

Press Release of General Synod Edmonton Immanuel 2019.

On Monday May 13, twenty-four delegates from across Canada gathered in Edmonton Alberta in preparation for the convening of the 2019 General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In the evening, Rev. Richard Aasman, the chairman of the previous General Synod in Dunnville, led a special worship service. He preached on 1 John 3:1-3 – focusing on how lavish is the love that the Father has showered upon us in Jesus Christ. This message provided encouragement to the delegates about to begin their work the next day and to the many members in attendance from the Immanuel and surrounding congregations.

On Tuesday morning, Rev. Julius VanSpronsen, on behalf of the convening church opened the meeting, by welcoming all present, especially the delegates to GS 2019. He led in opening devotions which included a brief meditation on the words of 1 Timothy 6:11-21. The credentials were examined and found to be in good order. Twenty-two primary delegates and two alternate delegates were present and signed the attendance list.

Through a free vote, the following brothers were chosen to serve in the executive: Rev. Douwe Agema as chairman, Rev. John Louwerse as vice-chairman, Rev. Karlo Janssen as 1st clerk, and Rev. Peter Holtvluwer as 2nd clerk. On behalf of the convening church, the Rev. VanSpronsen declared Synod constituted. The newly chosen chairman thanked the assembly for confidence expressed in the elected officers of Synod. He expressed much appreciation to the convening church for all the work done in preparation for Synod. Apart from receiving and organizing hundreds of documents, the host church also arranged lodging and transportation for the delegates and had the responsibility of providing three meals a day for at least twenty-four men and often more when delegates from sister churches were present. This work was very much appreciated by the delegates.

Synod was briefly adjourned, while the executive took the opportunity to prepare proposals regarding the proceedings of Synod and the division of tasks among the various members of Synod. When Synod reconvened, the agenda was adopted, and 5 advisory committees were appointed. Each committee was assigned particular agenda items to consider and came forward with proposals for discussion, deliberation and

adoption in plenary session. In the early stages of Synod most of the time was devoted to meetings of these advisory committees. As time went on, there were more and more plenary sessions.

In the following paragraphs, the major decisions of Synod Edmonton Immanuel will be reviewed, not necessarily in the order they were made. Synod had to deal with several personal and confidential appeals, as well as appeals and overtures from individual churches, which are not included in this review.

Anyone who wishes to have more detail about the decisions of Synod can explore the *Acts of Synod* which have already been published on the Canadian Reformed Churches website and will be released in printed form in the near future.

Ecumenical Relationships.

The Canadian Reformed Churches enjoy ecclesiastical fellowship with various churches in North America and around the world. Delegations from these churches were present at General Synod and were given the privileges of the floor and many availed themselves of this opportunity.

On the first evening of General Synod, a letter of greetings from the Reformed Churches of Indonesia (GGRI) was read, as these churches were unable to send a delegation to Synod. The Rev. Ben Westerveld, delegate from the Reformed Churches in Quebec (ERQ), addressed Synod describing the ERQ and its ministries and expressing gratitude for our sister church relationship. Elder Dr. James Wanliss, spoke on behalf on the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)(FCC), describing the FCC, its worship and outreach efforts, its history and distinctives and expressing gratitude for the unity of faith. The Rev. Travis Grassmid, representing the Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS), expressed appreciation for the relationship with the CanRC and urging the Synod to be faithful to the Word in the matters before it.

On the second evening, Br. Johannes Moes, delegate from the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa gave an address, describing the FRCSA, its history and its ministries. He expressed gratitude for unity in the faith, evident in the assistance the FRCSA received from CRTS in training theological students. He outlined the need for financial support in South Africa for mission projects and described the inter-church relations of the FRCSA. The Rev, Adriano Gama, one of three delegates from the Reformed Churches of Brazil (IRB) addressed Synod, expressing gratitude for the relationship with the CanRC and the

48 years of work by the CanRC in Brazil. He also described the history of the IRB and some of its projects and ministries.

The Rev. Yonson Dethan, delegate from the Reformed Calvinist Churches in Indonesia (GGRC) was given the opportunity to address Synod. Besides passing on greetings, he expressed appreciation for the ties with the CanRC and regret over the fact that those ties have not yet become ones of ecclesiastical fellowship. He described the history of the GGRC, its Indonesian context, its current ministries and outreach projects, including its involvement with Smithville's mission work in Timor.

The Rev. Rinze IJbema and the Rev. Dr. Melle Oosterhuis, delegates from Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv) also addressed Synod. Rev. IJbema brought greetings and described the origin of the relationship between GKv and the CanRC in 1952. He also expressed regret about the tension that exists between the GKv and the CanRC at this time and stated that the GKv would dearly love for the sister church relationship to continue. The Rev. Dr. Oosterhuis then addressed synod, explaining the decisions of GS-GKv 2017 (Meppel) especially regarding hermeneutics as the background to GKv decisions that concern the CanRC.

