

# **REPORT OF THE COORDINATORS FOR THE COMMITTEE FOR CHURCH UNITY (CCU)**

**To: General Synod Dunnville 2016**

## **Mandate**

General Synod Carman 2013 gave the coordinators of the CCU the following mandate:

1. To discuss with CERCU the areas of concern or fear in the URCNA that seem to be hindering progress toward a merger with the CanRC;
2. To seek ways to facilitate the work of building unity on the local level, as well as visiting churches and classes of the URCNA, particularly in the United States;
3. To mandate the coordinators to discuss with CERCU how to make preparations for Phase 3, such as through the reappointment of the subcommittees for theological education, liturgical forms and confessions and a common songbook;
4. To seek clarification from CERCU on the authoritative status and definitions of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods and to encourage the URCNA to refrain from making further statements of this nature.

*(Acts of General Synod Carman 2013, Article 129, p. 161)*

## **Activities**

1. In May of 2013, Rev. W. den Hollander was invited by several URCNA churches in Iowa to preach and make presentations to the congregations about the CanRC. He preached in Rock Valley IA on Ascension Day and did a presentation to the congregation. On Sunday, May 12, he preached in Sanborn IA and Orange City IA, doing presentations to each of these congregations.
2. On Sept 18, 2013, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde met to discuss the mandate given by General Synod Carman 2013 as well as what we would talk about with the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) at the occasion of the annual meeting of NAPARC in Flat Rock, North Carolina.
3. Rev. C.J. VanderVelde attended Classis Ontario-East September 26, 2013 held in Toronto, ON and brought fraternal greetings.
4. Rev. W. den Hollander attended Classis Michigan October 8, 2013 and brought fraternal greetings, being invited to do so. After his presentation there was time for questions from the floor of Classis. A ministerial luncheon had also been organized for Rev. den Hollander to attend the next day, which gave further opportunity for discussion. Rev. den Hollander also used the visit to Michigan to preach in the Wyoming URC and

the Byron Center URC on the Sunday preceding the Classis. After both services, he did a presentation to the respective congregations.

5. On October 27 and November 3, 2013, Rev. den Hollander preached at the URCNA church in Cape Coral FL. On that second Sunday, he did a presentation to the congregation about the CanRC and the pursuit of merger.

6. In the evening of November 18, 2013 and in the afternoon of November 20, 2013, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde met with the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) at the occasion of the annual meeting of NAPARC in Flat Rock, North Carolina. We presented the URCNA brothers with a copy of the *Acts* of General Synod Carman 2013. We used this occasion to seek clarification from CERCU about the authoritative status of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA Synods and to explain why the CanRCs do not like such statements. We also discussed how best to move the merger efforts forward. Please see Appendix #1 for the Press Release.

7. On Dec 1, 2013, Rev. den Hollander preached at the URCNA church in Pella IA as well as at the URCNA church in Des Moines IA. Both times he did a presentation to the congregation after the service

8. Rev. W. den Hollander attended Classis Pacific Northwest February 25, 2014 in Ripon, CA and brought fraternal greetings on behalf of the CanRC, being invited to do so. On the Monday before Classis, a ministerial took place at which Rev. den Hollander could speak personally with various ministers and address their concerns.

9. Rev. W. den Hollander attended Classis Southwestern Ontario March 12, 2014 in Brantford, ON and brought fraternal greetings on behalf of the CanRC.

10. On March 20, 2014, Rev. den Hollander spoke upon invitation to past, present, and future officebearers at the Providence URC in Winnipeg MB. This meeting was attended by URC and CanRC men and addressed the pursuit of ecclesiastical unity between the URC and CanRC.

11. Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde attended Synod 2014, for its duration, from June 2-5, 2014, which was held at Visalia, California. Rev. den Hollander brought fraternal greetings on behalf of the CanRC; see appendix #2 for the address.

12. The Council of the Free Reformed Church of Baldivis, Australia sought our input as to whether they should initiate an overture through their broader assemblies to the effect that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) take up the invitation of the URCNA to explore the possibility of entering a relationship of Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the URCNA. In a letter written in June 2014, we strongly recommended pursuing this.

13. On September 24, 2014, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde met with Rev. J.A Bouwers to have a brainstorming session about how to move the relationship between the CanRC and URCNA forward after Synod Visalia 2014's decision to "table indefinitely" the proposal to encourage CERCU to work on a formal plan leading to Phase 3A (merger).

14. On September 30, 2014, Rev. W. den Hollander met with the Council of the Dunnville, Ontario URC, upon their request, to speak about the merger pursuit in general and also specifically about how the CanRC have taken the decision of Synod Visalia 2014. There was also discussion about the forms for the excommunication of communicant and non-communicant members, lapsing of membership, liturgy, and other matters.

15. On October 5, 2014, Rev. W. den Hollander preached in the New Haven, Vermont URC, upon their invitation, and did a presentation to the congregation about the unity efforts.

16. On November 11, 2014, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde had a meeting with CERCU at the occasion of NAPARC held in Grassie, ON. The focus of the meeting was: How do we move the relationship between the CanRC and the URCNA forward after Synod Visalia 2014's decision to "table indefinitely" the proposal to encourage CERCU to work on a formal plan leading to Phase 3A (merger)? How do we implement the calling/principle regarding unity in a practical way, both locally in Canada and federatively in North America? We also discussed how Synod Visalia 2014's decision is perceived in the CanRC, and whether CERCU can go to URC congregations where resistance to merger is strong in order to promote the cause. We reflected on the overture to Synod 2016 from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14 and 15, 2014 calling for the discontinuation of all further action, advancement, processes, efforts or steps toward merger at this time. We exhorted one another to proceed with patience and love in this whole process.

17. Rev. W. den Hollander was in attendance at Classis Southwestern Ontario November 26, 2014 convened in Hamilton, Ontario (where another CanRC minister was already present as fraternal delegate and spoke as such on behalf of one of our Classes). Rev. Henry VanOlst informed Classis about Rev. den Hollander's interim ministry in the Dunnville URC during its vacancy and about the upcoming interim relationship with the Hamilton-Rehoboth URC during its vacancy. This kind of ongoing relationship in a local congregation has helped to solidify the CanRC-URCNA relationship.

18. Rev. C.J. VanderVelde attended Classis Southwestern Ontario March 25, 2015 held in Listowel, ON and brought fraternal greetings on behalf of the CanRC.

19. Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde met with the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) at the occasion of the annual meeting of NAPARC held in Quebec City from November 10-12, 2015. We discussed developments since our last meeting together and hopes for the future. We

noted that slow but certain progress, though at times difficult, is nevertheless encouraging. We discussed the wisdom of having a period of time in which there is no pressure of having Phase 3A on the immediate horizon but in which efforts can be made to cultivate our relationship in the USA. This may be of benefit to those churches in the USA where there is a lingering discomfort about the unity efforts. In addition, we had much opportunity to discuss informally with members of CERCU how the pursuit of unity can best be enhanced.

By the Spring of 2014, all of the American Classes within the URCNA had been visited. The overall impression is that among the Classes in the USA the response generally speaking was somewhat ambivalent, lacking the interest and support one may expect for a federative pursuit of church unity with a federation of the same precious faith. There could be all kinds of reasons for this. On the one hand, there appears to be little sense of an ecumenical imperative toward union. On the other hand, the sentiment was expressed by some officebearers that the URCNA federation has changed a lot since 2001, with the result that the effort toward merger is no longer supported as it was before 2001 when the federation was dominated by the Canadian URCs. Furthermore, the (perceived) Canadian Reformed view of the covenant was challenged by some – a concern which has in many ways been removed by the colloquium at Synod Visalia 2014. In view of the above, let us pray that further efforts made by CERCU and CCU may be blessed with a growing interest federation-wide among the URCNA.

## **The Status of the Doctrinal Statements**

Synod Carman 2013 mandated the coordinators of the CCU to seek clarification from CERCU on the authoritative status and definitions of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods. This mandate arose from a concern that the churches might be binding themselves beyond the confessions. The *Synodical Rules of Procedure* adopted by Synod Nyack 2012 as they pertain to doctrinal affirmation and pastoral advice are as follows:

1. **Doctrinal Affirmation:** A *Doctrinal Affirmation* is an interpretation of the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity on a specific point of their teaching (*Acts of Synod 2004*, Article 76.B.b., p. 29).

1.1 A Doctrinal Affirmation serves the churches by directing them to the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity, applying them in response to doctrinal questions that has arisen in the churches.

1.2 A Doctrinal Affirmation should be received by the churches with respect and submission, and it may not be directly or indirectly contradicted in preaching or in writing (Church Order Articles 29 and 31; *Form of Subscription*). The Scriptures, Ecumenical Creeds, and the Three Forms of Unity alone may serve as grounds in matters of discipline (*Acts of Synod 2007*, Article 67.4, p. 36).

1.3 A Doctrinal Affirmation may be appealed as outlined in Church Order Articles 29 and 31 (*Form of Subscription, Regulations for Synodical Procedure 3.4 and Appendix B*).

2. **Pastoral Advice:** *Pastoral Advice* is Synod's application of the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches.

