

APPENDIX VII

Report of Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity to Synod Abbotsford 1995.

A. MANDATE

Deputies worked under the following mandate from Synod Lincoln 1992:

Synod decide ... to appoint deputies for the promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity, consisting of an equal number of committee members from the two Regional Synod districts, 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;
2. to represent the churches, whenever invited, at assemblies or meetings held for the purpose of coming to ecclesiastical unity;
3. to report on its activities to the churches and to the next General Synod. (*Acts General Synod Lincoln, ON 1992, Art. 36.V.B*)

B. ACTIVITIES

1. *General Comments*

Since deputies are spread across the country and since we saw no urgent need to come together at considerable expense, all the deputies never met in person together but conducted their business primarily by mail. In view of these rather unique circumstances, the convener became de facto the secretary of the deputies.

To keep the churches as fully informed as possible, material was published in *Clarion* as appropriate.

Because virtually all our business was conducted by mail, including the preparing of this report, this report comes to the churches later than we would have liked. Another factor for the relative lateness of this report is that deputies had to attend the November 1994 meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches and digest and distribute the results of that meeting prior to making a report.

2. *Making our Presence Known*

By way of letters (dated Feb 5, 1993) we officially informed The Confessional Fellowship of Reformed Churches (c/o Rev. J.S. Gangar) and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches (c/o Dr. B. Short) of our existence and mandate and indicated that we were available within that context.

We have received no response from the Confessional Fellowship, presumably because this body which was formed on May 23, 1992 (see *Clarion*, August 14, 1992), and met only once since then (Nov 19, 1992) basically ceased to function when the Independent Churches formed a regional Ontario fellowship on June 18, 1994 (see *Clarion* Oct 21, 1994).

We received no response from the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and Dr. C. Van Dam later heard from Rev. H. Bout of the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches that our letter had never been tabled at a major assembly of these churches. A copy of our original letter was subsequently sent to Rev. H. Bout (Nov 20, 1993) and the hope was expressed that we would receive an official response from the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. At the time of writing this report we have received no response.

In the context of making our presence known, two additional points can be mentioned. Firstly, our existence was made known to the Alliance of Reformed Churches by our presence and speaking at these meetings (see below under "3. Public Meetings"). Secondly, shortly after Deputies were appointed, *Christian Renewal* interviewed Dr. C. Van Dam with a view to learning more about the role and function of the Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity. The interview appeared in *Christian Renewal* (February 1, 1993) and was reprinted in *Clarion* (February 26, 1993).

3. *Public Meetings*

There were several occasions that some deputies were involved in public meetings. There were first of all the meetings of the Alliance of Reformed Churches held in Lynwood, Illinois in the middle of November. Due to a variety of circumstances, the ideal of having a rotating representation (from among the deputies) at these meetings could not be realized. The 1992 meeting was attended by ad hoc deputies appointed by Synod Lincoln for the occasion, namely, Rev. J. Mulder and Dr. C. Van Dam. They reported on this meeting in *Clarion* (Jan 15 and 29, 1993) by publishing an account of the event and the text of a short speech as observer. The 1993 and 1994 meetings were attended by Rev. R. Aasman and Dr. C. Van Dam who reported to the churches in *Clarion* (Jan 14, 1994 and Jan 13, 1995) by publishing both the reports and the speeches as observers. (All the published reports and messages can be found in Appendix I.)

Canadian Reformed observers were clearly welcome at these meetings and their presence was appreciated. It is also very important for the Canadian Reformed Churches to observe these meetings and get a sense of the direction of the Independent Churches associated with the Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Rev. W. den Hollander, Elder H. T. VanderVelde, and Dr. C. Van Dam attended a meeting of the Independent Reformed Churches which was held in St. Catharines on May 29, 1993. A report of this meeting was published in *Clarion* (August 13, 1993).

