

Press Release of Synod Dunnville 2016

On the evening of May 9, 2016, Reformed believers from many congregations in southern Ontario gathered for a special worship service prior to the convening of General Synod Dunnville 2016. Rev. Clarence Bouwman, the chairman of the previous synod in Carman, Manitoba (2013), led the worship service. In his sermon, he focused on verse 6 of Psalm 122 where the Psalmist exhorts his fellow believers to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” Putting the work of the upcoming synod in the perspective of this verse was encouraging for all the worshipers and provided a strong motivation for the delegates to indeed work in such a way that the well-being of the churches would be served.

On the morning of May 10, twenty-four delegates arrived at the beautiful and spacious facilities of the Dunnville church. Twelve had been delegated by Regional Synod West and twelve by Regional Synod East. For many delegates, serving at a General Synod was a first. Only two of the twenty-four men were repeat delegates from Synod Carman. At 9:00 a.m., the delegates were seated and officially welcomed by the convening church. After opening devotions led by the minister of the convening church, Rev. John VanWoudenberg, the credentials were examined. With two exceptions, all the primary delegates were present. Through a free vote, Rev. Richard Aasman of Edmonton, Alberta, was chosen as chairman. Rev. Rob Schouten became the vice-chairman, Rev. R.C. (Karlo) Janssen the first clerk and Rev. Eric Kampen the second clerk.

A committee of the convening church had done a large amount of work to make the work of Synod possible. Each delegate had received a fully hyper-linked agenda. Access to any document of the agenda was available through a single click. As a result, delegates were spared the challenge of carrying about numerous large binders filled with synod documents. Apart from receiving and organizing hundreds of documents, the host church also arranged lodging and transportation for synod delegates. Additionally, it had the responsibility of providing three meals a day for at least twenty-four men and often more when delegates of sister-churches were present. This task was accomplished with amazing efficiency and with a high degree of gustatory satisfaction for each member of Synod. Not only this, sr. Jane Oosterhoff, a member of the host church, was present every day from 7:00 AM – 9:30 PM, making herself available for a wide array of administrative work which she accomplished cheerfully and for the benefit of all.

Agenda

The agenda was composed of a variety of elements. First, there were reports from various committees appointed by the previous synod. There were eight such reports in all: from the

Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad and a Subcommittee on relations with the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, the Committee on Relations with Churches in North America, the Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise*, the Committee on Bible Translations, the Committee for the Website, the Committee for Needy Students Fund and the Committee for Funding of the Pastoral Training Program. These committee reports were sent out to all the consistories of our federation six months before Synod for their scrutiny and feedback. Additionally, every synod receives a lengthy report from the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. Many of the consistories took the opportunity by way of a letter to Synod to express agreement with the various reports or to convey concerns about them.

Besides committee reports and related letters, Synod received many appeals against decisions of previous Synods (mostly about the issue of women participating in the election of office-bearers) and also against the decisions of previous Regional Synods. Additionally, there were two overtures from Regional Synod West seeking changes in regard to financial support and examinations of seminarians. All in all, the workload looked quite heavy but not as onerous as some other recent synods. Several matters stood out immediately as difficult and challenging. The delegates knew their work would not be easy.

Manner of working

Once Synod was convened, the executive made a proposal for the appointment of five advisory committees and assigned to each committee a section of the agenda for Synod. Much of the work of Synod is done at the level of these advisory committees. After a process of discussion and analysis, these committees prepare reports or proposals, which are then presented to Synod during a plenary session. In the early stages of Synod, most of the time is devoted to meetings of the advisory committees. As times goes on, there are more and more plenary sessions. Things seem to speed up dramatically and delegates have to read and digest one report after another. If a delegate were to come to Synod without significant investment of time and energy to prepare, he would not be able to keep up with the pace of the deliberations and decisions.

Typically, when a report or proposal is discussed during plenary session, a lot of changes are made. In some cases, they are quite minor, pertaining to matters of word choice, formatting and general flow of thought. In other cases, discussion on the floor results in a wholesale change of direction. When this happens, advisory committees take their report for further deliberation and eventually make a new presentation to the whole body of Synod. Working together in an advisory committee is a very intense experience. For large portions of two weeks or more, you work very closely with three or four other delegates. There is a long process of pondering, discussing, arguing and persuading. Slowly but surely, proposals take shape and are

further refined. Suffice it to say that the men serving on these committees become very familiar with each other. They also become experts on the issues before them.

