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COMMITTEE FOR THE PROMOTION OF ECCLESIASTICAL UNITY

Canadian Reformed Churches

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To: Consistories of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches

Esteemed brothers:

Enclosed please find the "Statements of Agreement" approved by the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity in its consultations with the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the United Reformed Churches.

This agreement was reached according to the terms adopted by our Committee in the attached "Position Paper on Strategies to Church Unity"(cf Phase c, last paragraph). According to this position paper we have sought agreement on the Points (a-f) of the URC Guidelines to Church Unity with the proviso that this agreement will be sent to Synod 2001 Neerlandia for approval in order to enter Phase 2 of our negotiations.

Presently the Committee has not yet formulated its recommendations to Synod 2001. However, in order to keep the churches informed of our progress, we thought it appropriate to send you the terms of our mutual agreement as soon as possible. This will allow the local churches to make some initial evaluations on the work we have done.

The full Committee report to Synod, along with the terms of the URC Guidelines, will be sent to the churches in the fall. *- Read Sept 11/00 - deferred until fall & then will be discussed*

May the Lord also bless this work, and use it for the gathering of his churches. May He also guide all your deliberations.

With fraternal greetings,



(Dr.) J. De Jong
Secretary/Convener

STATEMENTS OF AGREEMENT

Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity
Canadian Reformed Churches

and

Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
United Reformed Churches in North America

Church History

We acknowledge from both sides, that with sin and shortcoming, both of the most recent secessions in our history, the liberation of 1944 and the 1990s secessions, were acts of obedience required and obligated in keeping with the will of God (as confessed in Art.28 and 29 BC).

The Covenant

The covenant is a relationship between God and man established by God at the time of His creation of Adam and Eve. It is one sided in origin and two sided in existence. God established it to live in fellowship with man and show him His love and favour, and to receive from man love, obedience, trust, and honour. When man broke this covenant of favour by his rebellion and fall into sin, God in His grace maintained this relationship and promised to redeem man by the sacrifice of His Son, the Seed of the woman in its deepest sense. The Lord makes this covenant of grace with the believers and their offspring.

The promises of the covenant together with the demand to repent from sin and believe the promises must be proclaimed throughout all the world. All who repent and believe and receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour are grafted into the covenant and share in its promises and blessings. The death of Christ on the cross represents the fulfilment of the terms of the old covenant. Therefore in the new dispensation of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, believers and their seed are called by the power of God to live in true thankfulness and live according to all the commandments of God.

In an obedient response to the covenant obligations the believers are called to gather together in unity with Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, and in unity of faith with the church of all ages. These gatherings are found where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed in purity, where the sacraments are administered in purity, and where church discipline is exercised for the correcting and punishing of sins. All people belonging to God's covenant of grace are called and obliged to join the church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. The fullness of this covenant takes place at the consummation of all things when the one triune God will live with His chosen people in perfect love and fellowship through all eternity.

The Church

We acknowledge that due to the many limitations and shortcomings of human understanding there is a brokenness of the church both in local situations and in broader federations. This implies that there can be more than one true church in a particular place at any given time. We need to reject a broad denominationalism on the one hand, as well as a narrow sectarianism on the other. Churches

of various backgrounds but one confession have the duty to pursue the highest forms of ecclesiastical fellowship possible in their context, in order to promote the unity of the church locally as well as in the federation of churches.

The Church Order

The unity committees express their gratitude that both federations have maintained the principles, structure, and essential provisions of the Church Order of Dort in their respective adaptations for Reformed church life. The committees discussed the specific differences between the orders of the Canadian Reformed and the United Reformed Churches. The agreement was reached that a recommendation be sent to the next synods that each synod appoint a church order committee, and that the two committees work together to produce a suitable and agreeable adaptation of the Church Order of Dort. The differences between the current orders of the federations would be evaluated in the light of the Scriptural and Confessional principles and patterns of church government of the Church Order of Dort.

NOTE: The Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the United Reformed Churches has agreed to recommend to synod 2001 that the last sentence of Art.34 of the URC Church Order be suspended during the period of *Ecclesiastical Fellowship* with the Canadian Reformed Churches, should both synods agree to enter such a relationship. The sentence in question reads, "*Fraternal activities between congregations which need not be reported to classis may include occasional pulpit exchanges, table fellowship, as well as other means of manifesting unity.*" The committee will also recommend to synod that all churches are urged to maintain this provision.

The Song Book

The unity committees gratefully observe that both federations have maintained the principle that while preaching is the central ingredient in the church's worship, congregational singing suitably accompanied forms a significant part of a Reformed worship service. The committees discussed the differences between the Canadian Reformed *Book of Praise* and the United Reformed *Psalter Hymnal*. The agreement was reached to recommend to the 2001 synods that when the two federations agree to enter into *Ecclesiastical Fellowship* each synod appoint a song book committee, and that the two committees work together to produce a song book that contains the Anglo-Genevan psalter and other suitable metrical versions, while including hymns that also meet the standard of faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Reformed Confessions. The committees recommend that the churches continue to use their accustomed song books, also after the Union should the Lord grant this, until the new song book is ready and adopted.