- 2.1 Pastoral Advice expresses the collective wisdom of Synod to guide the churches in their pastoral care.
- 2.2 Pastoral Advice should be received with respect. It would be unwise to disregard Pastoral Advice in preaching or writing. It may not, however, serve as grounds in matters of discipline.
- 2.3 Pastoral Advice may be appealed as outlined in Church Order Articles 29 and 31 (*Regulations for Synodical Procedure* 3.4 and Appendix B).  
(*Acts of Synod Nyack 2012, Article 45, p. 37*)

The Fifteen Points adopted by Synod London 2010 were doctrinal affirmations prefaced with the statement “That Synod affirm the following teachings of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity” (*Acts of Synod London 2010, Article 113, p. 66*). This means that the Fifteen Points may not be directly or indirectly contradicted in preaching or in writing. At the same time, it is important to note from the above rules of procedure that only the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity may be used as grounds for discipline; doctrinal affirmations and pastoral advice are not given that status.

The doctrinal affirmations by their very definition thus present a particular interpretation of the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity. Anytime there is a further definition or interpretation of something in our Confessions there is a (potential) narrowing of the range of interpretation allowed. This has been the longstanding concern of the CanRC regarding such statements, and we as coordinators conveyed this to CERCU at the meeting in Flat Rock, NC in November 2013.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that there are also other ways in which doctrinal statements could be made which seek to define or interpret something in the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity. This too could result in narrowing the range of interpretation allowed. For example, when a CanRC ecclesiastical assembly is faced with an appeal about a doctrinal matter, the considerations leading up to the recommendation could consist of doctrinal affirmations involving the definition and interpretation of something in the Scriptures or the Confessions. The *status* of such considerations would not be equal to the status of the points adopted by recent URCNA synods, but the *practice* in such instances also amounts to articulating certain points of doctrine. The difference is that in the case of the points adopted by the URCNA the doctrinal statements are codified, whereas this is not the case when doctrinal statements are made in the considerations leading up to an ecclesiastical assembly’s decision. To be fair and to present as balanced a picture as possible in this whole matter, we as coordinators also mentioned this in our discussion with CERCU.

Moreover, much could depend on how the Fifteen Points are understood. For example, point #5 of the Fifteen Points of London affirms that “Adam was obligated to obey ‘the commandment of life’ in order to live in fellowship with God and enjoy His favor eternally (Belgic Confession, Article 14, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3).” Does this mean that an officebearer must hold to the existence of a covenant of works before the Fall into sin? That particular language is not used, but what is the import of this statement? When we as coordinators mentioned the discomfort that many in the CanRC have with the language of “covenant of works” and read some quotations to that

effect from a published work, this sparked considerable discussion and led to the expression of some concern on the part of several members of CERCU. It was partly because of this discussion at Flat Rock, NC in November 2013 that CERCU felt that perhaps a colloquium should be organized to give a keener focus on whether our differences are within what we confess together in the Three Forms of Unity. This discussion at Flat Rock, NC underlines our concern about extra-confessional statements because it shows that doctrinal affirmations made to interpret the Confessions are themselves open to interpretation.

Herewith we pass along to Synod Dunnville 2016 that we as coordinators have sought and received clarification from CERCU on the authoritative status and definitions of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods.

### **Synod Visalia 2014 on Unity Matters**

In its report to Synod Visalia 2014 as included in the *Provisional Agenda*, CERCU made many heartening comments with respect to the effort toward church unity. We read: “One third of the URC has discovered that the Canadian Reformed are our dear brothers and sisters in the faith. That two thirds of the URC has not had the opportunity to discover this truth firsthand continues to present real challenges, but we pray that the two thirds will accept the testimony and witness born [sic] by the one third” (*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, p. 77) The CERCU report goes on to say:

In our discussions together as CERCU we observe that three types of concerns remain regarding the unity process. One is theological. We need to be convinced as churches that the doctrine of the covenant taught in our respective churches can live healthily side by side in one federation within the bounds of our confessions. The second is church political. Given our negative past experiences, there are continued fears concerning perceived hierarchical tendencies in the Proposed Joint Church Order. The third has to do with the will to ecumenism generally; some are not convinced that churches that share a confession are required to seek organizational unity. As a committee we are of a mind that if the first two types of objections can be addressed to our mutual satisfaction, the hesitations with regards to the third will also be alleviated.

According to its mandate, and the ongoing encouragement of synodical decisions, CERCU remains committed to pursuing unity with these sister churches. Since November 2012, CERCU has communicated by way of press releases and reports to classes, that it decided that we announce to Synod 2014 our intention to propose at Synod 2016 entering Step A – *Development of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union* (of Phase Three *Church Union*). Our *Guidelines* describe this step as follows...:

#### **Step A – Development of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union**

Having recognized and accepted each other as true and faithful churches, the federations shall make preparation for and a commitment to eventual, integrated federative church unity. They shall construct a plan of ecclesiastical union which shall outline the timing, coordination, and/or integration of the following:

- a. the broader assemblies
- b. the liturgies and liturgical forms
- c. the translations of the Bible and the confessions

- d. the song books for worship
- e. the church polity and order
- f. the missions abroad

Entering this step of Phase Three requires ratification by the consistories as required in Church Order, Art. 36 (*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, p. 77).

Furthermore, in an effort to clear up theological misconceptions, CERCU proposed that a colloquium be held at Synod Visalia. We read the following in the CERCU report:

To continue to promote better understanding of one another, we are also proposing a one hour colloquium be held at this synod between two respected leaders from each of our federations. We have invited Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema from the URC and Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Ted Van Raalte of the CanRC. We have asked each group to prepare a paper dealing with the theological concerns that are between us, and then for each group to write a response to the other's paper. Those papers will be available, Lord willing before synod and then at synod the four men will present their conclusions and with each other in a public "colloquium" during an hour we are proposing be set aside during the meeting of synod. By allowing representatives of our churches to dialogue publicly over points of critical interest and importance, it is hoped that greater confidence in our mutual adherence to our Confessions may be promoted (*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, p. 78).

Under the heading "The Lord's Work," the CERCU report ends its section on the Canadian Reformed Churches by making these important remarks:

It was the work of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, which brought about the formation of the URC. It was God who gave the faith, courage, love, and mutual trust that united our churches under Scripture and the confessions with a new church order. If a similar love, courage, and trust will bring about a new union with other brothers and sisters of common confession and heritage, this also must be of God. This is why prayer is of utmost importance. Prayer acknowledged [sic] this dependence on God. Prayer means seeking God's will, and not our own. Prayer expresses and reinforces the importance of "making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

The committee has pursued its mandate to seek unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches with the belief that such union would be according to God's Word, and thus pleasing to Him. But such belief alone neither accomplishes anything nor proves it to be the will of God. This is why we have included a recommendation that synod urge the churches to regularly pray for the Lord's guidance and grace that we may know and do His will, and that He might do "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think . . . to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations" (Ephesians 3:20-21) (*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, p. 79).

Regarding the recommendations of CERCU to Synod Visalia, we note that Recommendation #8 reads: "That Synod remind the churches of our mutual responsibility to engage one another in our ecumenical task through prayer, classical dialogue, local efforts and the expression of concerns." Recommendation #10: "That Synod receive for information the announcement of CERCU that it plans to

recommend to Synod 2016 that we proceed to Phase Three A of church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, we would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*.” Recommendation #11 seeks to get the local churches more involved: “That Synod urge the churches to seriously consider which, if any specific articles or stipulations of the PJCO they believe should be changed before it can be adopted for a united federation, and seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their classis.” And Recommendation #12: “That Synod approve the cooperation of the PJCO [Proposed Joint Church Order] Committee with CERCU for the working on as yet unresolved difficulties that will be encountered in formulating a plan of union” (*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, p. 84).

One final recommendation which, although lengthy, is worth quoting in its entirety:

That Synod continue to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting Canadian Reformed ministers to fill our pulpits, inviting Canadian Reformed representatives to our classis meetings, seeking open dialogue with Canadian Reformed brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with Canadian Reformed congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection

Grounds:

- a. Those who have been involved in the process of facilitating greater unity have been profoundly impacted with the spirit of unity. Throughout the process, further dialogue has consistently resulted in warm and cordial relationships and misconceptions have been dispelled.
- b. This would be an encouragement to the Canadian Reformed Churches who through their synodical communications have expressed their willingness to continue working through the challenges involved in seeking unity.
- c. Our own unity as emerging URCNA churches was formed through much of these kinds of relations and interactions before our own official start together.

(*Provisional Agenda Synod Visalia 2014*, pp. 84,85).

As fraternal delegates representing the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) at Synod Visalia 2014, your coordinators enjoyed much good fellowship with the URC brothers as we attended Synod Visalia for its duration. With two delegates present from each congregation, it is a good opportunity for us as coordinators for church unity to interact with people from all regions of the federation. In addition to the speech by Rev. den Hollander bringing greetings from our federation, the highlight for us as CanRC was the one-hour colloquium (learned discussion) which took place on the floor of Synod by Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema from the URCNA and Dr. Ted VanRaalte and Dr. Jason VanVliet from the CanRC (Article 50). The topic was covenant views. A one-hour question period followed the colloquium, allowing for questions from delegates to Synod Visalia. This colloquium was held at the suggestion of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) of the URCNA. The purpose was to help clear up misunderstandings and to see what the differences are when it comes to prevalent covenant views in the URCNA and the CanRC.



Prior to the colloquium, the two URCNA brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the URCNA, and the two CanRC brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the CanRC. It was made clear at the colloquium that two men cannot speak for an entire federation but that what was presented was fairly representative of each federation. The papers were the basis for the colloquium at Synod. These papers were distributed to all the Councils of the URCNA federation prior to Synod Visalia.

