

Church Order Subcommittee of CPEU

Report of the Committee re: *Church Order* to the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity

A. Mandate

The Committee appointed by Synod Neerlandia 2001 received the following mandate [Acts General Synod Neerlandia 2001 Article 95 p. 107]:

- 1.3.1. To work closely with the committee re: church order appointed by the URCNA synod;
- 1.3.2. To evaluate the differences between the current church orders of the federations in the light of the Scriptural and Confessional principles and patterns of church government of the Church Order of Dort;
- 1.3.3. To propose a common church order in the line of the Church Order of Dort;
- 1.3.4. To keep the CPEU updated on the progress;
- 1.3.5. To provide the CPEU with a report in sufficient time for them to produce the comprehensive report for Synod in a timely fashion.

B. The Committee and its activities

The Committee, composed of Dr. Jack De Jong (convener), br. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John Van Woudenberg and Dr. Art Witten, met for a total of nine times as a committee. It also met three times with the committee re: church order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), twice in Grand Rapids, MI and once in Burlington, ON. A fourth combined meeting has been scheduled D.V for November 4-6, 2003.

The URCNA committee is composed of Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond J. Sikkema and br. Harry Van Gorp.

The Committee enjoyed an excellent working relationship both internally as well as with the brothers of the URCNA. Unfortunately, during the course of time the health of Dr. De Jong deteriorated to the point where he could no longer function effectively as an active member of the Committee. While he still attended all meetings, br. Nordeman took over as convener for the remainder of the term, and the Committee asked Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen to assist the Committee as an advisor and interim member in order for the work to continue. At the close of the last combined meeting, Dr. De Jong informed the meeting that because of the above mentioned reasons, he had to be relieved of the responsibilities of being a member of the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity and the Committee re: Church Order. This he subsequently confirmed in writing. The Committee acknowledged this request with sadness and profound regret, and reflected on Dr. De Jong's love for his work, his wholehearted commitment to the union process and his desire to see this work come to fruition. Also Dr. Kloosterman responded on behalf of the URCNA brothers expressing both appreciation for Dr. De Jong's

contribution to the work of the committees and the hope that he would indeed be able to enjoy the final product of our labours. He read from Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Acts 20, and led in prayer, placing the needs of our brother and his family before the Lord, and asking that He graciously surround the De Jong family with His love and grace.

Mandate 1.3.1.

The Committee worked closely with the committee re: church order appointed by the Synod Escondido 2001 of the URCNA. The combined committees met three times for a total of seven days including some evenings. It became clear that the respective mandates were very similar, in that the differences between the current church orders of the federations are to be evaluated in the light of the scriptural and confessional principles, and to propose a common church order maintaining the principles, structure and essential provisions of the Church Order of Dort. It was agreed to work as one committee to develop a draft for a common church order with a single set of minutes and press releases. At the combined meetings Dr. Kloosterman functioned as chairman, Rev. Sikkema as recorder of the minutes and br. Nordeman prepared the press releases. Each meeting could be concluded with thanks and praise to our heavenly Father for the brotherly manner in which the committee could proceed with its work.

Mandate 1.3.2

In order to evaluate the differences between the current church orders of the two federations, the Committee, at its earlier meetings, spent considerable time mapping these church orders as well as the Church Order of Dort (Dort) as accepted in 1914 by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in its English version. A comparison was made for numbering and arrangement of both the CanRC and URCNA church orders against Dort (1914) and from there to Dort 1618-1619. Articles where the CanRC and the URCNA had changed from these earlier church orders were carefully noted for later discussion as per our mandate to do so in light of the scriptural and confessional principles. A draft proposal for a new church order was prepared prior to the first combined meeting of the two committees. To clarify terminology used, when we speak of the Church Order of Dort we refer to the original Church Order of 1618 and the version adopted by the CRC in 1914.

Mandate 1.3.3.

