

CRCA/CCCNA Report to GS 2022

on

Ecumenical Relationships: Why and How

INTRODUCTION

General Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 (hereafter: GS 2019 (Edmonton)) mandated the CRCA and CCCNA to do a thorough study on how Church Order article 50 (hereafter: CO 50) can best be executed in today's ecclesiastical realities, noting that the items flagged in Observations 2.2-5 should be incorporated into the study.¹

CO 50 reads as follows: *The relation with churches abroad shall be regulated by general synod. With foreign churches of Reformed confession a sister church relationship shall be maintained as much as possible. On minor points of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice churches abroad shall not be rejected.*

Though CO 50 speaks only of "churches abroad" and "foreign churches" there are additionally numerous federations in North America which fit under that broad umbrella.²

To provide historical context for this topic, committee member Rev. Dr. Karlo Janssen engaged in an extensive historical review of decisions related to ecumenical relationships taken by our general synods since the establishment of our federation. Titled "Historical Overview of the Exercise of CO Article 50 by the CanRC", it documents the varied and sometimes contradictory approaches our synods have taken. Should readers wish to access this material, the study is available at www.officebearers.com under TOPICS.³

As we embarked on our task in fulfillment of synod's mandate, it became evident that proposing a clear way forward would be a daunting task. A number of challenging realities need to be acknowledged from the outset. Though the challenges might not be limited to those articulated below, the following provide at least some evidence that GS 2019's mandate to our committees was timely and appropriate.

Finally, by way of this introduction, we would like to clarify the use of the term *ecumenical relationships* in our title. This term refers to the various relationships we have with other Reformed and Presbyterian churches around the world. It is a term that is distinct from, and much broader than, the term *ecclesiastical fellowship* which is one category of ecumenical relations.

PART A – CHALLENGING REALITIES

Challenge 1 – Categories and Rules of Relationships

We have had clearly articulated rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) since the earliest days of our federation.⁴ Our current rules have been in place since 1992.⁵ Prior to 1992 a number of our General Synods made pronouncements on the topic of categories of relationships. GS 1977 (Coaldale) decided to offer the OPC a temporary relationship called "ecclesiastical contact" as a next step to what then was termed "full correspondence" or EF as we know it today.⁶ On the other hand, when the church at Surrey requested GS 1980 (Smithville) to appoint a committee to study "the feasibility of having another, less comprehensive relationship (i.e. a relationship different from correspondence) with the OPC and possibly

¹ GS 2019 art. 149. The full text of this article can be found at the end of this report.

² It is noteworthy that GS 1992 in art. 79 classified the RCUS as a 'church abroad' over against submissions from Carman, Guelph and Attercliffe.

³ For the full link: <https://officebearers.com/uncategorized/interchurch-relations/>.

⁴ The first "Rules of Correspondence" were already adopted by GS 1954 art. 54.

⁵ GS 1992 art. 50, IV.B.1-7

⁶ GS 1977 art. 91, III

36 other churches of our Lord...which stand in a different tradition” Synod denied the request concluding that
37 “There is no reason to establish a different form of permanent ecclesiastical relationship with other
38 churches in the world than as regulated in the rules for correspondence”.⁷ GS 1986 (Cloverdale) instructed
39 the ‘Committee on Correspondence with Churches Abroad’ that in its discussions with the sister churches
40 on rules to cover ecclesiastical relationships they were to urge the sister churches “to maintain
41 correspondence according to the adopted rules as the only form of permanent ecclesiastical relationship.”
42 This was followed by a further instruction to let the sister churches know that it was not “common practice
43 to formalize ecclesiastical contacts with Churches with which correspondence cannot be established.”⁸
44 The same Synod also underlined that the temporary contact relationship with the OPC was an “exceptional
45 measure” and not designed to become a common practice to formalize relations with churches with which
46 correspondence cannot yet be established.