Several deputies were also involved in public meetings. Although it was not always clear whether their being a deputy was decisive in being involved, we would nevertheless like to note these occasions here for they were essentially part of the work of those appointed to be deputies. Rev. J.D. Wielenga spoke on "Federation of Confessionally United Churches" for the Conference on Reformed Ecumenical Action on April 3, 1993 which was in Calgary. This speech was published in *Clarion* (May 21, 1993). Rev. Wielenga also spoke at a combined congregational meeting of Orthodox Christian Reformed Church in Kelowna, B.C. and the Canadian Reformed Church in Vernon, B.C. on September 30, 1994.

Dr. C. Van Dam spoke at congregational meetings in Fergus, Ancaster, and Burlington Ebenezer in the spring of 1994 on "The Independent Christian Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches." The speech was published in *Clarion* (Oct 7 and 21, 1994).

Rev. W. Den Hollander spoke on "Conditions and Compromise for Ecclesiastical Unity" at the Minister's Workshop held on January 9, 1995 in Hamilton.

4. *Discussion Paper*

Your deputies adopted a discussion paper, "Pursuing Ecclesiastical Unity," which is included in Appendix II. This paper reflects how the deputies think about the issues relating to our goal for unity. It was published in *Clarion* (Feb 11, 1994) and in *Christian Renewal* (March 7, 1994) in the hope of helping to

further the discussion that was underway between consistories meeting to discuss unity. One consistory and one minister responded to it. The consistory of Port Kells (June 6, 1994) expressed wholehearted agreement with the ecumenical direction and also asked several questions, namely: Is the language not too vague when we speak about not binding one another to each other's idiosyncrasies? (Response: The vagueness was on purpose. We would like to stress the positive, namely, that any unity should be on the basis of Scripture and the accepted confessions.) Would it not be better not to have our ministers on non-Canadian pulpits in the interim situation? (Response: The paper leaves both possibilities open. It is up to the minister involved and his consistory.) Where does the local church's responsibility end and that of the federation begin in seeking unity? (A good question. Synod 1992 correctly tried to give both the local church and the federation their due place.) Rev. R.F. Boersema also responded (July 14, 1994) positively with some suggestions for improvement. Two of these have been adopted.

We request Synod to adopt this discussion paper so that consistories who are in the process of ecumenical discussions can be helped by it and so that any future deputies to be appointed can build on this work.

5. *The Ecumenicity Committee of the Alliance of Reformed Churches*

At the 1993 meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches, there were four overtures which requested the ARC to contact several ecclesiastical conferences and churches. A committee was appointed consisting of the Independent churches of Calgary, Edmonton and Lethbridge, Alberta, and mandated to do the following:

- i. Contact the International Conference of Reformed Churches, the International Reformed Fellowship, and other Reformed fellowships, to investigate their membership, goals, and confessional foundations, and determine whether fellowship with them is feasible or desirable.
- ii. Contact the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, the Protestant Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Christian Presbyterian Church, and the Reformed Church in the United States, requesting some official communication from them to see whether they are interested in working toward federative unity with the independent churches, and if so, according to what procedure they would suggest such federative unity be sought.

Your deputies received a letter in February, 1994 (see Appendix III) from this ecumenicity committee of the Alliance inviting us to respond. We answered by letter (March 14, 1994, also in Appendix III) in which we introduced ourselves and our mandate, responded positively to the question whether the Canadian Reformed Churches were interested in working toward federative unity with the independent churches, and included for their information a copy of the discussion paper *Pursuing Ecclesiastical Unity*.

The Ecumenicity Committee reported to the 1994 meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches. It is of interest to note that this committee had received responses only from the Canadian Reformed Churches (i.e. from the Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity) and from three Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. All the responses were positive. The Committee's report was rather brief and incomplete. It simply passed on the correspondence received, drew no inferences from it, and gave no recommendations for further action. It was also disappointing that this Committee had not placed their report on the

provisional agenda of the Alliance of Reformed Churches and only distributed it near the end of the Alliance meetings. Thus no consistory had an opportunity to study it beforehand.

In the discussion at the Alliance meeting that followed, appreciation was expressed for the correspondence received. The Alliance of Reformed Churches decided to dismiss the committee since its mandate was completed and a new committee for contact would be appointed. Its mandate would be to study the letters received and to take such action as it deems necessary. To date no answer has been received to our initial response.

