observed that part of that perception could come from a functional congregationalism that may exist in some URCNA churches. It was pointed out that until greater trust develops there will remain an unwillingness on the part of some to embrace delegated assemblies.

3. Appreciating the ecumenical imperative.

The representatives would encourage preaching on John 17:21 and other texts which highlight the moral imperative of unity. The general consensus amongst the brothers was that while formal, organic unity cannot exist in any beneficial or meaningful way where there is no spiritual unity, both are essential. Formal, organic unity is the structure and shape of spiritual unity.

In summary, CERCU encourages each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA. The Canadian Reformed brothers expressed their eagerness and willingness to come to any classis to address any concerns to enable us to come to know and trust one another more fully. Those who have been involved in this process of facilitating greater unity have been profoundly impacted with the spirit of unity. Throughout the process relationships have been formed and misconceptions addressed. It seems that most or all of those present have experienced progress in terms of our understanding of the unity of the church. We have also experienced how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity (Psalm 133:1).