The colloquium papers indicate no significant differences regarding covenant views and the colloquium itself also led to no disagreement, with the four participants concluding that we are on the same page regarding covenant views. The colloquium was a very positive experience and helped to clear up misunderstandings. As representatives of the CanRC, we received much positive feedback about the colloquium from the delegates of Synod. The colloquium papers can be read at the website of the URCNA at [www.urchna.org](http://www.urchna.org) and have also been sent to the Councils of all Canadian and American Reformed Churches by your coordinators for church unity. There was an audio recording of the colloquium and the question period, which has been transcribed. The papers and the entire proceedings have been published as a book: John A. Bouwers and Theodore G. Van Raalte, eds., *The Bond of the Covenant within the Bounds of the Confessions: A Conversation between the URCNA and CanRC* (St. Catharines, ON: Church Unity Publications, 2015). We hope that many will read it.

In dealing with the CERCU report, the advisory committee of Synod recommended that Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the CanRC; this would mean that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, CERCU would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*. This was “tabled indefinitely,” which according to *Robert’s Rules of Order* means that Synod Visalia did not want to adopt or defeat this recommendation, choosing instead to postpone a decision about it (Article 53, Recommendation 9). This decision shows that the URCNA is not ready to proceed further with concrete steps toward merger at this time. While this decision is disappointing for us as CanRC, we can be thankful that the recommendation was not defeated but tabled indefinitely. With the time remaining in our mandate as coordinators for church unity, we continued to build relationships within the American section of the URCNA, and we tried to cultivate a will to ecumenism. We will see how the LORD decides to bless our efforts in the future.

Synod Visalia did adopt a recommendation of the advisory committee that the churches seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) they believe should be changed before the PJCO can be adopted for a united federation, and that the churches seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their Classes (Article 73, Recommendation 10). Synod instructed the PJCO committee to wait with doing further work on the PJCO until after a decision to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC (Article 69, Recommendation 1).

The reasoning which led Synod Visalia to instruct the PJCO committee to wait with doing further work on the PJCO until after a decision to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC is a departure from the approach of previous Synods. The ground is that the PJCO work properly belongs to Phase 3A, and the URCNA is not yet in Phase 3A with the CanRC (Article 69, Recommendation 1). However, the PJCO committee had been working for several years already in anticipation of a future merger, thereby doing groundwork for such a merger.

Furthermore, in keeping with Synod Nyack 2012, Synod Visalia reiterated that each Classis and Consistory continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to Classes, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with CanRC congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection (Article 26, Recommendation 12).

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and Classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC.

### **Synod Visalia on Other Matters**

In other news from Synod Visalia, we pass on that Rev. Richard Bout was elected to serve as Missions Coordinator. Rev. Bout had served as a church-planting missionary in Mexico for the past fifteen years and was awaiting a call after repatriating (Article 66, Recommendation 8, Article 84, Recommendation 8). His task will be to offer support and direction to the various church-planting projects of the URCNA, both abroad and at home. Two Councils are prepared to supervise Rev. Bout as Missions Coordinator; one of them will take on this task.

Furthermore, Synod adopted a Psalm Proposal of the 150 Psalms to be the Psalter portion of the new songbook for the URCNA. (About twenty of these Psalms are Genevans from our *Book of Praise*.) This Psalm Proposal was the joint effort of a URCNA committee and an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) committee (Article 32, Recommendation 4). An OPC General Assembly meeting at the same time elsewhere also adopted this Psalm Proposal. The work on the Hymn section is ongoing and is expected to be completed in time for Synod 2016, the LORD willing (Article 32, Recommendation 7).

Synod Visalia also decided to invite the OPC to hold its 2016 General Assembly at the same time and place as the next Synod of the URCNA (Article 32, Recommendation 11). The grounds are that this would be an expression of unity as sister churches in Christ, an expression of appreciation for the OPC invitation to join them in

the production of a new songbook, and an opportunity to hold a joint discussion on the songbook should both assemblies desire to do so. It was decided that Synod 2016 will be held in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area.

Synod Visalia decided that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv), the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) (FCC), and the Calvinistic Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRTNTT). Synod Visalia decided to discontinue Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Free Protestant Church in Argentina. Synod Visalia decided that the URCNA enter into Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Evangelical Reformed Church in Latvia (ERCLAT) and the Evangelical and Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW). Synod Visalia decided that the URCNA enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) with the United Reformed Churches of Congo (URCC) (Article 33 and 54).

### **Other Developments**

Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 (Article 30) dealt with -- and adopted -- an overture from one of the churches (Zion URC of Ripon CA) "...to overture Synod Wyoming 2016 to direct CERCUC to discontinue all further action, advancement, processes, efforts or steps towards unification with the Canadian Reformed Churches and specifically advancement to Phase 3, Step A." Ground #2 adduces that "...two-thirds of the federation does not approve of unification with the Canadian Reformed Churches and is resistant to CERCUC's proceedings." [Note: This is based on a misreading of CERCUC's report to Synod Visalia 2014.] Ground #3 reads: "The URCNA's current Phase II status of unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches is altogether satisfactory and effective and no compelling need to proceed to total union is presented." Ground #6: "Phase II Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches presently satisfies biblical requirements for pursuing Christian unity." Ground #5 asserts that the process has been "significantly distracting" from other matters such as missions and evangelism and from "...the very unity that we now do share and appreciate with the Canadian Reformed Churches." The overture does not close the door entirely on merger efforts because Ground #9 posits: "Staying in Phase II for the foreseeable future will in no way prejudice later initiatives to advance unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches."

While Synod Visalia 2014 "tabled indefinitely" the recommendation to *encourage* CERCUC to work toward recommending to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the CanRC – meaning that Synod Visalia did not want to vote for or against it – this overture going to Synod 2016 seeks to *stifle* any effort intended to lead to unification. If this is adopted by Synod Wyoming 2016, it will spell the end of any effort toward merger for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 (Article 32) also dealt with an overture from one of the churches (Immanuel's Reformed Church of Salem OR)

to the effect that Classis Pacific Northwest overture Synod 2016 "...to declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (a church order proposed for use in the prospective union of the United Reformed Churches with the Canadian Reformed Churches) is unusable for that purpose." Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 adopted this overture, and so it too is going to Synod 2016. The overture asserts that the Proposed Joint Church Order "vacates" a principle held dear by the URCNA, namely, that authority in Christ's church resides with the local eldership and not broader assemblies. The overture maintains that this principle is violated by such stipulations as having to maintain a seminary, licensure by Classis, counselors appointed for vacant churches by Classis, the role of deputies of Regional Synod, having Regional Synods, admission to the pulpit, etc. The fact that this overture is going to Synod 2016 shows that we are still a long way from agreement on how a merged federation would operate.

Furthermore, Classis Central US April 13-14, 2015 (Article 35) also dealt with an overture arising from one of the churches (Cornerstone URC of Sanborn IA), and adopted this overture, with the result that it too will be an overture on the agenda of Synod 2016. The overture seeks to change the mandate of CERCU. The mandate of CERCU currently reads: "With a view toward complete church unity, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." The overture proposes that it read: "With a desire to pursue a broader unity with churches that share a common confession and faith, and acknowledging the desirability of union with churches of like faith and practice, where feasible, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." In explanation, Ground #6 states: "The current terminology '*With a view toward complete church unity...*' appears to be used by the committee in a way which seems to keep driving toward organic union with the Canadian Reformed Churches without recognizing differences in like-faith, like-practice and the desire of churches in our federation to acknowledge them as a true church but not proceed further at this point."

While this overture is not as far-reaching as the overture going to Synod 2016 from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 (the overture originating from Zion URC of Ripon CA), our concern is that this proposed change to the CERCU mandate is designed to put the brakes on unity efforts with the CanRC and seems to suggest a weaker commitment to efforts toward merger. Especially the words "where feasible" could potentially lead to a neglect of the calling to work toward unity. The fact that it was adopted by Classis Central US and is going to Synod Wyoming 2016 as an overture is further evidence of a lingering discomfort regarding merger efforts among URC churches. If adopted, the message to CERCU is clear with respect to its dealings with the CanRC. If not adopted, it is still clear that there is a lingering discomfort among URC churches regarding merger efforts. And if the overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 is adopted, the overture from Classis Central US April 13-14, 2015 becomes a moot point regarding the CanRC.

Considering the above, the future for unity efforts looks less hopeful. We will have to await the outcome of Synod Wyoming 2016. Let us remember Synod Wyoming 2016 in our prayers, both as congregations and individuals, and pray that the vision of Synod Escondido 2001 -- which agreed to the Phase Two relationship and looked beyond to eventual merger -- may not be lost.

At the same time, it should be noted that positive remarks were made regarding unity at Classis Eastern US October 2014, at which time the question was asked: "Why are churches holding to the Three Forms of Unity not united?" CERCU was even told to present this question at NAPARC's meeting in Grassie, Ontario in November 2014. Hopefully, this sentiment too will be heard at Synod Wyoming 2016.

While it is easy to become discouraged by the unity efforts, we should not lose sight of the many blessings which we enjoy in our relationship together as churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship -- all of which are the result of a slow but steady growing together over a period of twenty years. Pulpit exchanges take place in many parts of Canada, we work together in Streetlight Ministries (a mission church in Hamilton, Ontario) as well as in Campfire (an evangelistic camping experience for the unchurched), there is a combined effort in the Anchor Association (an association to help handicapped brothers and sisters), we work together in Reformed schooling, there are combined young people's activities, and there were two full-time interim ministries by a retired CanRC minister in URCNA churches during a time of vacancy (Rev. W. den Hollander in Dunnville, Ontario and Hamilton, Ontario).

