

APPENDIX 6:

Report of the Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity

A. MANDATE

The Deputies received the following mandate from Synod Abbotsford 1995:

Synod decide...

B. To re-appoint Deputies for the promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity to promote the unity of Reformed believers who have left the Christian Reformed Church, with the mandate:

1. to make their presence known for the purpose of information and consultation wherever necessary;
2. to make themselves available for advice on local developments;
3. to represent the churches, whenever invited, at assemblies or meetings held for the purpose of pursuing ecclesiastical unity;
4. to report on its activities to the churches and to the next General Synod. (Acts General Synod Abbotsford 1995, Art. 86 V.B)

B. THE COMMITTEE AND ITS WORKINGS

As deputies we have enjoyed a good working relationship. Most of the work is done by correspondence, but some is also done by telephone and fax. So far communications have worked very well. We have decided as deputies that the local concerns in western Canada would be dealt with by western delegates, and that local issues (meetings, consultations, etc.) in eastern Canada would be covered by the eastern delegates.

In this connection we must mention the passing of one of our delegates, Rev. J.D. Wielenga, who was called home by the Lord on January 29, 1996. We remember with gratitude the work he did as a deputy. Even though this was a relatively short period, he did this work with all his heart, and offered much time and effort for this cause. We are thankful to have had the opportunity of working with him, and it is our hope and prayer that his efforts for church unity may not be fruitless.

As deputies appointed by Synod 1995, we have sought to build on the preliminary work done by the deputies appointed by Synod Lincoln 1992. For example, we have made use of the discussion paper *Pursuing Ecclesiastical Unity*, as drafted by the previous deputies. However, since this document was not adopted by General Synod 1995, we have not felt obliged to operate entirely within the parameters of this discussion paper. Our approach was somewhat eclectic, determined in part by the reaction of various churches to the "Discussion Paper" and Synod's considerations on this matter, (Acts, 1995, Art. 86 IV, p. 46).

C. ACTIVITIES

1. Contact at meetings

a. Alliance of Reformed Churches, November 14-16, 1995, Lynwood, IL.

Two committee members represented our churches at the meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches in November, 1995. They also stayed for the meeting of the independent churches which immediately followed the Alliance meeting. These were the churches desirous of federating as soon as possible. Rev. Den Hollander spoke a few words of greeting at the Alliance meeting, and this address was later published in *Clarion*, (see Appendix 1 for reports and speech). This was a positive visit, although it was evident at this meeting that the brothers were going to move ahead directly to the formation of their own federation.

b. Constitutive Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America, October 1,2, 1996, Lynwood, IL.

Upon contact with Rev. Jerome Julien, who at the time was the stated clerk of the Alliance of Reformed Churches, the committee decided to send a delegation of observers to the first Synod of the United Reformed Churches held on October 1, and 2, 1996, in Lynwood, IL. A report of the is meeting was published in *Clarion*, as well as the speech held by Dr. J. De Jong, see Appendices 2 and 3). There was a very positive atmosphere at this synod, and one could notice a strong desire to move ahead as a separate federation of churches. There are now three classes, one in the west, one in the midwest, and one in the east; however, growth has been so rapid that a new division may be required. The American churches have flocked in the classis mid-west, but since most of the growth in the past year has occurred there, future developments will no doubt include another one or two classical regions in the USA.

The federation has been in existence for almost a year, and as stated has experienced rapid growth. The next synod is scheduled to be held D.V. October 21, 1997 in St. Catharines, Ont., and we will be sending a delegation as observers to this synod. It is clear that this has become a period of consolidation and growth for the URCNA. Several churches have

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joined since the formation of the federation, and several more are contemplating joining this new federation.

The founding synod also appointed an Inter-Church Relations Committee composed of two ministers and two elders. We have received a letter from this committee expressing the desire to pursue talks with us aimed at a growing understanding of each other's traditions and backgrounds. A reply was sent to this letter (February 1997), and we received another letter dated July 15. These letters, as well as the reports of the Inter-Church Relations Committee to the forthcoming synod of the URCNA indicate that much attention is being given to the contact with the Canadian Reformed Churches. We can only be grateful for these developments.

c. Synod of the United Reformed Churches, October 21-23, 1997, St. Catharines, ON.

The second Synod of the United Reformed Churches was held in St. Catharines, Ont., from October 21 to October 23. For the most part, Rev. Den Hollander functioned as the fraternal delegate from the Canadian Reformed Churches, (see Appendices 7 and 8 for the report and speech). He was accompanied by brother H.T. Vandervelde for two sessions (afternoon) and one afternoon session by Dr. J. De Jong.

There are now 63 churches in the URCNA, with six classes. There has been rapid growth, especially in the US during the last year. Thus there is still much movement and flux in these churches.

This synod appointed a Committee for Ecumenical Relations with the mandate to pursue ecumenical relations with a number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including our own federation. While the Inter-Church Relations Committee in its report to synod gave considerable priority to the relation of the URC to the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Synod itself pursued a policy of treating all these churches equally. Thus, federative unity has become much more of a long term option than before.

d. Alliance of Reformed Churches, November 11-13, 1996, Holland, MI

Dr. J. De Jong represented the churches at the meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches. A report on this meeting was published in *Clarion*, as well as the speech that was held there (see Appendix 4). This was a good visit, in which many contacts could be made, and many informal discussions could be held. The Committee feels that at present our contacts with the Alliance should continue, with the specific purpose of promoting federative unity.

e. Alliance of Reformed Churches, October 16 and 17, 1997, Kalamazoo, MI

Rev. W. Den Hollander represented our churches at the 1997 meeting of the Alliance. The most notable decision of this assembly was to permit federations of churches to be members as well as local churches. This

would include federations from the Presbyterian tradition as well. It was also decided to use the ARC as a forum to discuss matters dividing Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. Rev. Den Hollander's report and speech at the Alliance is attached, (see Appendix 6).