To be realistic, it should be noted in this context that as long as the Independent Churches are not federated in some form, it is very difficult for them to deal meaningfully with matters of ecumenicity.

6. *Other Activities*

- i. Respecting local Canadian Reformed ecumenical activities, we received the following official information:
 - a. a copy of the agenda for the combined meeting (of Feb 8, 1993) of the consistories of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Edmonton and the Orthodox Reformed Church in Edmonton, along with a report of this meeting.
 - b. from the Canadian Reformed Church at Hamilton a letter (Feb 9, 1993) informing us of a letter they sent to the Independent Christian Reformed Church (at Upper Wellington) in Hamilton in which they invite this church to a combined meeting of the respective consistories to discuss matters of mutual concern and benefit. We also subsequently received a copy of the answer of the Hamilton Independent Reformed Church (April 11, 1993) to the Cornerstone Canadian Reformed Church in which they gratefully accepted the invitation.
 - c. a copy of the agenda for the combined meeting of the consistories of the Canadian Reformed Churches at Taber and Coaldale and the Independent Christian Reformed Church at Lethbridge, along with other materials on these meetings including a report.
 - d. a copy of a letter that the Canadian Reformed Church at Winnipeg sent (April 29, 1993) to the consistory of the Independent Reformed Church in Winnipeg respecting beginning ecumenical discussions as consistories.
 - e. a copy of the (draft) "Okanagan Accord" from the Canadian Reformed Church at Vernon. This document details the decision of the consistories of the Orthodox Reformed Church at Kelowna, B.C. and the Canadian Reformed Church at Vernon, B.C., to enter into a relationship of local ecclesiastical fellowship with a view to working towards a federative unity, subject to the advice of the respective Classes.
- i. A letter of inquiry (Feb 5, 1993) was written to the American Reformed Church in Grand Rapids asking for information on its plans to expand their ministry-at-large project to target especially those who have left the Christian Reformed Church. In our letter, this church was reminded of the mandate Synod Lincoln 1992 had given the Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity. (After our letter had gone, we received a copy of a letter dated Feb 23, 1993) from Burlington-West to Grand Rapids in which similar issues were raised.)

Grand Rapids responded by providing information (April 19, 1993) and a second letter about the same matter (Oct 12, 1993) reminded Deputies that Grand Rapids remained the address church for the United States. On

November 15, 1993 (just before the 1993 meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches) a fax was received from the Grand Rapids consistory in which they gave information on recent developments in their area and in which they expressed their view on the churches associated with the Alliance of Reformed Churches, namely, that these churches "have not demonstrated a Scriptural understanding of a legitimate secession from the CRC," that they "must conclude that the CRC is a false church" and that "they ought to seek ecclesiastical unity with the Canadian and American Reformed Churches" and not federate themselves. The Deputies responded (December 6, 1994) thanking Grand Rapids for their information and input and enclosing a copy of the message that was delivered to the Alliance on behalf of the Canadian Reformed Churches. We also indicated that we did not have the same difficulty Grand Rapids did in the probable formation of a federation of the present Independent Christian Reformed Churches and saw it as a possible step toward a union of Reformed churches.

- iii. Via Rev. J. Mulder, we received material addressed to the Canadian and American Reformed Churches relating to the Nineteenth Meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council. Since we did not have any mandate respecting this organization, this mail was received for information.

C. PROGRESS AND ISSUES

It is good in a report such as this to reflect for a moment how things have changed from the time the mandate was given until now. We would like to bring the following to your attention.

1. With respect to the Alliance of Reformed Churches we can say that there is slow but steady progress to these churches becoming federated with each other. There are encouraging indicators that they desire to federate on the basis of a Reformed Church Order. Once the Independent Christian Reformed Churches are federated, we may expect, under God's blessing, more movement on the ecumenical front. In the first place, one would hope that the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and those that are now federating would want to seek unity. In the second place, it is to be hoped that the interest shown in the Canadian Reformed Churches up to now will result in meaningful federative dialogue once a federation of the present Independent churches is in place. In light of this, it is important that Synod once again appoint Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity. It is also of great importance that the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and the federated Independent Christian Reformed Churches realize where we officially stand and that we fervently desire the unity of all Reformed confessors. This knowledge will help these respective churches to act upon the ecumenicity issue with us.
2. With respect to the home front, we as Deputies have received official information from several churches about their ecumenical endeavours. This was greatly appreciated. However, in general we officially know little about what is happening in the midst of our own churches. Besides the official information we have received, our knowledge of local efforts comes primarily through fellow deputies (information on ecumenical discussions in Chilliwack, and Guelph) or from speaking to colleagues elsewhere. We do not blame any church for this situation (Synod also never gave any hints in this direction), but this circumstance is a handicap for us as deputies and could be detrimental for the churches for several reasons.