## **Considerations**

1. As coordinators, we have sought and received clarification from CERCU on the authoritative status and definitions of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods. We as coordinators conveyed the concern of the CanRC that such doctrinal statements have the potential of narrowing too much the range of interpretation allowed and that these doctrinal statements themselves are open to interpretation.

At the same time, it is clear to us that the URCNA is committed to the doctrinal statements made by recent Synods and that these will not be reversed. It is a reality on the North American ecclesiastical scene that churches make statements on various matters in order to further delineate where they stand on the theological issues of the day. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) has done it, as well as the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), and now also the URCNA. Our concerns about this practice have been stated, and we should leave it at that.

Moreover, as reported to Synod Carman 2013, the URCNA has assured the CanRC that the doctrinal statements made about the Federal Vision were not directed against the CanRC. The colloquium at Synod Visalia 2014 also indicated that there are no significant differences in covenant views between the URCNA and the CanRC. We should not consider the doctrinal statements of recent URCNA synods as a threat to us.

This too is a reason not to pursue further with the URCNA the matter of doctrinal statements.

2. As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium at Synod Visalia 2014 and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and Classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. As opportunity allows, we should continue to build on the progress made.

Much depends on what Synod Wyoming 2016 will decide with respect to overtures designed to significantly delay any effort intended to lead to unification with the CanRC in the foreseeable future. Let us remember Synod Wyoming 2016 in our prayers, both as congregations and individuals, and pray that the vision of Synod Escondido 2001 – which agreed to the Phase Two relationship and looked beyond to eventual merger – may not be lost.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend:

1. That Synod Dunnville 2016 decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Carman 2013 to discuss with CERCU the areas of concern or fear in the URCNA that seem to be hindering progress toward a merger with the CanRC.
2. That Synod Dunnville decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Carman to seek ways to facilitate the work of building unity on the local level, as well as visiting churches and classes of the URCNA, particularly in the United States.
3. That Synod Dunnville decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Carman to discuss with CERCU how to make preparations for Phase 3, such as through the reappointment of the subcommittees for theological education, liturgical forms and confessions and a common songbook.
4. That Synod Dunnville decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Carman to seek clarification from CERCU on the authoritative status and definitions of the different categories of doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods and to encourage the URCNA to refrain from making further statements of this nature, and to consider this matter finished.
5. That Synod Dunnville reappoint Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity.

6. That Synod Dunnville give the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity a specific and well-defined mandate.

Respectfully submitted with brotherly greetings,  
Rev. William den Hollander  
Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde  
Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity (CCU)

## **Appendix #1**

### **Press Release CERCU/CCU November 2013**

The annual meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) once again provided a venue for representatives of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) to meet and discuss their efforts toward merger. Those present from the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) were Rev. Bill Boekestein, Rev. John Bouwers, Rev. Dan Donovan, Rev. Casey Freswick, Rev. Dr. Michael Horton, Rev. Rick Miller, Rev. Bill Pols, Rev. Ralph Pontier, and Rev. William Van Hal, while Rev. William den Hollander and Rev. Clarence VanderVelde were present as the CanRC's Coordinators of the Committee for Church Unity (CCU).

Meetings were held on the evening of Monday, Nov 18 and the afternoon of Wednesday, Nov 20, 2013 in Flat Rock, North Carolina. The focus of the meetings was how we can best move forward in our relationship leading to merger. Rev. William den Hollander reported on his visits to URCNA classes and churches in the United States since our meeting a year ago. So far he has visited all the American classes, except Classis Pacific Northwest which he hopes to visit in the spring of 2014. Rev. den Hollander has also used those occasions and other occasions to preach in American churches and attend ministerials of the URCNA. These visits served as excellent opportunities for brotherly interaction about the issues involved in the efforts toward merger. These invitations were issued in light of Synod Nyack 2012's mandate to the churches "to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger."

In an effort to understand one another better, we discussed covenant views in the CanRC and the URCNA. The discussion then moved on to why the CanRC dislike extra-confessional statements. We also discussed the status of the doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods.

We discussed CERCU's intention to move the relationship to Phase 3A, which would mean a commitment to making concrete preparations for an eventual merger. It is CERCU's intention to present Synod Visalia 2014 with a preliminary outline of such a plan leading up to a finalized proposal to Synod 2016. Part of this plan would be to encourage URCNA churches to interact with those issues that need resolution before

merger. Furthermore, to enhance understanding of the issues involved, the hope is that a colloquium can be held at Synod Visalia 2014 in which two representatives from the URCNA and two from the CanRC will address covenant views and perhaps other theological issues.

As we work toward merger, may the Lord bless our humble efforts in such a way that they serve as a witness to the world and for the glory of his Name.

## **Appendix #2**

### **Fraternal Greetings by Rev. W. den Hollander to Synod Visalia 2014**

#### **Esteemed Brothers in the Church of Christ**

It truly is an honour and privilege that I may once again be present in your midst and address you as General Synod of the URCNA. The fact that I can address you in your broadest assembly with *all* your churches represented by its delegates makes this moment very special. Since GS Nyack 2012 I have been in the rather unique position of visiting seven of your eight Classes. Included in these visits were some 16 opportunities to conduct worship services in URC congregations, and besides those to preach as well in *other* churches among your Classes upon special invitations. Aside from these preaching engagements I could address your Classes and congregations to introduce the federation of CanRC and its history and heritage. In short, if ever it has been appropriate to apply the figure of “ambassadors” to the servants of Christ as they make their appeal on Christ’s behalf [2 Cor. 5:20], I certainly felt like I came in that function! My appeal, however, on behalf of Christ, was not so much as saying, “Be reconciled to God,” but to encourage you with the other words of the apostle, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace!” Indeed, your invitations, your receptions, and your interests and inquiries, together with my humble attempts in fulfilling my mandate, did add up to the apostle’s appeal to manifest the maintenance of the unity of the Spirit and to promote the will to ecumenicity through the bond of peace!

Brothers, I consider myself exceedingly blessed by the experiences enjoyed during these visits and occasions. Just as we are exulting here at GS Visalia 2014, so I rejoiced in each and every of the other opportunities, in the truth of the words of Psalm 133, “Behold, how pleasant and how good, that we, one Lord confessing, together dwell in brotherhood, our unity expressing!” [PH #279] When the CERCU report to your synod mentions that “Growing love, mutual knowledge and trust, as well as increased cooperation in such things as education, evangelism, youth activities, conferences, joint services, and pulpit exchanges have marked the past number of years,” among the churches in closer geographical proximity that is, then I may add that *also* these *my* personal encounters contributed to a similar growth in love, mutual knowledge and trust! Your committee report is so true when it observes that “It is significant that the closer and more frequent the interaction has been, the greater is the interest and openness toward progressing onward in this endeavour.”



At times the question was put to me whether I was *still* as convinced and motivated that the process toward organizational unity should be pursued, having experienced and discovered that “significant ambivalence remains concerning the whole process among the US Classes of the URC.” [As your CERCU report refers to my findings.] Let me assure you with all the sincerity of my heart and integrity of my faith, that my exposure to these US churches and Classes and my interaction with the brotherhood in the URCNA have become an even greater incentive for this pursuit than I have had since the beginning of my involvement in 1992. In fact, the *miracle* of the growing unity among the churches in Canada to the point of its present integration and immersion and cooperation at every level of church life, congregational communion, and the pursuit of kingdom service in a growing number of areas of life, this *miracle* must be a strong motivation to *continue* our pursuit to the point at which we may see *the miracle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* come true in the union of the URCNA and CanRC to the greater glory of God our Saviour and as testimony to the world!

Why this should be? Well, brothers, we all know that the church gathering work of Christ is a dynamic process. When you, in 1995/6 set out to establish the federation of United Reformed Churches in North America, you pursued a union by faith, in love, with courage, and in mutual trust (as your CERCU report testifies!), because you knew that this was in accordance with the Word of God. You did so because the entire Scripture reveals this dynamic process toward union in Old and New Testament: in the service of God at Shiloh, in *one* tabernacle, *one* temple, for the *one* people of God (which was composed of twelve so very different tribes!), a unity of God’s people which our Saviour articulated when speaking about *one* flock and *one* Shepherd, revealing to us in the NT gathering of His church that He breaks down dividing walls to unite Jews and Gentiles, uniting them into *one* holy nation, working towards the *one* multitude! God is one; He unites under the headship of Jesus Christ, and He restores unity as well!

Then the Scriptures reveal to us that this work is *visible*: the multitude in Revelation 7 came about through Christ, as He walked among the 7 churches in Asia Minor, holding their stars in His *one* hand, being the *one* foundation under their local churches, which expressed their unity by being a hand and foot to each other, in the congregations and among their federation! Indeed, it is this dynamic work of God that we can see throughout the history of the church, as we confess in the *oneness* and catholicity of the church! Hence, we are urged to look at *God’s* work and not at the people and their feelings, reservations, or their ambivalence, but we must see our faith working through love, Scripturally, confessionally, historically, and organizationally! The church is pillar and foundation of the truth; it’s this truth which unites believers, congregations, and federations! We have seen the miracle of this unity develop and grow in Canada, as it continues to manifest itself; in the same spirit of unity in the truth we may see this dynamic character of the church become evident in the union that we continue to pursue as brothers and sisters of common confession and heritage!