To accomplish the task of proposing a common church order in the line of the Church Order of Dort, the combined committee at its first meeting reviewed the preparatory work done by each committee. In addition to the proposal prepared by the CanRC committee the URNCA committee placed a revision of the 1997 URNCA church order on the table. It was agreed to use Dort as a starting point for a proposed new church order and to compare it to the proposals from both sub-committees. The respective mandates used words that this be a "common church order maintaining the principles, structure and essential provisions of the Church Order of Dort". This, however, was not interpreted to

mean a slavish following of each article, its wording and sequence in the church order. At the beginning of each meeting the articles provisionally adopted at previous meetings were carefully reviewed and refined where necessary.

The first item in this effort was a discussion on the need for, and place of an introduction in a church order. The CanRC introduction, as recommended by General Synod Lincoln 1992, provides an overview of the history of this church order. In the URCNA church order the introduction focuses more on a declaration of beliefs and the biblical basis for a church order. The URCNA church order also includes a section 'Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government'. The URCNA committee considers these foundational principles to be fundamental. While specific wording could be revised or improved on, the principles as based on Holy Scriptures must remain. After an extensive discussion the meeting reached a consensus on the exact wording of the four components of this introduction: 1) Biblical and Confessional Basis, 2) Historical Background, 3) Foundational Principles and 4) Broad Divisions. This has been attached to this report as Appendix A.

Agreement was reached on the wording of Art. 1 'The purpose of the church order' and Art. 2 'The three offices'. At this point it was decided to deal with subsequent articles without numbering them. Their proper sequence within the church order will be determined later.

Agreement was reached on part of the articles dealing with the duties and the lawful calling of the ministers of the Word. Also, provisional agreement was reached on articles dealing with ministers being bound to a particular church, ministers without a congregation coming from another federation and articles dealing with provisions for the care of the minister and the retirement of the minister. The Dort provision for 'recent converts wishing to enter the ministry' is adequately covered in the proposed article headed "An Ordained Minister Without a Congregation Entering the Federation", where a requirement of an examination by classis and "an adequate period of consistorial supervision" is stipulated.

The committee took some time to review the need for an article dealing with admitting men to the ministry who have not pursued the regular course of study (old Dort Article 8). This article could be helpful in times of calamity or distress. However, with a view to past abuse of this article in some Reformed churches, and the potential for abuse of such an article in the future of the united churches, as well as the churches' requirement that every minister be thoroughly trained for the ministry, a training that at present is readily available, it was agreed by both committees that the churches will be better served by omitting such an article.

Much time was spent discussing the principle of 'jurisdiction'. This is an area where both federations have distinct views, coloured by tradition as well as recent experiences. The authority of the elders and minister is unquestionably one given to the church by the Lord. But what authority do broader assemblies have in the churches? It was decided to adopt a simple statement as follows: "The broader assemblies shall exercise jurisdiction exclusively relating to matters properly before them."

At some length we debated the question whose responsibility it is to declare a man a candidate for the ministry. The consideration that the function of a minister extends beyond the local congregation and that he is available for call among all the churches of the federation, suggests that declaring a man eligible for call is not the task of a consistory but more appropriately that of a classis. We also discussed the neces-

sity for, and procedure of consistorial involvement in the preparation and nurturing of a man for the ministry.

It was agreed that, when a vacant church wishes to call a minister for the second time during the same vacancy, classical approval is required.

An extended discussion took place on the division and alignment of churches, classes and synods. The role of regional synod and the role of the regional synodical deputies also received attention. Information was exchanged and a better understanding gained by this discussion.

A consensus was reached that among the churches of the federation, four assemblies shall be recognized: the consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the general synod. The terms "classis" and "synod" designate either ecclesiastical assemblies or ecclesiastical regions. As assemblies, classes and synods exist only for the duration of their meetings. These assemblies are deliberative in nature.

Appropriate articles were formulated prescribing that those delegated to the broader assemblies shall be issued proper credentials by their delegating body, thereby receiving authorization to deal with all the matters properly placed before them; and that in all assemblies only ecclesiastical matters shall be transacted, and only in an ecclesiastical manner. The broader assemblies shall exercise jurisdiction exclusively relating to matters properly before them. All matters must originate with a consistory and must first be considered by a classis and a regional synod before they may be considered by a general synod. Only those matters shall be considered in the broader assemblies that could not be settled in the narrower assemblies, or that pertain to the churches in common. Each broader assembly shall approve for publication a press release regarding its proceedings.