In the next paragraphs, the major decisions of Synod Dunnville will be reviewed, not necessarily in the order they were made. Anyone who wishes to have further detail can explore the *Acts of Synod* which have already been published on our federation's website and will be released in printed form in the near future. Due to the rapid availability of the *Acts*, this press release will be shorter than some have been in the past.

Ecumenical relationships

Interfacing with other sectors of the body of Christ is perhaps the most exciting aspect of General Synod. As we deal with reports about other church bodies and hear their delegates address us, sister churches are transformed from mysterious acronyms into living entities. We were privileged to receive quite a number of delegates from churches in North America and further abroad. Delegates from churches in ecclesiastical fellowship were granted privileges of the floor and many availed themselves of the opportunity, especially when discussion focused on their own churches. Mr. Mark Bube spoke to us on behalf of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, taking us through the history of the OPC over the past three years. Rev. George Horner addressed Synod on behalf of the Reformed Churches of the United States, describing the recent history and current state of the RCUS. Rev. John Bouwers addressed Synod on behalf of the United Reformed Churches of North America. Rev. Bruce Backensto was present at Synod as an observer from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. He passed on greetings to Synod and expressed his understanding for the hesitancy of the CanRC to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the RPCNA. Most of these delegates were present for large portions of Synod and also sat in on the advisory committees which were dealing with their respective churches.

Synod also received fraternal delegates from beyond North America. It was a joy to have Rev. Dirk Boersema of the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa present among us. This was his third visit to our synods. In his address to synod, he shared the struggles of the South African churches and also affirmed the great value of the growing relationship with the CanRC. Present from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia were Rev. Stephen 't Hart and br. Peter Witten. Br. Witten addressed Synod, giving the body an update on the life and activities of the Free Reformed Churches and expressing warm appreciation for the living connection between our two federations. Present from the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated) were Rev. Kim Batteau and br. Peter Bakker. They brought greetings to Synod on behalf of our Dutch sister churches and asked Synod to continue the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the RCN despite the grave concerns in Canada about developments among our Dutch sister churches. Synod also received letters of greeting from the Free Church of Scotland

(Continuing), the Reformed Churches of New Zealand and the Reformed Churches of Indonesia (GGRI-NTT). Also present among us in an unofficial capacity was Rev. Bram DeGraaf, missionary of the Cornerstone Church of Hamilton working in Brazil in cooperation with the Reformed Churches of Brazil.

It was heartwarming to hear about the work of our Lord Jesus Christ in many countries and church federations. It was also a joy when Synod decided to maintain relations of ecclesiastical fellowship between the CanRC and all these various church federations and to also maintain our participation in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) as well as the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

In regard to the merger process with the United Reformed Churches of North America, Synod recognized that the work has proceeded more slowly than was originally expected when Synod Neerlandia 2001 initiated the process toward merger. Synod also took note of voices within the URCNA calling for a complete halt to the merger process. Nonetheless, Synod reappointed coordinators for the work of promoting unity with the URCNA and, in view of the workload and the importance of the issues at stake, even increased their number from two to four. In this way, our churches have said very clearly that we want to continue the unity process. We desire our present relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship to become one of ecclesiastical unity. We feel this is a matter of Christian love and obligation.

Another important decision of Synod pertained to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. This small group of churches is a member of NAPARC and our Committee for Contact with Churches in North America was recommending to Synod Dunnville that we enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with these churches. Synod, however, decided “that the CanRC not enter into a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship” with the RPCNA. Even though Synod stated that the “RPCNA can be recognized for their fidelity to the Word of God and their strong Reformed convictions,” the practice of ordaining women to the office of deacon was a barrier to moving to a closer relationship.

In the case of the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands, Synod expressed “thankfulness and joy to the Lord for much faithfulness in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (GKv) as well as grief and disquiet over tolerance of deviations from Scripture and confession.” Because of Synod’s concern about our Dutch sister churches, the decision was made to “continue ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKv, with the temporary suspension of the operation of Ecclesiastical Fellowship rules 4 and 5.” This decision means that the churches of our federation no longer automatically accept attestations from our Dutch sister churches and no longer call ministers of our Dutch sister churches without first seeking classical approval. The mood of Synod in coming to this decision was somber. After more than sixty years of close association

and cooperation, it was painful to feel this separation from what is historically our “mother church.”