Esteemed brothers, just as GS Escondido 2001 was pivotal in promoting a growing momentum by its forward-looking decisions and appointments, you have gathered in one of the churches in California again with the opportunity to maintain and increase the momentum through decisions and CERCU’s recommendations which pursue this unity in the truth (including our common understanding of the richness of the doctrine of the covenant)! The most recent GS of the CanRC, in Carman 2013, has reiterated and

confirmed its sincere desire that we proceed in the way in which the Lord of the church has blessed us so exceedingly. It endorsed your CERCU's plan for the preparation of union in the coming years till your and our next GS, in 2016 the Lord willing. We, as Coordinators of the Committee for Church Unity, the Rev. Clarence VanderVelde and I (your ambassador of the CanRC) will be ready and eager to do everything we can to cooperate and to facilitate whatever plans and discussions need to pave the way for your consideration and decision of our desired union. Personally I would like to assure you that as gladly as I have accepted the invitations and made the visits to your churches and Classes to *introduce* our churches, so eagerly I would be available to *further* your acquaintance and remove whatever ambivalence remains!

Dear brothers in the Lord, receive the greetings of the CanRC in the communion of the Spirit of peace and in the pursuit of Scriptural ecumenicity and the ecclesiastical unity of our two Reformed federations of churches of the Lord Jesus Christ!

### **Appendix #3**

#### **Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A URCNA Perspective**

Cornelis P. Venema and W. Robert Godfrey

June, 2014

#### **Introduction**

We have been asked by the CERCU of the URCNA to address the question whether our federations' (URCNA and CaRCs) hold to different views of the doctrine of the covenant, and whether these views, though different, fit within the boundaries of acceptable teaching, as these boundaries are defined by the Three Forms of Unity. In order to fulfill this mandate, we decided to focus upon two doctrinal matters: 1) the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant relationship between God and the human race in Adam (commonly termed the "covenant of works"); and 2) the doctrine of the covenant of grace, particularly in respect to its relationship to the doctrine of election. We believe that these are the two primary topics where there may be differences between our two federations.

It should be observed that we do not intend to offer a summary in what follows that fully expresses the diversity of opinion that obtains within the URCNA. What we present is a summary of what we believe is a common understanding of these topics within the URCNA. The key questions are: Are these opinions in conformity to, or within the boundaries set by, the Three Forms of Unity? Are they opinions that the CaRCs believe are within confessional boundaries?

#### **The Pre-fall Covenant ("covenant of works")**

We believe that the following theses summarize a common view of the pre-fall covenant, which is held by many in the URCNA to conform to the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity:

1. Adam's obedience to the requirements of his pre-fall fellowship with the Triune Creator was the "condition" for his continuance in and entrance into further life in blessed fellowship with God. The "life" implicitly promised (indeed, the promise of "eternal life" in immutable fellowship with God; cf. Gen. 3:22) in this fellowship would not be a "free gift" of God's *saving grace*, but a covenanted reward granted in the way of (and in no other way) of Adam's "perfect obedience." What Adam would have received from his Triune Creator, were he to have obeyed the requirements of the pre-fall covenant, would fully accord with divine truth and justice. (See Belgic Confession, Article 14, the "commandment of life"; HC Lord's Day 3.6, "so that [aus dass] he might live with Him in eternal blessedness"; HC Lord's Day 16.40.)
2. Adam's "justification" prior to the fall, though a matter of his "reputation" by God's declaration (forensic), was not on account of the righteousness of Another, but on account of a righteousness which was his own (though his by virtue of God's favor, enablement and provision). Prior to the fall into sin, Adam was properly reckoned to be righteous by God, but this was not an act of God's saving grace in Christ (see Rom. 5:12-21). Even if Adam's enjoyment of justification and eternal life would not be "merited" by "strict justice" (because it depended upon God's covenanted promise to grant him life on condition of his obedience), it would be granted him as a reward for his obedience. In this respect, it would be a "covenanted merit" or reward based upon Adam's obedience to the condition of the covenant.
3. The justice and truth of God satisfied through the work of Christ, the second Adam, consists in His active and passive obedience. For this reason, we speak (and the confessions consistently speak) of Christ's "merits" or of His "meriting" for us righteousness, favor and eternal life. (See, for example, Belgic Confession, Article 20-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2-7, 16.40, 23-24.)
4. The Reformed tradition (including Calvin) has always fully concurred with the "distinction" (yes, even a repugnance) between "law" and "gospel," when it comes to the decisive matter of the believer's free justification. (See Belgic Confession, Article 22-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2,21,23-24,44; Calvin Comm. Jn. 1:17; Rom. 4:15; Gal. 3:19; 2 Cor. 3:6; Deut. 7:9; Institutes II.ix.4; II.7.16; Bavinck, GD, vol. 3, par. 349: "wettisch [and not an] Evangelisch verbond.")
5. The Reformed objection to Rome is not that it uses the language of "merit," but that it speaks of the believer's "merit" rather than acknowledging the perfection, the sufficiency and the power of the merit of Christ imputed to us for justification.
6. Thus, everything that constitutes a necessary and sufficient basis for affirming a pre-fall covenant of works in distinction from a post-fall covenant of grace is set forth in the Three Forms of Unity. (See, for example, Belgic Confession, Articles 14,20,22,23,24; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3-6,15-17,23-24; Canons of Dort Head of Doctrine II; III.2.)

## The Covenant of Grace

In the following summary, we begin with points (#1-3) where there is little or no difference of expression or emphasis, so far as we can determine, between our two federations. The following points (#4-6) address areas where there may be differences of expression or emphasis.

1. After the fall into sin through the disobedience of Adam, the triune Redeemer instituted a second covenant, the covenant of grace, between Himself and believers and their seed. In the covenant of grace, believers are promised salvation and new life through the work of Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, and are called to faith and obliged unto new obedience.
2. In the historical administration of the covenant of grace, we may distinguish without separating between the “promises” of the covenant and the “demands” or obligations of the covenant. When believers and their children embrace the covenant promises in Christ in the way of faith, they enjoy the “blessings” of the covenant—fellowship with the living God through Christ and by His indwelling Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and free justification, the restoration of the image of God, renewal in righteousness by the Spirit, and the promise of everlasting life. When believers and their children do not believe or embrace the covenant promises, or walk in a manner that is consistent with the covenant’s demands, they break the covenant and come under God’s judgment.
3. Believers and their children may be assured of God’s gracious promise to them, which is communicated through Word and sacrament, and be confident in the reliable Word that God speaks to them. The doctrine of election is one that honors God alone as the Savior of His people, and provides a sure basis for the believer’s confidence in God’s saving power. However, the doctrine of election must be handled with appropriate care, and never be treated in a way that undermines the believer’s confidence in God’s covenant Word or promise.
4. It is important to distinguish the covenant of grace in its *historical administration* and the covenant of grace in its *saving efficacy* (sometimes called the “dual aspect” of the covenant). In its substance and saving efficacy, the covenant of grace is the means whereby God saves his elect people in Christ. Redemption is ultimately a divine gift and gracious inheritance granted in Christ to fallen but elect sinners. The covenant of grace, so far as its saving efficacy is concerned, is not merely a “conditional offer” of salvation to those who are “under” the covenant, but it is also the instrument whereby God communicates to his elect people all that is granted them in Christ. With respect to the saving efficacy of the covenant of grace, God grants to the elect all that is theirs in Christ. The very “conditions” that God stipulates in the covenant of grace, are obtained and granted to the elect upon the basis of the perfect work of Christ on their behalf. (See Canons of Dort, II.8; II, Rejection of Errors 3-6.)

5. The covenant of grace, though it graciously realizes what was typified by the covenant of works, is properly viewed as a “second covenant,” and not simply as a re-institution of the covenant relationship. Because Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, accomplishes all that is necessary for the redemption of His people, and communicates the promise effectually to them by His Spirit, we may not view the promises and demands of the covenant of grace as formally the same as the promises and demands of the covenant of works. Christ gives to His own what He requires of them in the covenant of grace. (See F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Twelfth Topic, Q. 4, #7, 2:191-92 (\*quoted below))
  
6. Though the Three Forms of Unity do not expressly speak of the “visible” and “invisible” church, they do distinguish between those who are “externally” in the church but not genuinely members of Christ (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The distinction between the covenant in its historical administration and the covenant in its saving efficacy, is parallel to the distinction between all believers and their children who are members of the visible church, and the elect who are known to God (2 Tim. 2:19) and who are properly and genuinely members of Christ and partakers in His saving work. This distinction is an important one to maintain, and is supported by the apostle Paul’s distinction between those who enjoy certain covenant privileges but are not, strictly speaking, “children of the promise” in the sense of God’s purpose of election (Rom. 9:6-8).

(Note: Regarding the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” church, we believe that Article 29 of the Belgic Confession is translated properly in the English translation in use in the URCNA. In this translation, the third paragraph reads: “With respect to those who are members of the church, they may be known by the marks of Christians: namely, by faith, *and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior ...*” In the English translation of this Article in the Book of Praise of the CaRCs, the third paragraph omits the “when” of the original French and Latin (it reads: “Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour ...”). Omitting the “when” of the original may suggest a rather different view as to who genuinely belongs to and is of the church of Jesus Christ.)