47 This topic received renewed attention when, prior to GS 2010 (Burlington), the CRCA recommended
48 the establishment of four categories of ecumenical relationships,⁹ but the proposal was not supported by
49 the churches. The consequence was that GS 2010 decided not to accept the proposal, reinforcing the
50 choice through the decades to have only one set of rules for only one category of ecumenical relationship,
51 namely, EF.¹⁰ However, the historical resistance to having multiple categories with distinct rules continued
52 to bump up against the reality that one size does not fit all. Indeed, since 2010 our synods have effectively
53 implemented all four proposed categories of ecumenical relationships, and no church has ever questioned
54 this.¹¹

55 In summary then, while the adopted rules for EF leave us with just one category (EF) the practice of our
56 synods clearly acknowledge that the general topic of ecumenical relations has an element of a spectrum
57 to it with multiple categories. Furthermore, none of the synods ever provided a rationale for the position
58 that there should only be only one form of permanent ecclesiastical relationship. In order for our churches
59 to best execute CO 50 in today’s ecclesiastical realities we will need to change our approach to one where
60 there is more than one category defined by only one set of rules.

61 **Challenge 2 – Purposes of Ecumenical Relationships**

62 Over the years, our synods have articulated a variety of reasons for interacting with other church
63 federations. Sometimes a committee was instructed to collect information in pursuit of either
64 ecclesiastical fellowship or federative unity. Other times, some sort of assistance was to be given. A
65 committee received instruction to try to persuade another federation to embrace a particular perspective.
66 Still other times a goal was to work collaboratively in specific areas.¹² It begs the question: What should
67 be the main objective(s) of ecumenical relationships? A number of Scriptural texts can be referenced when
68 discussing the objective(s) of ecumenical relationships, but the two most prominent texts, each with a
69 different focus, can be found in John 17 and Ephesians 4.

70 Some federations appeal to John 17 when introducing ecumenical relationships. This is something that

⁷ GS 1980 art. 154

⁸ GS 1983 art. 110

⁹ *Contact Churches* (churches being considered for EF); *Fellowship Churches* (churches in EF); *Associate Churches* (member churches of NAPARC and ICRC not being considered for EF and not in EF); *Churches Raising Concern* (churches in EF showing evidence of departing from the Reformed faith). See GS 2010 art.59

¹⁰ With the clearly stated exception of the temporary relationship of ecclesiastical contact created for the OPC by GS 1977.

¹¹ For *contact church* see GS 2016 art. 106 (RCK); for *fellowship church* see GS 2016 art. 21 (FRCA); for *associate church* see GS 2016 art. 90 (RPCNA); for *churches raising concern* see GS 2016 art. 104 (GKv).

¹² For collecting information see, e.g., GS 1977 art. 91.III, GS 1989 art. 117, GS 2004 art. 85. For giving some sort of assistance see, e.g., GS 1998 art. 97, GS 2013 art. 127.4.3.2, GS 2019 art. 120 & 121. For persuasion see, e.g., GS 1962 art. 33 & 154, GS 2013 art. 43.4.3.

71 resonates well with the CanRC churches. When we begin there, the principle and ultimate objective of EF
72 is to progress towards federative church unity on the assumption that the unity Jesus prays for, while being
73 spiritual in character, should come to concrete expression as well in organizational and structural ways.
74 That is a lofty goal, and one that is reflected in the history of contact with the URCNA as well as the
75 FRCNA.¹³

76 History, however, teaches that achieving federative unity is usually a difficult goal to achieve. In our
77 fallen sinful state, it seems to be challenging to get past linguistic, cultural, and historical differences.
78 Realistically, geographic realities may factor into this as well. Consequently, the CanRC churches have not
79 seriously anticipated federative unity with the vast majority of EF churches. For example, the idea of
80 federative unity with churches in Asia, Africa or Europe would be deemed unrealistic. Closer to home,
81 though the question of federative unity has been raised with regards to the ERQ and RCUS, it has not been
82 considered achievable. And despite sincere and concerted efforts to achieve federative unity with the
83 URC for a few decades, even that has not been realized to date.