2. Contacts by Correspondence

a. Contact with former Independent Churches (URCNA).

As mentioned above we have received an initial communication from the Inter-Church Relations Committee of the United Reformed Churches. Our aim is to pursue this contact initially by mail; however, we hope it will result in some further exploratory meetings between the two committees.

At the (oral) invitation of Rev. J. H. Gangar (Wellandport) a memorandum prepared by Dr. J. De Jong was sent to the committee on the church order appointed by the Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1994, (see Appendix 5). This memorandum was forwarded early in 1996 in order to provide comments on the proposed church order as it was being discussed among the Alliance churches. This church order was later provisionally adopted by the first synod of the United Reformed Churches. The Committee of Inter Church Relations of the United Reformed Churches has agreed to send us a copy of their church order once it has been definitely adopted (at synod 1997). We hope to continue the discussion on the points that were raised in 1996 in the further correspondence and possible meetings with this Committee of the URCNA.

b. Contact with Other Reformed groups seceding from the CRCNA

In December 1996 we sent a letter of support and encouragement to the Inter-Classical Conference organizing Committee, based in Escondido, California. Many churches in the conference are considering a form of secession as one of the options they must pursue. Therefore, we felt it was a duty to reach out to them in the hope that this will lead to further contacts in the future. Since 1996, several of these churches have left the CRC and are contemplating or requesting to join the URCNA.

c. Contact with Other Churches

We received a letter from a committee appointed by Classis East of the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. This letter was also addressed to the United Reformed Churches and Free Reformed Churches of the Ontario region. Although we believe this task should move to the level of committees appointed by synod, we still responded positively to this letter, and hope to send a delegate as observer to the next Classis East. We envision this as a doorway to initiate talks among like-minded churches on a local level, after which overtures can be presented to the various minor and major assemblies for the purpose of attaining federative unity.

d. Local Contacts

Several churches of our federation informed us of their work, and also asked for our advice in their discussions with independent churches. We received communications from the churches of Elora, Hamilton, Rockway, Toronto, Watford, and Winnipeg, as well as from a Committee of Classis Pacific of April 1995. A letter was also received from the Committee for Contact with the Churches Abroad re the attempts of the sister churches in Holland to pursue some contacts with those churches seceding from the CRCNA.

D. DEPUTIES' ASSESSMENT

On the whole we are thankful for the opportunities provided for us, and we can be positive about having made our presence known in the current ecclesiastical scene in both Canada and the US. Discussions at the public meetings indicated quite clearly that the Canadian and American Reformed Churches are known as a group of churches that desire ecumenicity on a solid Reformed basis. The very fact that we are introducing ourselves and our background to believers seceding from the CRCNA is a positive step. Many people are hardly aware of our existence, and if they are, they attach no direct significance to us, since their perspectives are clouded with misconceptions regarding what we stand for.

We were very encouraged by the most recent exchange with the Committee of Inter-Church Relations of the URCNA. From this correspondence it is obvious that they place considerable importance on continuing their relations with us, with a view to establishing federative unity. We feel it is our duty to examine carefully their new church order, isolate our differences, and carry on the discussion concerning these differences.

The position of the most recent synod, on the other hand, was less encouraging. It did not give a clear endorsement to the Committee's approach to the Canadian Reformed Churches, and concentrated on the establishment of fraternal relations with twelve other national and foreign church federations. This implies that the specific goal of federative unity with Reformed churches of a more immediate range and historical background has been let go in favour of a broader policy on ecumenical relations.

With regard to the latest developments in the Alliance of Reformed Churches, we do not feel that it falls within the scope of the original mandate given to the deputies to be a part of an organization designed to discuss issues that divide Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. Therefore we do not feel that as deputies we have an integral role to fulfil in this situation. However, given the fact that there are still several churches among the Alliance that remain unfederated, and that the involvement of the Canadian Reformed Churches is most sincerely appreciated, we feel that a more restricted involvement, particularly with regard to the churches that are still independent, should be maintained, if only to continue to let obligation to church unity be voiced.

E. SUGGESTIONS AND REQUESTS

Despite slow progress, we are convinced that this work must continue, if only to show to the contemporary ecclesiastical world in Reformed North America that we are dedicated to the principles of Reformed ecumenicity, and that this is a vision that ought to be shared by all Reformed churches, especially those sharing our background and heritage. This is another avenue for us to heed the call of Christ who died for His church, that also through our voice, His sheep may be one, as He calls them to be, (John 17:21). Our efforts are modest, but if they are done in the conviction of love and service to God then we may be sure of God's blessing even in ways we least expect. Therefore we believe the Deputies' mandate should be renewed with the following additions and/or modifications:

1. that deputies be instructed to pursue continued fraternal dialogue with the United Reformed Churches of North America with a view towards establishing federative unity
2. that deputies pursue a more restricted involvement in the Alliance of Reformed Churches with a view to pursuing federative unity with unfederated (independent) Reformed Churches.
3. that deputies represent the churches (when invited) at meetings of the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, with a view to promoting greater understanding and exploring possibilities of federative unity.
4. that a new deputy be appointed from western Canada to fill the vacancy among the Deputies created by the loss of Rev. J. Wielenga.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. R. Aasman

Dr. J. De Jong

Rev. W. Den Hollander

Elder P. Van Woudenberg

Elder H. T. Vandervelde