Creeds, Confessions, Liturgical Forms, and Prayers

for Inclusion in the Proposed Song Book

The unity committees also note with thankfulness that both federations have translations of the Three Forms of Unity in their song books which adhere to and reflect the original languages as adopted by the Synod of Dort. The committees are also grateful that the liturgical forms and the prayers for special and designated purposes appear in each federation's song book since they form a direct link with the history of the early Reformed churches in Europe where they originated. The unity

committees recommend that the first Synod of the new combined federation, should the Lord grant the Union to take place, appoint a committee or committees to coordinate and harmonize the present translations of the Ecumenical Creeds, the Three Forms of Unity, the liturgical forms, and the special prayers, consulting where possible the original languages, for eventual inclusion in the new song book.

Agreement on Theological Education for Ministers

With thanks to God the unity committees concur that both federations have maintained the traditional Reformed practice of requiring and providing a thoroughly confessional and scholarly theological education and training for their students aspiring to be ministers of the Word. The Canadian Reformed Churches own and support their Theological College in Hamilton, Ontario, and the professors are Canadian Reformed. Graduates normally become candidates and ministers in their churches. The United Reformed Churches have no federational seminary, and the candidates for their ministry are trained by a number of Reformed seminaries, especially by the independently owned and operated Mid America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, but also by the similarly independent Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California.

The committees discussed the potential and actual differences in the confessional requirements, the church membership of the professors and teaching staff of these three theological schools, the appointment procedures, as well as the institutions' curricular diversities. Agreement was reached to recommend to the synods of 2001 that when the two federations agree to enter into *Ecclesiastical Fellowship* each synod appoint a theological education study committee. The unity committees recommend that each synod's committee also have serving on it one or two professors from its own theological school or schools, and that the two committees work together to draft proposals for their synods in preparation for the eventual Plan of Union in accordance with their mandates.

The unity committees recommend to the synods of 2001 that the mandates for the proposed theological study committee of both federations contain provisions for the commitment that should the Lord of the Church grant eventual Union, the resulting United Churches will retain at least one federational theological school and that the synod recommend the school's professors and teaching staff for appointment. A further recommendation to be included in the study committees' mandates is that the synod of the United Churches select those non-federational seminaries for the preparation of its future candidates for the ministry whose professors and all teaching staff sign the Form of Subscription indicating agreement with the Three Forms of Unity. Another recommendation for inclusion in the study committees' mandates is concerning an aspiring candidate's failure to have adequate instruction in significant courses such as Reformed Church Polity or Reformed Church History. He will be required to supplement his education in those courses to conform to the standards of the churches' theological school(s) before being able to be declared a candidate for the ministry of the Word in the United Churches.

Preaching

Grateful to the King of the Church, the unity committees report their agreement that both federations seek to maintain a high standard of preaching as required by Scripture. Fully trained and ordained ministers are called to preach the whole counsel of God. This includes the regular preaching of the

Reformed Confessions focussing especially on the Heidelberg Catechism during one of the worship services on each Lord's Day. The committees agree that preaching the full counsel of God requires the proclamation of the promises of God, together with the command to repent and believe the gospel, thus calling all to flee from the wrath to come. With suitable exhortations and admonitions all the hearers are encouraged to appropriate the promises of the gospel with a living faith. In this way, the committees agree, every effort is expended in the churches of the two federations to promote the proper explication and application of the Scriptures for the building up of the congregations.

Agreement on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Noting that the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them is a mark of the true Church, the unity committees agree that in both federations the sacraments are maintained and administered according to the ordinance of God. The elders exercise supervision with regard to the administration of both sacraments, and only confessing members in good standing are allowed to present their children for baptism. After making public profession of faith members are admitted to fellowship at the Lord's Table. It is in this way that the sacraments are celebrated to the glory of God and for the edification of His people.

The committees discussed the different practices of supervising the participation of guests at the Lord's Supper. The Canadian Reformed practice is to require of guests an acceptable certificate or attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct issued by the elders of their "sister churches." The United Reformed Churches generally accept upon an interview with the guest, his or her signed personal attestation concerning doctrine and conduct thereby assuring the consistory of their church membership by profession of faith and of their godly walk.