84 Some other federations turn to Ephesians 4, reminding us that the unity of the church is an expression
85 of a unity of faith, articulated in love.¹⁴ Churches with such an understanding engage in relationships with
86 other churches to give concrete expression of an acknowledged unity of faith. The objective of such a
87 relationship is to mutually encourage and assist each other as well as to exercise mutual accountability.
88 Such an approach does not rule out possible eventual federative church unity, but the present-day focus
89 is on identifying opportunities to encourage each other and provide mutual assistance. Areas of
90 collaboration or cooperation could be related to topics as diverse as theological education, mission
91 endeavors, or various kinds of diaconal activity.¹⁵

92 Given today's ecclesiastical realities, we suggest the objective of ecumenical relationships is not a
93 matter of one approach versus another. The particular circumstances will help determine the best way
94 forward and which objective to pursue.

95 **Challenge 3 – A Historical Dimension**

96 Relationships with some church federations are more intense and meaningful than others. There are a
97 variety of factors which might contribute to the nature of ecumenical relationships, including human and
98 financial resources. Though we may all be deeply united by a common faith and confession, sometimes
99 the absence of shared human history and cultural commonalities contributes to a sense of distance. On
100 the other hand, similar historical experiences can lead to strong ties; church federations, for example,
101 begun by Dutch immigrants in South Africa and in Australia, have a similar history as our own, and this
102 contributes to a more intense relationship. Likewise, church federations established in part as a result of
103 the work of CanRC missionaries, such as in Brazil, Asia and Indonesia, might have a strong desire to connect
104 closely with us. In such situations, continued close relations may be warranted and beneficial to both
105 parties.

106 Other times, however, when church federations do not have such a shared history, it may be more

¹³ For example, a letter from the CanRC to the URCNA states: *"The Canadian Reformed Churches have always tried, with many shortcomings, to take the high priestly prayer of our Lord as recorded in John 17, with great seriousness."* (GS 2010 art. 169) and a decision concerning the FRCNA states: *"To initiate fraternal dialogue with the Free Reformed Churches in North America with a view towards establishing federative unity."* (GS 1998 art. 98)

¹⁴ See for example the opening statement of the OPC's 'Rules for Ecclesiastical Relationships': *That we acknowledge the scriptural mandate (Ephesians 4) to express the unity of the church by entering into fellowship with other churches where it is consistent with biblical unity and truth as a visible demonstration of the unity of the church both to the church and to the world.* [Articles 88&97 of the 84th (2017) General Assembly of the OPC]

¹⁵ These are all activities the CanRC pursue within the context EF. To illustrate: for theological education see GS 2019 art. 117 (FRCA), for mission endeavors see GS 2019 art. 22 (ERQ), for diaconal activity see GS 2019 art. 108 (FRCSA).

107 realistic to settle for a relationship which is less intense and comprehensive. That should not be construed
108 in any way to be an indication of less spiritual unity; it would simply be an acknowledgement of historical
109 circumstance.

110 **Challenge 4 – A Local Dimension**

111 GS 2019 received a letter from the Toronto-Bethel CanRC requesting that the study mandate regarding
112 CO 50 also reflect on how ecumenical relations might be practiced at both the local and broader levels.
113 The CRCA and CCCNA were therefore mandated to reflect on “if and how ecclesiastical fellowship can be
114 acknowledged and experienced at a local/classical level while being considered at a federative level to
115 avoid a hierarchical approach that can hinder local church interaction.”¹⁶

116 CO 50 says that “the relation with churches abroad shall be regulated by *general synod*.” However, it
117 has become common for a substantial amount of interaction between delegates of different church
118 federations to occur at the classis level.¹⁷ There are numerous classes where there may be delegates
119 present from other North American federations, usually with EF churches, but sometimes with other
120 NAPARC churches. Many of these interactions happen without any awareness or involvement of members
121 of the CRCA or CCCNA; there is an authentic grass-roots component evident.