Regarding delegation to broader assemblies a consensus was reached that classis shall choose the delegates to both the regional synod and the general synod proportional to the number of classes participating. This would ensure a better distribution of delegates from among the churches. The exact formula still needs to be determined.

Agreements were also reached on the proposed wording of articles relating to the specific function and make-up of a classis and that a classis shall be held every four months, unless the convening church, in consultation with the neighbouring church, concludes that no matters have been sent in by the churches that would warrant the convening of a classis. Cancellation of a classis shall not be permitted to occur twice in succession.

Decisions regarding 'church visitors' include the understanding that classis shall appoint a number of its most experienced and competent ministers and elders to visit all the churches of the classis, and that at each church visit at least one of the visitors shall be a minister. A description of the specific task and function of the church visitors was agreed upon.

Agreements were also reached on the matters pertaining to archives, counsellors, regional synod and deputies of regional synod. A regional synod, consisting of three or more classes in a region, shall ordinarily meet once per year. This synod shall deal only with such matters as are placed on its agenda by the member classes, and with appeals from consistories or church members who have previously processed their appeals through their consistory and classis.

Mandate 1.3.4.

The CPEU and the churches were kept informed and updated on the progress of the Committee via the press releases that were published in *Clarion*, *Reformed Polemics* and *Christian Renewal*. These press releases are included in this report as Appendix B.

C. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is with much thankfulness to the Lord that the Committee could fulfill its mandate to this point. Much appreciation is felt for the spirit and the brotherly harmony wherein our work is progressing and the growing understanding of each other. It is our prayer that also the work of the Committee may contribute to a greater awareness and understanding between the respective churches.

We recommend that Synod Chatham 2004:

1. Recognize Dr. J. De Jong for the outstanding contribution he made to the work of the Committee for a common church order and accept his request to be relieved of his appointment.
2. Receive this report and its appendices as a progress report and that the details of our proposed common church order not be opened for discussion or debate at this time, but that all concerns from the churches be sent in writing to the Committee for its consideration.
3. Reappoint the committee members, and for the sake of continuity appoint Dr. G. Nederveen as the fourth member to allow the Committee to complete its mandate.
4. Charge the Committee to complete its task as mandated.

Correspondence for the Committee can be send to:

CPEU Church Order Committee,
 C/O Mr. G. J. Nordeman
 3182 Sprucehill Ave.
 Burlington, ON, L7N 2G5
 e-mail: gj.nordeman@hwcnc.org

In order to perform the task given to us by Synod Neerlandia 2001 the Committee incurred a total of \$3,692.37 in expenses.

Respectfully submitted,

J. De Jong
 G.J. Nordeman
 A.Witten
 J.Van Woudenberg

For the Committee
 Gerard J. Nordeman, Clerk and Interim Convener

Appendix A

Introduction to the Church Order

Biblical and Confessional Basis

We Reformed believers maintain that the standard for personal, public, and ecclesiastical life is God's Word, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant book of Holy Scripture. As a federation of churches we declare our complete subjection and obedience to that Word of God. We also declare that we are confessional churches, in that we believe and are fully persuaded that the Three Forms of Unity, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, summarize and do fully agree with the Word of God. Therefore, we unitedly subscribe to these Reformed Confessions.

Both the Word of God and these Reformed Confessions demand that in our ecclesiastical structure and rule we openly acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the supreme and only Head of the church. Christ exercises His headship in the churches by His Word and Spirit through the ordained offices, for the sake of purity of doctrine, holiness of life, and order in the churches. The churches of our federation, although distinct, willingly display their unity and accountability, both to each other and especially to Christ, by means of our common Confessions and this Church Order. Congregations manifest this unity when their delegates meet together in the broader assemblies.

Historical Background

Our Church Order has its roots in the continental European background of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed churches desired to be faithful to God's Word in practice and life as well as in doctrine. Therefore, as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and even in the midst of persecution, the Reformed churches set down the foundation of the Church Order at various synods beginning in 1563, including those in Wezel, The Netherlands (1568), and in Emden, Germany (1571). For the most part, the decisions of the assemblies in this period leaned heavily on the church orders already in place and used by the Reformed churches in France and Geneva.