Firstly, if churches were to keep us informed, it would be a valuable learning experience for us. We are at this point of history in an unprecedented situation

ecclesiastically in North America and we should share our collective insights and attempts as we seek to do the Lord's will with respect to church unity. If deputies would be called upon to give advice where discussions are just starting, they will be in a more knowledgeable position to do so if kept informed on different approaches and results experienced elsewhere.

Furthermore, if Deputies were to be kept fully informed, it would also enable the Deputies to get a more accurate sense of where the churches are at, so that the Deputies can more effectively speak for the churches in ecumenical settings where they are involved.

Finally while we as Deputies certainly wish to uphold the jurisdiction of the local church, it should be recognized that in local ecumenical discussions also federative aspects quickly come into the picture (to mention a few obvious ones, questions surrounding the *Book of Praise*, the Church Order, and the translation of the confessions). Churches should therefore be encouraged to keep Deputies fully informed and to call upon Deputies should a local church wish to have their input.

3. It is clear from one of the letters we received (Port Kells, June 6, 1994) and from what we have unofficially heard from colleagues that many in the churches are wondering what to do once two local churches have recognized each other as true churches. Another question that appears to live is what exactly is a federative and local responsibility in these discussions. How far can a local church go? These questions are important for not having answers for them can hold up and sour promising local ecumenical discussions because one is unsure how to proceed. Unless events have overtaken us by the time this report is discussed at Synod, it may be helpful that Deputies be asked to study such questions since these type of issues (e.g., possible pulpit exchange once churches recognize each other officially) are not generally covered by our Church Order. A common approach would be beneficial for the churches.
4. A final consideration that we wish to pass on to you is that if, so the Lord wills, these ecumenical concerns take more of the spotlight in the life of churches in our midst, it may become necessary for the Deputies to meet periodically. The present system of geographically separated Deputies has its advantages, but it would be wise for Synod to take the possibility of periodical meetings of Deputies into consideration when approximate budgets are drawn up for the Church at Carman to collect.

D. CONCLUDING REQUESTS

We respectfully request Synod:

1. to approve the work of deputies
2. to adopt the discussion paper so that any future deputies to be appointed can build on this work.
3. to express officially that the Canadian Reformed Churches truly desire a Biblical ecclesiastical unity with the Independent Churches, Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and all those who wish to be church on the basis of the Scriptures as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity and that Canadian Reformed deputies are available to discuss with them any issues that may form a stumbling block to realizing this ecumenical goal.
4. to ask the churches to keep the deputies fully informed of activities or decisions in their discussions with those who have left the Christian Reformed Church.
5. to appoint again Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity with the following mandate:
 - i. to make their presence known for the purpose of information and consultation where still necessary,

- ii. to authorize Deputies to officially approach the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches and the future federation of Independent Christian Reformed Churches with the request that these respective churches appoint deputies for church unity who are mandated by their respective assemblies to speak on their behalf and to meet with their Canadian Reformed counterparts,
- iii. to receive reports from the Canadian/American Reformed Churches on local ecumenical developments,
- iv. to be available to consistories for counsel as necessary in local ecumenical discussions or developments,
- v. to represent the churches, whenever invited, at assemblies or meetings held for the purpose of coming to ecclesiastical unity,
- vi. to report on its activities to the churches and to the next General Synod.

Respectfully submitted
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Rev. W. den Hollander,
Dr. C. Van Dam, convener/secretary
Elder H. T. VanderVelde,
Elder P. Van Woudenberg,
Rev. J. D. Wielenga