122 Sometimes the grass-roots component may be even more local: there can be the development of
123 meaningful local ecumenical interactions that may or may not warrant entering into and maintaining an
124 EF relationship at a federative level.¹⁸ While those significant local interactions may not have much of an
125 impact upon the rest of the churches in the two federations, they can prove meaningful for the churches
126 involved.¹⁹ If the approach to ecumenical relationships is exclusively ‘top-down’²⁰ then those interactions
127 can be hindered.²¹

128 Among the significant local interactions that might prove meaningful for the churches involved are two
129 areas that, on account of the present rules for ecclesiastical fellowship, are sometimes understood in our
130 federation to belong *exclusively* to those relationships. The first of these relates to pulpit fellowship, and
131 the second concerns transfers of membership and receiving guests at the Lord’s Supper. However, this
132 common understanding / practice is not embraced by all consistories. There is a diversity of opinions and

¹⁶ GS 2019 art. 149.2.3.

¹⁷ GS 2004 art. 24.5.5, GS 2004 art. 85.5.2.3, GS 2019 art. 86.4.2.2; GS 2019, art. 139 4.7.3. Many CanRC classes now have a committee or deputy for ecumenical contact.

¹⁸ This is reflected in the letter of Toronto-Bethel to Synod Edmonton 2019 and in turn forms one of the considerations for our present mandate. For historical discussions around local level / federative level see for example GS 1992 art. 36 (Vernon and Kelowna OCRC); and GS 1992 art.79 (Carman and the RCUS).

¹⁹ For some contemporary examples: the local relationship between Toronto-Bethel and a neighbouring HRC congregation; the local relationship between Ottawa-Jubilee and a neighbouring PCA and RPCNA congregation; the local relationship between Hamilton-Blessings and a neighbouring PCA; as well as the local relationship between Denver and a neighbouring RPCNA congregation.

²⁰ GS 1995 considered: “While respecting the initiative of the local church to pursue contacts with churches in their area, it is desirable that as much as possible the churches follow a common approach and make use of the advice of the deputies” (GS 1995 art. 86).

²¹ Toronto-Bethel sought as part of our mandate the recommendation that we reflect on, “*if and how ecclesiastical fellowship can be acknowledged and experienced at a local/classical level while being considered at a federative level to avoid a hierarchical approach that can hinder local church interaction.*” We reflect on the fact that a geographically isolated church like Jubilee has been unable to fill its pulpit as a result of the decision of RSE 2019 art. 11 re: the practice of inviting ministers from non-EF churches to the pulpit. Meanwhile, Denver has been advised by its Classis not to have a neighbouring RPCNA minister on its pulpit. In this situation Denver was not the one hindered from receiving help, but a neighbouring minister/church was hindered from experiencing the benefits of pulpit exchanges.

133 practices on the application of Church Order articles 15, 61 and 62 respectively.²²

134 Because our churches exist in the context of local communities, a grass roots component to our
135 ecumenical relationships is inevitable, particularly as CanRC churches integrate increasingly into the local
136 ecclesiastical fabric of their respective communities. This was already acknowledged by GS 2010
137 (Burlington) when it provisionally adopted a Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO). Extensive discussions
138 during the preceding years had been held between CanRC and URC deputies as they formulated a PJCO.
139 Article 32 of the PJCO made allowance for “preaching exchange and fellowship at the Lord’s Supper” by a
140 local church in its ecumenical activities, on the condition of classical approbation.²³

141 In conclusion, when local circumstances are factored into ecumenical relationships, it becomes evident
142 that one prescribed set of specific expectations can hinder manifesting the unity of the Spirit in the bond
143 of peace.