\*“Nor can it be objected here that faith was required also in the first covenant and works are not excluded in the second .... They stand in a far different relation. For in the first covenant, faith was required as a work and a part of the inherent righteousness to which life was promised. But in the second, it is demanded—not as a work on account of which life is given, but as a mere instrument apprehending the righteousness of Christ (on account of which alone salvation is granted to us). In the one, faith was a theological virtue from the strength of nature, terminating on God, the Creator; in the other, faith is an evangelical condition after the manner of supernatural grace, terminating on God, the Redeemer. As to works, they were required in the first as an antecedent condition by way of a cause for acquiring life; but in the second, they are only the subsequent condition as the fruit and effect of the life already acquired.”

## **Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A CanRC Perspective**

Theodore G. Van Raalte and Jason P. Van Vliet

May 2014

### *Introduction*

We have been asked by the CERCU of the URCNA and the CCU of the CanRC to address the question whether our respective federations hold different views of the doctrine of the covenant, and whether these views, though possibly different, fit within the bounds of the Three Forms of Unity (TFU).

To the best of our knowledge, we do not believe that any differences between our federations on the topics of covenant and election are of such a nature that they are beyond the bounds of the TFU and therefore doctrinally suspect. In fact, many of the differences *between us* as federations may well also be differences *within* each of our respective federations. Thus, we have not significantly disagreed with our URCNA brothers Venema and Godfrey, but have pointed out some nuances and further considerations.

We consider it important to note that our CanRC forbears often emphasized that there was no unique “CanRC doctrine/theology/view of the covenant.” They were adamant that they were bound simply by what is found in the TFU and that the churches ought to have a measure of flexibility within those bounds.

In addition, it appears to us that the view of the covenant presented by brs. Godfrey & Venema is substantially the same as that which is presented in the Westminster Standards. Since 2001 the CanRCs have had ecclesiastical fellowship (sister church relationship) with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), which obviously subscribes to the Westminster Standards. Although the doctrine of the covenant was certainly discussed by the OPC and CanRCs in the years prior to 1998, in the end those discussions did not prevent the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship from being established. This official decision of Synod Fergus 1998, which has also been upheld and reconfirmed at every CanRC synod since then, indicates that the CanRCs are willing to work with those hold a Westminster view of covenant theology, without themselves subscribing to the Westminster standards. By the same token, the OPC have not officially objected to any covenant views found within the CanRCs on the basis of their secondary standards. Keeping this broader perspective in mind gives us good hope that the URCNA and CanRCs, both subscribing to the TFU, should be able to find common ground on the doctrine of the covenant.

Finally, we note that the contribution we hereby offer has no official standing in the CanRCs. CERCU and the URCNA Synod will be well aware of the reticence of the CanRCs to adopt position papers and can no doubt appreciate that we are expressing our

own views in ways that we think would be helpful for the promotion of unity between the URCNA and the CanRCs.

The considerations below have been crafted in response to questions posed by Drs Godfrey and Venema in an email dated Feb 19, 2014, as well as the summary they have put forward (see “Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A URCNA Perspective”). Thus, our considerations should be understood in that context and not regarded as a comprehensive treatment of the covenant, either pre-fall or post-fall.

Their initial questions were:

- (1) What is the understanding of our respective federations regarding the nature of the pre-fall relationship (or covenant) between God, the Triune Creator, and mankind as represented by Adam? We have attached a short summary of what we believe is a common understanding of this pre-fall relationship within the URCNA (see attachment), and would invite you to comment on it from the perspective of the CanRC’s.
  
- (2) What is the understanding of our respective federations regarding the nature of the post-fall covenant of grace? We are especially interested in the question of the relation between the formulation of the doctrine of the covenant, with its “promises” and “demands” (conditions? In what sense?), and the doctrine of election. In the URCNA, it is common to speak of the “dual aspect” of the covenant (G. Vos), and to recognize that the conditions of the covenant are ultimately fulfilled in accordance with God’s “purpose of election” (Rom. 9:1ff.).
  
- (3) How do the CaRCs regard the decisions of recent URCNA synods— re the doctrine of justification, the federal vision controversy, and the relation between covenant and election? The question is not so much whether the URCNA has (arguably) adopted some form of “extra-confessional binding.” Rather, the question focuses upon whether it is permissible, even necessary, to distinguish between the covenant in its historical administration and the covenant in its substance and efficacy in the salvation of the elect (what is often called the “dual-aspect” of the covenant, or what is expressed by the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” church).
  
- (4) In the URCNA, it is commonly believed that Article 29 of the Belgic Confession warrants a distinction between those who truly belong to Christ and his church and those who are “externally” members of the (visible)

church. This Article is thought to warrant a distinction like that between the “visible” and “invisible” church, or the distinction between those who are “in” but not “of” the covenant people of God. What is the understanding of the CanRC’s re this distinction? (Note: We are curious that the English translation of the Article in the Book of Praise, third paragraph, reads: “Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour ....” In our translation, it reads: “With respect to those who are members of the church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior ....” Your translation seems to ignore the “when” of the original French and Latin, and may suggest a rather different view as to who genuinely belongs to and is of the church of Jesus Christ.)

### **Key Considerations concerning the Covenant before the Fall**

#### *Concerning Question 1 and Theses on the Pre-fall Covenant [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. We agree that God’s covenanted reward of “immutable fellowship” would be given in Paradise by way of Adam’s perfect obedience. We agree that Adam was created with the freedom of choice to serve God or not, a freedom he had to exercise rightly, so that he would show in act and fact that he truly loved his God by submitting to his authority and fulfilling the God-given mandates. However, we point out several nuances:
  - a. When God said that his creation was “very good” (Ge 1:31) and when he walked in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve in the Garden *pre-lapsum* (inferred from Ge 3:8) they enjoyed a sinless and uninhibited fellowship with God. Therefore their entrance into “further life” should not be understood to be more than the entrance into a state of *non posse peccare*, or of “immutable fellowship with God” and whatever that entailed. In other words, Adam and Eve already enjoyed the gift of life with God and we should not speak of them as though they lacked any gift or capacity from God, lest we impinge upon created goodness.
  - b. When God threatened the sentence of death in the very day that Adam took of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Ge 2:17), he thereby taught Adam that he had within him the possibility of sinning against God and his neighbour, depending upon the choice of his will. This text, more than Genesis 3:22, ought to be the ground for speaking of Adam’s state of *posse peccare*. The history of redemption and history of revelation teach us of God’s purpose to bring man to the state of *non posse peccare* (e.g., Re 21-22).
  - c. When Adam obeyed God he did so out of a heart of trust in God. His calling was to have that faith in God which took God at his Word, that hope which



looked in faith to the time of “immutable fellowship,” and that love which flowed out of such faith. In other words, while the leading measure of Adam’s faithfulness was his “personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience” (WCF 7.2, WLC 20), this loving obedience could only have been present together with faith and hope, and particularly as the fruit of such faith/trust. The Westminster Confession thus uses not only “covenant of works” but also “covenant of life” and indeed theologians of the period also spoke of a “covenant of friendship,” “legal covenant,” “first covenant,” and “covenant of nature.”

- d. We caution against stringing together phrases from the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession without due attention to their context, as is done in thesis 1. To wit, the result clause in HC, LD 3.8 “so that he might . . . live with him in eternal blessedness” is not in the context of Adam doing good works but in the context of having been created good – “God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that . . .” The fuller quotation emphasizes that Adam was created in true righteousness, not that he had to earn it.
  - e. In sum, the life implicitly promised would be a covenanted reward granted in the way of Adam’s perfect obedience. As a covenanted reward, it would still be a gift out of God’s favour to the creature. Adam’s prefall obedience should be understood to be the leading measure of his trust in God.
2. We affirm that Adam’s righteousness or “justification” prior to the fall was a righteousness of his own, though our typical use of the word “justification” applies it to our post-fall forensic justification in Christ. The reward granted to Adam prior to the fall would indeed have been a reward for his obedience within the terms of his relationship with God, that is, a *meritum ex pacto* that consists in claiming the promises that God is already holding out. In our view, Adam could not have merited his reward by strict justice outside of any covenant terms because that would require the creature to produce something entirely of his own (*ex nihilo*, as it were). But everything, including the terms of Adam’s pre-fall relationship with God, is a gift of God (1Co 4:7).

Turretin writes, “From these [foregoing considerations] we readily gather that there now can be no merit in man with God by works whatsoever, either of congruity or of condignity . . . Hence it also appears that there is no merit properly so called of man before God, in whatever state he is placed. Thus Adam himself, if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice, although (through a certain condescension [*synchatabasin*]) God promised him by a covenant life under the condition of perfect obedience . . .” (Turretin, *Institutes*, 2.712; also quoted in *URCNA Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification*, footnote 52).

3. We agree wholeheartedly with Godfrey & Venema’s thesis. Our confessions clearly teach that Christ alone fully merited our salvation and that God imputes to his elect both the active and passive obedience of Christ.