On the third evening, the Rev. Hendrik Alkema, delegate from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia addressed Synod, expressing appreciation and gratitude for the close ties between the FRCA and CanRC. He described some of the many ways in which the two federations are connected. He spoke briefly of the development of the Australian *Book of Praise* and the study of the feasibility of training for the ministry in Australia. He also gave an overview of the inter-church relations of the FRCA. The Rev. Leo de Vos, delegate from the Reformed Churches of New Zealand described the history of Christianity in New Zealand and the blended character of the RCNZ. He gave an impression of church life in the RCNZ and expressed appreciation of the way in which the RCNZ and CanRC cooperate in mission in Papua New Guinea. The Rev. Bill Pols delegate from the United Reformed Churches of North America expressed appreciation for the ties between the URCNA and CanRC, describing how some of those ties are evident in church life. He outlined some of the recent developments in the URCNA, including the doctrinal affirmation on marriage and the introduction of the *Trinity Psalter-Hymnal*.

The last fraternal observer to address Synod on Thursday evening was the Rev. Bill Barron, from the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC). He spoke of the history of the ARPC and its current character. He described how the ARPC and RPCNA are growing together. He gave an impression of some of the works in the ARPC, including its education ministries and its mission projects.

On Monday evening a letter of greeting was received from the Rev. Jack Sawyer on behalf of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Personal circumstances that arose at the time of Synod prevented him from coming. Hence the Rev. Holtvluwer read the speech prepared by Rev. Sawyer. The history of the OPC was briefly described, followed by a description of ministries and current activities of the OPC.

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

Reformed Churches in the Netherlands

One of the most difficult decisions which Synod had to make was, with sadness, to discontinue the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and to implore the Canadian Reformed Churches to continue in prayer for these churches. This decision came upon the recommendation of the subcommittee appointed by a previous Synod to deal with the Dutch sister churches. In coming to this decision, Synod considered, that nothing in Rev. Oosterhuis' presentation showed that the sub-committee's outline of developments was inaccurate or that its assessment of these developments and their implications was in error. Synod also observed that sister churches from around the world have encouraged the GKv to rethink the course upon which they have gone, and yet in Synod Meppel 2017, the GKv were not convinced by the admonitions of their sister churches. And Synod noted that now these churches approve of developments contrary to the Lord's instruction in his Word; the marks of the true church cannot with confidence be said to be consistently present in these churches. Further, it considered that continuing a relation with the GKv would communicate that we are not sorely grieved by their recent decisions and are not

earnest about our past letters and words of admonition. Conversely, severing the relation would communicate to our own members the need to be watchful that we in the Canadian Reformed Churches do not follow a similar path. At the same time severing the relation would give encouragement to the faithful members in the GKv to take similar action. Lastly, it noted that the discontinuation of the relationship at this time is not irreversible. Should a future synod of the GKv give evidence that the churches have reversed their direction, the CanRC's can reestablish relations. Synod also adopted the text of a letter to be sent to all the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv) and brought in person to their synod 2021.

New Contacts and Relationships

Synod Edmonton did decide to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Calvinist Churches in Indonesia (GGRC). Synod also decided to extend ecclesiastical fellowship to the Reformed Churches Indonesia (GGRI) as a whole, being the federation of the churches in Kalimantan Barat (GGRI-KalBar), the churches in Nusa Tenggara Timur (GGRI-NTT) and the churches in Papua (GGRI-Papua). These decisions were a reason for thankfulness.

It was also decided to accept the invitation of the Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC) and the Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA) to enter into their Level One correspondence. The Committee for Contact with Churches in North America was mandated by Synod to engage in continued dialogue and contact with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church in America (Kosin), and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America.

Synod decided to mandate the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) to continue contact with the Reformed Churches in Korea (RCK) and the Independent Reformed church of Korea (IRCK) where possible.

On another note, Synod decided to instruct two of its committees, the CRCA and the CCCNA to jointly do a thorough study on how Article 50 CO can best be executed in today's ecclesiastical realities. This study would, among other things also indicate how these two committees might most effectively and efficiently work together. These two committees are to submit a report to the churches 6 months prior to the convening of the next Synod.

Unity with the United Reformed Churches.

Synod decided that the coordinators for the committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Dunnville 2016 to seek ways to facilitate the work of building unity on the local level, as well as visiting churches and Classes of the URCNA, particularly in the United States. Also, the decision was made not to reappoint the Committee for Church Unity, (including the sub- committees - Church Order, Theological Education, Common Songbook and Creeds and Forms).