Agreement was reached that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is entrusted to the congregation in each location, and that its elders are charged by Christ with the pure administration of this sacrament. In receiving guests from elsewhere, the committees have agreed that a travel attestation from a guest's home consistory is a time honoured and effective practice in supervising guests at the Lord's Table. A personal attestation prepared and administered by the consistory of the church celebrating the Lord's Supper is also an acceptable and Reformed way of supervising attendance at the Lord's Table, when as much as possible the elders have attempted to secure confirmation of the guest's godly life from appropriate sources. In the attestation the signatories state that they are communicant members not under discipline of a faithful church which fully confesses the doctrines of the Scriptures. The consistory would send the personal statement to the person's home church.

Ecclesiastical Discipline

Since both federations seek to govern themselves according to the pure Word of God, all of the churches exercise church discipline for correcting and punishing sins, the unity committees agree that the implementation of Scripture, the Confession, and the Church Order are duly practised in the churches. The Canadian Reformed and the United Reformed Churches consider Christian discipline to be spiritual in nature, and for the purpose that God may be glorified, that the sinner may be reconciled with God, the church and his neighbour, and that all offense may be removed from the church of Christ.

the form of merger they wish to pursue. If both consistories defend and promote federative unity, proposals regarding a mutually agreeable time table should be tabled at consecutive classes and synods. With the assistance of the deputies for ecclesiastical unity, these proposals should be coordinated into one mutually acceptable draft plan for union, agreeable to all parties, all along the lines of the agreement reached in Phase 2.

The more detailed draft plan for union, including the formulation and adoption of a mutually agreed upon text of the church order, should be ready for adoption by the broadest assemblies of both federations in 2004.

The agreement of Phase 2 should include some initial mutually agreeable provisions regarding theological education, song books, liturgical forms and customs, and Bible translations. The further coordination of these matters in a definitive form would be the subject of the more detailed arrangement in Phase 3, as well as subsequent negotiations.

Drafted June 1997
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Position Paper :Strategies to Church Unity

Preamble

The final goal of all local discussions with churches from other Reformed federations is ecclesiastical union on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, in agreement with the Reformed confession, according to the rules of Reformed church government.

All parties in the discussions should agree at the outset to submit in all things to the word of God, and to a commonly agreed upon confessional framework (in our case the *Three Forms of Unity*).

The respective congregations should be kept informed of the progress made in the discussions throughout the entire process.

Local congregations will also factor in the decisions of the broader assemblies with regard to ecclesiastical unity and maintain these decisions in their own local discussions. Reports of the discussions should also be presented at classis, and essential decisions regarding the advance of the discussions should receive the approval of classes from both federations.

Discussion must proceed on both the local and national level, and one approach should never cancel out the other. These various levels of discussion should not end up working at odds with each other. Discussions at the level of synodical committees will keep the churches informed by means of regular published reports.

The Stages

We can distinguish three main stages in the process of discussions towards ecclesiastical unity: recognition, acceptance, and union. We will review these stages in turn:

a. Initial Recognition and Exploration

In the first stage the discussions should be exploratory and should concern a mutually agreed upon understanding of the confessional heritage of the church, specifically of Articles 27 to 32 of the Belgic Confession. Here use can be made of work done by the Ecumenical Relations Committee, (URC) as well as statements agreed upon by participating consistories in various locales.

This recognition stage would benefit from a mutual understanding that accepts one another's more recent histories as being, despite many weaknesses and shortcomings, required and obligated separations according to the standards of the word of God, especially the Liberation 1944, and the 1990 separations in the CRC.

This stage of recognition should also isolate areas where differences of approach exist, and which need to be examined more closely in order for progress to be made towards a integral ecclesiastical union, i.e. worship, theological education, schooling, and so on. There should be some form of agreement as to the scriptural and church orderly way that these differences can be overcome.

b. Acceptance and Cooperation

This stage of the discussions envisions a mutual acceptance by the two participating consistories of each other's faithfulness as churches to the Word of God and the confessions of the church. In other words, the consistories are able to declare agreement on the fundamentals, and to publicly note that they recognize each other as true churches of Jesus Christ.

Ideally this stage will also include a specific proposal regarding the options open to come to closer ecclesiastical fellowship. This could occur if the agreement reached at the level of the synodical committee could receive the approbation of the churches by the time it is ready to be forwarded to the broadest assemblies.

Once the point of recognition has been achieved certain forms of cooperation can be explored and implemented. For example various groups may hold combined meetings, e.g. men's clubs, women's service agencies, Bible studies, speeches or addresses by each other's ministers, cooperation in evangelism, and so on.

Delegates should also visit broader assemblies, e.g. classes and synods. Meetings of combined consistories (or meetings of consistory committees) should be held regularly to isolate the specific differences that need further attention.

If agreement could be reached on a proposed time schedule towards union (say the period 2001 to 2004) with a commitment to attain integrated unity by the set target date, the rules for ecclesiastical fellowship as outlined in the URCNA "Guidelines" (a to f) could be implemented in the relationship between the two church federations.

c. Advanced Recognition to Union

In the stage of advanced recognition the consistories should come to an agreement as to