- a. Although the debate generated by Piscator about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ was subsequent to the composition of the BC and HC we affirm that these should be understood to affirm the doctrine, on the grounds that the *textus receptus* of the BC, as improved by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, clearly affirms the doctrine in Article 22, “he imputes to us all his merits and as many holy works as he has done for us and in our place.” We note also the closing of HC 23.60, “He grants these to me . . . as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me.” Our Form for Lord’s Supper celebration also includes, “By his perfect obedience he has for us fulfilled all the righteousness of God’s law.”
  - b. At the same time we caution against pressing the term “passive obedience” too far, for it does not mean that Christ was not active in pursuing the cross for our sakes, but that he *suffered* for us as the Paschal Lamb. In this case the word “passive” should be understood according to its shared root with the word “passion,” as in the “passion [=suffering] and death” of Christ.
4. We agree that in the decisive matter of the believer’s justification, law and gospel are antithetical concepts. Indeed, to affirm this is fundamental to our salvation, as the various confessional references in this thesis affirm (see further our comments on the role of faith in justification below under Covenant of Grace, Consideration 7). Yet we also affirm that in the language of Scripture the gospel is to be “obeyed” and even includes threats (Jo 3:36, Re 3:14-22, 2Th 1:8, Latin & French of CD 5.14). Scripture thus also speaks of the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2; 1Co 9:21). Scripture teaches us, too, that the law or Torah is a wonderful instruction of the LORD that is full of promises (Ps 119, Eph 6:2-3). Thus, we caution against an arbitrary dichotomization of Scripture texts containing commands into “law” and those containing promises into “gospel.”
  5. We wholeheartedly agree that we may use the language of merit for Christ’s work. We humbly and earnestly confess that Christ has merited our entire salvation. He is our only Saviour, given by grace alone and to be received by faith alone.
  6. Venema and Godfrey have affirmed that “everything that constitutes a *necessary and sufficient* basis for affirming a pre-fall covenant of works in distinction from a post-fall covenant of grace is set forth in the Three Forms of Unity.” This would seem to imply that all confessors of the TFU *must* affirm the distinction and perhaps also the terms “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace.”

On the one hand, we agree in affirming the distinction and disjunction between the pre-fall and post-fall situations. Indeed, we affirm a radical discontinuity that must be strongly emphasized so as to avoid Pelagian errors. Without doubt the fellowship in Paradise could not be restored by man himself; it was done and gone *unless* it was restored through Another, a Mediator, and by faith in him. Adam and Eve died spiritually “on that day,” and were thrust permanently from the fellowship in body and soul that they enjoyed with God in the Garden. That fellowship will not be restored fully until our Lord Jesus Christ returns in glory to bring in the new creation.

On the other hand, we do not hold each other to the term “covenant of works,” since the TFU do not require the term. We note that the Westminster Standards also use “covenant of life” (WLC, 20) and speak of the covenants of works and grace as “commonly called” (WLC, 30), implying that other terms are possible. Indeed Reformed theologians have affirmed the radical discontinuity between the pre- and post-fall situations by using other terms for the first covenant such as the covenant of nature or creation (Ursinus), covenant of friendship (Burgess, Ball), legal covenant (Sedgwick), covenant of favour (de Graaf), Adamic administration (Murray), and covenant of love (Stam), among others; as well as terms for the second covenant such as the covenant of reconciliation (Burgess, Ball), covenant of grace (the commonest term), covenant of the gospel (Davenant), or evangelical covenant (Sedgwick). Such terminology can be discussed within the bounds of the TFU, and we should grant each other room for this.

In conclusion, we are in unity with our URC brothers in affirming the uniqueness of Adam’s relationship to God pre-fall compared to his and humanity’s situation post-fall. In other words, Adam’s situation while in a state of righteousness yet able to sin (*posse peccare*) was radically different from our situations in the states of unrighteousness wherein we can only sin (*non posse non peccare*) and of justification by grace through faith wherein we are enabled not to sin (*posse non peccare*).

### **Key Considerations concerning the Covenant after the Fall, or the Covenant of Grace**

*Concerning Questions 2 & 3 and Theses on the Covenant of Grace [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. Concerning the relationship between the covenant of grace and election, it is clear that the two are not identical even though they are connected to each other in significant ways. To mention but one obvious difference, election is a decree that God made before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), while the covenant of grace is a relationship initiated by God after the fall and in history (Gen 15:18). Furthermore, not every child of the covenant is elect (Rom 9:6-13). In this sense, there is a certain duality in the covenant: there were both elect and reprobate among the circumcised in the OT, just as there are both elect and reprobate among the baptized in the NT. Another way of expressing this is that the circle of the covenant is larger than the circle of the elect.
2. The more challenging question is: what is the best way to describe the aforementioned duality in a scripturally responsible and pedagogically effective way? Over time various terms have been proposed: external and internal, administration and essence (substance), or conditional and absolute. Although

these terms attempt to express the truth of the previous point (#1 above), they do have limitations. For example, the following can be mentioned:

- a. although not decisive in and of itself, it is noteworthy that these terms do not appear in Scripture or our confessions;
  - b. although the proponents of these terms often wish to prevent it, it does happen that the dual aspect of one covenant becomes, for all intents and purposes, two distinct covenants in the minds of God's people—an external covenant and an internal covenant—while our confessions speaks of one covenant of grace (BC 34; LD 27; CoD 1:17) with two dispensations, old and new (LD 27);
  - c. these terms can leave parents in the pew, who are holding their just-baptized baby, in a state of uncertainty, wondering whether their child is *really* in the covenant or not;
  - d. these terms do not always do full justice to the scriptural reality of covenant breakers and profaners (Lev 26:15; Deut 31:16,20; Mal 2:10; Heb 10:29): if someone is only externally or conditionally in the covenant can he *truly* break it?
3. Considering the aforementioned limitations, it is helpful to take another look at the terminology that is found in Scripture, namely, that of the blessings (Deut 28; Gal 3:7-14) and the curses (Deut 29:1, 9-14; Gal 3:15-18) of the covenant. These passages shift our attention from *aspects* of the covenant to *outcomes* of life within the covenant. Clearly, there are two different outcomes for covenant people, those who believe “are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal 3:9) and those who do not embrace Christ by faith are under the curse (Gal 3:13-14). In this way, there is a clear confession of one covenant, while the two outcomes express the duality which was already mentioned in point #1 above.
4. At the same time, there is more than a difference in outcomes (#3 above), there is also a difference in the way that individual believers live *within* the covenant. Someone can merely “go through the motions” and live within the covenant in a merely external and superficial manner. This is ungodly hypocrisy. Conversely, someone can live within the covenant genuinely, that is to say, from the heart in true dedication to, and with fellowship with, the Lord. This is the way it should be. Yet both kinds of people can be found within the covenant, as the apostle Paul indicates in Rom 2:28-29. Here an analogy may help. The Lord compares his covenant with his people to a marriage covenant (Jer 31:32, Eph 5:22-33, etc). Just as a couple can be truly and legally married yet not live together in true

harmony and love, so too people may be truly and legally part of the covenant, but not live in genuine faith and love toward the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

5. In addition much can be gained by emphasizing the two parts of the covenant: promise and obligation (Gen 17:4, 9; *Form for Baptism*). If the preacher emphasizes both parts, in the right order and in a balanced way, his congregation will not walk away with the impression that one is automatically saved simply because he is baptized. Furthermore, the obligation is, in the first place, a call to trust the LORD and believe in the covenant promises he has given, and then, flowing out of that to also live a life of holiness (LD 23-24, 32-33).
6. The doctrine of election should not overshadow the doctrine of the covenant in such a way that doubt, rather than assurance, is cultivated in the hearts of God's people. Believing parents who bring their covenant child forward to be baptized should be certain that their child belongs truly—not merely possibly or potentially—to the covenant of grace. Along the same lines, the maturing Christian should be fully convinced of the reality of God's promises for him, as well as the reality of his obligations toward God, rather than constantly questioning whether he is elect or not, or whether he is actually in the covenant or not. In this respect, the concluding paragraphs of the Canons of Dort regarding "the consolation of afflicted souls" are very much to the point. We read the Canons of Dort precisely to underline the divine origin, full efficacy, and transforming and preserving power of God's sovereign grace, leading us to assurance rather than doubt.
7. With respect to the role of faith, we need to distinguish carefully between justification and sanctification. With respect to justification, faith relies entirely upon, and accepts, the free gift of Christ's perfect righteousness, satisfaction and holiness. This is what we confess when we say that we are saved only by faith and without any merit of our own (LD 23, 32). With respect to sanctification, faith produces the fruits of good works, as described in the letter of James and summarized in BC 24 ("We believe that this true faith... regenerates him and makes him a new man.")

*Considerations concerning Question 4 and Theses on the Covenant of Grace [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. BC 29 clearly speaks of hypocrites who are *in* the church but not *of* the church. The CanRCs not only confess this truth with the mouth but also believe it with the heart (to borrow some language from BC 1). Thus, the issue is not with

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<sup>1</sup> In its main lines, this is also what L. Berkhof, citing G. Vos, is saying on pp 286-87 of his *Systematic Theology*. It also coheres well with K. Schilder's emphasis on the legal reality of the covenant, even if the communion within the covenant has not yet flourished due to immaturity (in the case of infants) or is being rejected in unbelief (in the case of hypocrites). See Schilder's *Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant*, esp pp 3, 11-12.

confessing the truth that there are hypocrites in the church, or in the covenant (see #4 above), but rather how this sad reality is best described in theological terms. Here the CanRCs tend *not* to use the terms invisible and visible church. To begin with, such terminology is found neither in Scripture nor in our confessions. In addition, past experiences, particularly in the Netherlands in the time surrounding the Liberation of 1944, have taught us that speaking of an invisible church *can* lead to a certain pluriform view of the church which, practically speaking, often compromises the truth we confess in BC 28, namely, everyone's duty to join the church, being active members within it and respecting the authority of local office bearers. In short, the CanRCs have no difficulty with using the *in* the church but not *of* the church distinction, but we generally avoid the terms invisible and visible church for the reasons stated above.