The Church Order adopted at Emden was revised at the Synods of Dordrecht (1574 and 1578), Middelburg (1581), and the Hague (1586), before being adopted by the well-known Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619). Our Church Order follows the principles and structure of the Church Order of Dordrecht.

Foundational Principles

The following list of foundational principles, though not exhaustive, provides a clear biblical foundation for, and source of our Church Order.

1. The church is the possession of Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant.

Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27

2. As Mediator of the New Covenant, Christ is the Head of the church.
Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18
3. Because the church is Christ's possession and He is its Head, the principles governing the church are determined not by human preference, but by biblical teaching.
Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18, II Timothy 3:16, 17
4. The catholic or universal church possesses a spiritual unity in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures.
Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20; I Timothy 3:15; II John 9
5. The Lord gave no permanent universal, national or regional offices to His church. The offices of minister, elder and deacon are local in authority and function. Therefore, a broader assembly governs the church only by way of delegation, and exists only when it is in session.
Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Ephesians 4:11-16; Titus 1:5
6. In its subjection to its heavenly Head, the church is governed by Christ from heaven by means of His Word and Spirit with the keys of the kingdom, which He has given to the local church for that purpose. Therefore, no church may lord it over another church, nor may one office bearer lord it over another office bearer.
Matthew 16:19; 23:8; John 20:22, 23; Acts 20:28-32; Titus 1:5
7. Although churches exist in certain circumstances without formal federative relationships, the well-being of the church requires that such relationships be entered into wherever possible. Entering into or remaining in such relationships should be voluntary; there is, however, a spiritual obligation to seek and maintain the federative unity of the churches by formal bonds of fellowship and cooperation.
Acts 11:22, 27-30; 15:22-35; Romans 15:25-27; I Corinthians 16:1-3; Colossians 4:16; I Thessalonians 4:9-10; Revelation 1:11, 20
8. The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession.
I Corinthians 10:14-22; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:16-17
9. Member churches meet together in broader assemblies to manifest ecclesiastical unity, to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of many counselors. The decisions of such assemblies derive their authority from their conformity to the Word of God.
Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35; I Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:16-17

10. In order to manifest our spiritual unity, churches should seek contact with other faithful, confessionally Reformed churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world.
John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6
11. The church is mandated to exercise its ministry of reconciliation by proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.
Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; II Corinthians 5:18-21
12. Christ cares for and governs His church through the office bearers, whom He chooses through the congregation.
Acts 1:23-26; 6:2-3; 14:23; I Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17
13. The Scriptures require that ministers, elders and deacons be thoroughly equipped for the suitable discharge of their respective offices.
I Timothy 3:2-9; 4:16; II Timothy 2:14-16; 3:14; 4:1-5
14. Being the chosen and redeemed people of God, the church, under the supervision of the consistory, is called to worship Him according to the scriptural principles governing worship.
Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Psalm 95:1,2,6;
Psalm 100:4; John 4:24; I Peter 2:9
15. Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through its teaching ministry to build up the people of God in faith.
Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Timothy 4:6;
II Timothy 2:2; 3:16-17
16. Christian discipline, arising from God's love for His people, is exercised in the church to correct and strengthen the people of God, to maintain the unity and the purity of the church of Christ, and thereby to bring honor and glory to God's name.
I Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; Hebrews 12:7-11
17. The exercise of Christian discipline is first of all a personal duty of every church member, but when official discipline by the church becomes necessary, it must be exercised by the consistory of the church, to whom the keys of the kingdom are entrusted.
Matthew 18:15-20; John 20:22-23; Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 5:13;
I Peter 5:1-3

Broad Divisions

Since we desire to honor the apostolic command that in the churches all things are to be done decently and in good order (I Corinthians 14:40), we order our ecclesiastical relations and activities under the following divisions:

- I. Offices (Articles 1 -)
- II. Assemblies (Articles -)
- III. Worship, Sacraments and Ceremonies (Articles -)
- IV. Discipline (Articles -)