General Synod, however, also expressed that the CanRC remain committed to the pursuit of unity with the United Reformed churches and are looking forward to re-engaging in this discussion when the URCNA is ready. Thus Synod decided to continue ecclesiastical fellowship (phase 2) with the United Reformed Churches in North America under the adopted rules.

Committee for the Official Website.

Thanksgiving was expressed by Synod to those involved in the development and implementation of the new federation website. When perusing the website you will find all the Acts of Synod Edmonton 2019 available for everyone to read. The committee was given a mandate to maintain the existing website and associate technical functions. Some of the technical functions associated with the website will be changed.

Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

The Board of Governors informed General Synod that it granted Dr. G.H. Visscher's request to retire upon the completion of the 2019-20 academic year. Synod approved of his retirement and expressed deep gratitude for his many years of faithful and diligent service to the Seminary and the Churches as professor of New Testament and of his nine years as Principal of the Seminary. The Board of Governors was directed to appoint Dr. William DenHollander of Langley as Professor of New Testament at CRTS. Dr. DenHollander was able to visit and address Synod and inform the body of his acceptance of this position at CRTS.

The Synod received the report of the Board of Governors in which it could be noted that CRTS continues to be a source of great blessing in the churches and to many others around the world. Synod appointed three new governors, the Rev. Rob Schouten, the

Rev. Clarence Vandervelde, and br. Allan Datema. Thankfulness was expressed for the support of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia and the financial contributions of the Women's Savings action to the well-being of the Seminary.

Synod adopted a proposal which came from both Regional Synod East and West which gave permission to seminary students to pursue licensure following two years of study in the M.Div program. This permission to speak an edifying word in the church after two years was granted under several conditions. It was also decided to mandate the Committee for Pastoral Training Program, to continue with its present mandate by funding one full-summer internship for each M.Div. student of CRTS who aspires to ministry in the CanRCs, whether the internship occurs after the second or third year of a student's studies at CRTS. The PTP continues to function very well in the churches.

The Committee for the Needy Students Fund was instructed to seek advice, and if need be propose bylaw amendments to ensure that they remain in compliance with the Canadian Income Tax Act (CRA regulations) and the Church Order.

The Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise*.

Synod Edmonton made a number of recommendations with respect to the *Book of Praise*, including the one, which had also been given by previous synods: "seek, receive, evaluate, and recommend proposals for changes to the hymn section to be compiled for possible submission to a future Synod." Connected with this recommendation that has great importance for the future of the Book of Praise in answer to an overture submitted by Regional Synod West 2018. This Regional Synod had sent an overture to General Synod 2019 to approve, in addition to the adopted Book of Praise, the Psalms and Hymns of the *Trinity Psalter-Hymnal* (TPH; psalter-hymnal recently adopted by the OPC and URCNA) for use in public worship as per CO Article 55. Many churches made submissions interacting with this overture. General Synod decided to receive the overture submitted by RSW 2018 and to mandate the Standing Committee for the Book of Praise with the following:

Concerning Psalms: to seek input from the churches as to which non-Genevan renditions of the Psalms could be added to enhance the Psalm section of the BoP and to compile a list of suitable additional Psalm renditions for possible inclusion in the Book of Praise, using the TPH as a primary source.

Concerning Hymns: to seek input from the churches concerning replaceable and additional hymns for the 2014 Book of Praise, using the TPH as a primary resource: to compile a list of such hymns keeping in mind that at this time the final number of hymns in the Book of Praise should not exceed 100(as per GS 2004) and being flexible with the structural template (Apostles Creed) of the hymn-section of the 2014 Book of Praise.

Synod also gave the Committee the following instructions: to send, at least 18 months before the next general synod, an explanatory report out to the churches together with a provisional list of songs for immediate testing in the worship services if so desired, so there can be well-considered feedback to the next general synod and to receive feedback from the churches on the Committee's interim report and include its evaluation of that feedback along with actionable recommendations in its report six months before the next general synod.

This decision with respect to the overture from Regional Synod West 2018 was considered to serve as answer to several appeals/requests from a few churches.

Concluding thoughts.

We may give thanks to the Lord for the good working atmosphere among the delegates both while at work in committee and in plenary session. Under the capable leadership of the chairman Rev. Douwe Agema, General Synod could complete its work in eight days, making this Synod one of the shortest in recent times. May our Lord Jesus Christ bless the work of Synod Edmonton 2019 and may He also guide the churches as they consider and evaluate and implement the decisions that have been made by our broadest assembly. May the love of our Lord continue to rest on the churches represented at Synod Edmonton 2019.

Rev. John Louwerse

Vice-chairman Synod 2019.