2. Concerning the translation of BC 29, we do not think there is any significant issue here. The sentence in question reads: "With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Saviour, they avoid sin, etc" (URCNA Psalter-Hymnal) or "Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin, etc" (CanRC Book of Praise). The question revolves around the presence of the word "when" (Fr. *quand*). First of all there is a textual issue that adds a certain wrinkle in the translation history of this sentence. The original text of 1561 did not have *quand ayans recue un seul Sauveur Iesus Christ*, but rather *ce qu'ils reçoivent un seul Sauveur Iesus Christ*. Now, the *textus receptus* (Synod of Dort 1618-19) certainly does have *quand*, but the different word choice between the original and the *textus receptus* already indicates something about the semantic force of the word *quand* in that sentence. In that case the word is not suggesting that church members must at a certain point in time receive the Lord Jesus Christ in some kind of special conversion experience. Rather, it is logically connecting the various marks, or indications, that ought to be noticeable in the life of a sincere Christian, specifying that the works of sanctification are not simply parallel with the gift of faith, but flow from it. We fully agree with this, as is clear from many other places in the confessions. Whether the word *quand* is there (as in the *textus receptus* & URCNA Psalter Hymnal) or not there (as in 1561 edition & CanRC translation), the meaning of the sentence remains the same. As a matter of interest, an earlier translation of the BC used in CanRC had the word "when" in it (see *Book of Praise* 1972). The word "when" was removed in a linguistic and stylistic revision in the early 1980s. We have consulted some internal archive documents of that revision process, and we have the distinct impression that the change was made simply for linguistic reasons (i.e., ease of English expression) and not theological reasons.

## **Appendix #4**

### **Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity**

June 11, 2014

To: the Councils of all Canadian and American Reformed Churches

Esteemed brothers:

At the recent Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) held at Visalia, California from June 2-5, 2014, a colloquium (learned discussion) was held on covenant views in the United Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). A one-hour colloquium was held on the floor of Synod between Dr. Ted VanRaalte and Dr. Jason VanVliet of the CanRC and Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema of the URCNA. A one-hour question period followed this, allowing for questions from delegates to Synod Visalia. This colloquium was held at the suggestion of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) of the URCNA.

Prior to the colloquium, the two URCNA brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the URCNA, and the two CanRC brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the CanRC. It was made clear at the colloquium that two men cannot speak for an entire federation but that what was presented was fairly representative of the federation. The papers were the basis for the discussion at the colloquium. These papers were distributed to all the Councils of the URCNA federation prior to Synod Visalia. Herewith we as coordinators for church unity are distributing the papers to all the Councils of the CanRC. We waited with doing so until after the colloquium took place because the colloquium was only a proposal from CERCU and this proposal first had to be adopted by Synod Visalia.

When reading the papers, you will notice that there are no significant differences regarding covenant views. The colloquium itself also led to no disagreement, and the four participants concluded that we are on the same page regarding covenant views. The colloquium was a very positive experience and helped to clear up misunderstandings. Both of the undersigned were present at the colloquium and attended Synod Visalia for its duration as fraternal delegates representing the CanRC. We received much positive feedback about the colloquium from the delegates of Synod. There was talk of an audio recording of the colloquium and the question period; if this becomes available, it will in all likelihood be posted on the website of the URCNA at [www.urchna.org](http://www.urchna.org). May our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, use the colloquium to move the URCNA and the CanRC closer together in our unity talks.

Synod Visalia also dealt with a recommendation from the advisory committee of Synod which dealt with the CERCU report to the effect that Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three A of church unity with the CanRC; this would mean that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, CERCU would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*. This was “tabled indefinitely,” which according to *Robert’s Rules of Order* means that Synod Visalia did not want to adopt or defeat this recommendation, choosing instead to postpone a decision about it. This decision shows that the URCNA is not ready to proceed further with concrete steps toward merger at this time. While this decision is disappointing for us as CanRC, we can be thankful that the recommendation was not defeated but tabled indefinitely. With the time remaining in our mandate as coordinators for church unity, we will continue to build relationships within the American section of the URCNA, and we will try to cultivate a will to ecumenism, as we have been doing. We will see how the LORD decides to bless our efforts in the future.

Synod Visalia did adopt a recommendation of the advisory committee that the churches seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) they believe should be changed before the PJCO can be adopted for a united federation, and that the churches seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their Classes.

Furthermore, Synod Visalia, in keeping with Synod Nyack 2012, reiterated that each Classis and Consistory continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to Classes, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with CanRC congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and Classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. Please remember in your congregational prayers the efforts toward unity. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1).

Brotherly greetings,

Rev. William den Hollander  
Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde



## **Appendix #5 Article in *Clarion* after Synod Visalia**

### **Synod Visalia 2014 of the URCNA**

By Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde

Close to 250 men met at the beautiful and spacious facilities of the Trinity United Reformed Church at Visalia, California from June 2-5, 2014 for the Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). With temperatures hovering around 100 degrees Fahrenheit outside, the men met inside the comfortably air-conditioned facilities to deliberate and decide on the matters before Synod. Synod was marked by the warmth of brotherly fellowship and a very efficient handling of the matters on the agenda. It was the first Synod in the history of the URCNA which was finished one day ahead of schedule.

As fraternal delegates representing the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) at Synod Visalia 2014, Rev. William den Hollander and I enjoyed much good fellowship with the URC brothers as we attended Synod Visalia for its duration. With two delegates present from each congregation, it is a good opportunity for us as coordinators for church unity to interact with people from all regions of the federation. In addition to the speech by Rev. den Hollander bringing greetings from our federation, the highlight for us as CanRC was the one-hour colloquium (learned discussion) which took place on the floor of Synod by Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema from the URCNA and Dr. Ted VanRaalte and Dr. Jason VanVliet from the CanRC (Article 50). The topic was covenant views. A one-hour question period followed the colloquium, allowing for questions from delegates to Synod Visalia. This colloquium was held at the suggestion of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) of the URCNA. The purpose was to help clear up misunderstandings and to see what the differences are when it comes to prevalent covenant views in the URCNA and the CanRC.

Prior to the colloquium, the two URCNA brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the URCNA, and the two CanRC brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the CanRC. It was made clear at the colloquium that two men cannot speak for an entire federation but that what was presented was fairly representative of each federation. The papers were the basis for the colloquium at Synod. These papers were distributed to all the Councils of the URCNA federation prior to Synod Visalia.

The colloquium papers indicate no significant differences regarding covenant views and the colloquium itself also led to no disagreement, with the four participants concluding that we are on the same page regarding covenant views. The colloquium was a very positive experience and helped to clear up misunderstandings. As representatives of the CanRC, we received much positive feedback about the colloquium from the delegates of Synod. The colloquium papers can be read at the website of the URCNA at [www.urchna.org](http://www.urchna.org) and have also been sent to the Councils of all Canadian and American Reformed Churches by your coordinators for church unity. There was talk of an audio

recording of the colloquium and the question period; if this becomes available, it will in all likelihood be posted on the website of the URCNA.

In dealing with the CERCU report, the advisory committee of Synod recommended that Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the CanRC; this would mean that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, CERCU would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*. This was “tabled indefinitely,” which according to *Robert’s Rules of Order* means that Synod Visalia did not want to adopt or defeat this recommendation, choosing instead to postpone a decision about it (Article 53, Recommendation 9). This decision shows that the URCNA is not ready to proceed further with concrete steps toward merger at this time. While this decision is disappointing for us as CanRC, we can be thankful that the recommendation was not defeated but tabled indefinitely. With the time remaining in our mandate as coordinators for church unity, we will continue to build relationships within the American section of the URCNA, and we will try to cultivate a will to ecumenism, as we have been doing. We will see how the LORD decides to bless our efforts in the future.

Synod Visalia did adopt a recommendation of the advisory committee that the churches seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) they believe should be changed before the PJCO can be adopted for a united federation, and that the churches seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their Classes (Article 73, Recommendation 10). Synod instructed the PJCO committee to wait with doing further work on the PJCO until after a decision to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC (Article 69, Recommendation 1).

Furthermore, in keeping with Synod Nyack 2012, Synod Visalia reiterated that each Classis and Consistory continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to Classes, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with CanRC congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection (Article 26, Recommendation 12).

In other news from Synod Visalia, we pass on that Rev. Richard Bout was elected to serve as Missions Coordinator. Rev. Bout had served as a church-planting missionary in Mexico for the past fifteen years and was awaiting a call after repatriating (Article 66, Recommendation 8, Article 84, Recommendation 8). His task will be to offer support and direction to the various church-planting projects of the URCNA, both abroad and at home. Two Councils are prepared to supervise Rev. Bout as Missions Coordinator; one of them will take on this task.

Furthermore, Synod adopted a Psalm Proposal of the 150 Psalms to be the Psalter portion of the new songbook for the URCNA. (About twenty of these Psalms are Genevans from our *Book of Praise*.) This Psalm Proposal was the joint effort of a URCNA committee and an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) committee (Article 32,

Recommendation 4). An OPC General Assembly meeting at the same time elsewhere also adopted this Psalm Proposal. The work on the Hymn section is ongoing and is expected to be completed in time for Synod 2016 (Article 32, Recommendation 7).

Synod Visalia also decided to invite the OPC to hold its 2016 General Assembly at the same time and place as the next Synod of the URCNA (Article 32, Recommendation 11). The grounds are that this would be an expression of unity as sister churches in Christ, an expression of appreciation for the OPC invitation to join them in the production of a new songbook, and an opportunity to hold a joint discussion on the songbook should both assemblies desire to do so. It was decided that Synod 2016 will be held in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and Classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. Please remember in your personal and congregational prayers the efforts toward unity. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1).