Appeals

Seventeen churches submitted appeals against Article 110 of the Acts of Synod Carman 2013 in which it was ruled that voting for office-bearers should be restricted to men only, thereby overthrowing the decision of Synod Burlington 2010 that the question of women’s voting should be left to the freedom of individual churches. Synod Dunnville sustained these appeals, judging that Synod Carman 2013 had failed to prove that the decision of Synod Burlington 2010 was in conflict with Scripture or the Church Order (see Article 31 of the Church Order). The upshot is that women’s voting is now once again a matter for local churches to regulate according to the wisdom given them by God.

Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS)

Synod received a lengthy report from the Board of Governors of the Seminary, including detailed financial reports for each of the three years since the last General Synod. Synod recognized with thankfulness to God that the work of training future ministers and missionaries of the gospel could continue without interruption from 2013-2016. In 2013, CRTS received accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools. Synod Dunnville officially approved all aspects of the work of the Board. It also appointed and reappointed governors and gave leave to the Board to grant tenure to Dr. J. VanVliet and Dr. J. Smith. Dr. J. VanVliet was appointed to a three year term as principal beginning in September, 2017. Synod also expressed gratitude to the Free Reformed Churches of Australia for their ongoing and generous support of CRTS.

The work of the Committee for the Needy Students Fund was approved by Synod. An overture from Regional Synod West to give the original home church of theological students a greater role in assessing financial need was not taken over by General Synod because the overture did not really make a specific proposal. Similarly, an overture from Regional Synod West to have students of theology examined by their home classis instead of the classis in which they reside, was not take over by Synod due to significant lack of clarity about what was really being proposed and how it would be implemented. The report of the Committee for the Pastoral Training Program Funding was also received with thankfulness for the work it had done.

Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise

The last two synods had a large amount of work to do in relation to the development and approval of a new edition of the *Book of Praise*. At Synod Dunnville, Rev. G. Ph. VanPopta presented Synod with an official copy of the *Book of Praise* published by order of General Synod

Carman 2013. He gave a speech outlining the history of the various iterations of the *Book of Praise* and expressing thankfulness to God that the new edition was complete. Synod acknowledged with thankfulness the dedicated labor of the Standing Committee including the late br. C. Nobels. The immense contribution of Dr. William Helder in writing new versifications for most of the Psalms was also recognized.

In regard to the future of the *Book of Praise*, Synod Dunnville left the door open for future changes when it mandated the Standing Committee to “seek, receive, evaluate and recommend proposals for changes to the hymn section to be completed for possible submission to a future Synod.”

Bible Translation

Synod decided to maintain the English Standard Version as the recommended translation for the churches of the federation. Other translations approved in the past were the New International Version (1984), the New American Standard Bible and the New King James Version. At the same time, Synod decided to “acknowledge that while it may not be possible to recommend the NIV2011, a general synod may not forbid churches to use it if they so desire.”

Website of the Canadian Reformed Churches

It was decided to increase the budget of the Committee for the Website to \$10, 000 and to mandate an upgrade to the appearance and functioning of the website. A special concern was that the website would work well for people using smart phones and other mobile devices and that better searching capability would be built into the website.

Closing thoughts

Synod Dunnville turned out to be the shortest Synod of our churches in recent times. Contributing factors included: the increased use of technology, a somewhat shorter agenda (especially in regard to the *Book of Praise*), high-quality reports from committees appointed by the previous synod and a great unity of mind on most issues combined with deep respect for each other’s opinion. Put all that together with a very experienced chairman, who kept the assembly on track with tactics of gentle pressure, add in the contributions of some very gifted thinkers and analysts among the delegates, and you have a recipe for a short synod. Leaving Synod earlier than expected was a new experience for me and quite delightful, if I may say so.

Thanks to the efficient work of our first clerk and his assistant at Synod, Rev. Ryan Kampen, the official *Acts* are already posted at www.canrc.org. If future synods are able to accomplish the publishing of the *Acts* in a similarly short period of time, this may be the last *Press Release* of a

synod you ever read. In the meantime, if this overview of General Synod Dunnville 2016 serves to encourage you to delve into the *Acts*, then we can say “mission accomplished.”

May God bless the work of Synod Dunnville 2016 and may he also guide the churches as they scrutinize, evaluate and implement the decisions that have been made. May our faithful Lord indeed preserve the peace of Jerusalem.

R. Schouten

Vice-chairman, Synod 2016