144 **Challenge 5 – A Global Dimension**

145 It is not feasible to enter into and maintain a relationship of EF with all true and faithful churches around
146 the globe, even if it is desirable.²⁴ Thus in the course of time the CanRC have concentrated on relations
147 geographically close to us, preferring to leave those geographically distanced from us to sister churches in
148 that region.²⁵ Even here in North America we have chosen not to pursue EF with all true and faithful
149 churches; however the desire to express and practice unity in faith as part of the catholic church has seen
150 the CanRC participate in ecumenical bodies such as the International Conference of Reformed Churches
151 (ICRC) and the North American Presbyterian And Reformed Council (NAPARC) even though the member
152 churches of these organizations are not all in EF with the CanRC.²⁶

153 A common membership in an ecumenical body like NAPARC does present the opportunity for there to
154 be practical consequences at a local level where possible and desirable (such as joint action in areas of
155 common responsibility, transfer of membership, admission to the Lord’s Supper and pulpit fellowship). In
156 light of the principle reflected in Church Order articles 4 and 5 we understand that local pulpit fellowship
157 would not happen without some form of involvement of classis.²⁷ As for the other matters mentioned,
158 they in fact fall under the jurisdiction of the local church rather than a broader assembly.

159

²² As evident in, for example, discussions in CanRC circles on the implications and propriety of NAPARC’s “Transfer of Members Agreement” (GS 2010 art. 52, GS 2013 art. 77, GS 2016 art. 89). See also Regional Synod East, November 13, 2019 art. 11 on a decision of Classis Central Ontario re: access to the pulpit.

²³ Article 32 of the Proposed Joint Church Order as found in *Reports to General Synod Burlington 2010, Vol 1*, page 37. For adoption of this article see GS 2010 art. 151.

²⁴ GS 1954 art. 44, 49, 54.

²⁵ GS 1992 art. 112, GS 1998 art. 72, GS 2007 art. 142. A recent example is found in GS 2016 art. 120.

²⁶ When the CanRC joined the ICRC, GS 1986 (Burlington) observed that formal recognition of another church as a true church of our Lord Jesus Christ was the responsibility of the churches and not to be based on membership in ICRC (GS 1986 art. 175 C. 3). This statement is understandable in the context of EF being the only category for ecumenical relationships. However, to apply this statement to what would be for us new categories of ecumenical relationship would create an impossible challenge to our churches. To individually go through a formal recognition process with a potentially large number of other Reformed and Presbyterian churches (e.g. 30+ for the ICRC) is not practical and, given the limited impact of these relationships on the churches as whole, is not necessary either.

²⁷ RSE 2019 art. 11 cons. 4 states: “Our current practice, based on CO and synodical decisions, is that access to the pulpit has been determined collectively by the churches (Articles 4, 5 CO; Rules for EF).”

PART B – CONSIDERATIONS

1. *Categories and Exercise of Ecumenical Relationships*

As per our mandate to incorporate Observations 2.4 and 2.5 into our study we took note of the categories of relationships used by the Heritage Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.²⁸ The five categories of the Heritage Reformed Churches are levels of relationship where the intention is to move from one (lower) level to the next (higher) level culminating in full federative unity. In our review of the challenges of ecumenical relationships it became evident to us that this approach cannot be adopted since it does not make allowance for our current ecclesiastical reality that some ecumenical relationships would never move to the ‘next’ level. There is, as we noted earlier, an element of spectrum to our relationships.

The three categories of the OPC are a combination of both the ‘levels’ approach and the ‘spectrum’ approach. The ‘levels’ approach involves their categories of *Ecclesiastical Fellowship* and *Corresponding Relationship*. The latter is entered into when mutual contact with another church is undertaken to become better acquainted with a view to entering into EF in the not-too distant future. Such a church would have to be either situated in North America or have some form of substantial contact or history with the OPC. Meanwhile, on the ‘spectrum’ side there is the category of *Ecumenical Contact*. This category is for churches outside of North America.

Moving from the OPC’s categories to their rules we find ourselves in somewhat unfamiliar waters. The reason for this is that the most contentious issues in the CanRC surrounding ecumenical relationships are non-issues in the OPC. We are referring to pulpit fellowship and Lord’s Supper attendance (and the related matter of membership transfer). When one reads the rules for each of the OPC categories then from a CanRC perspective one will quite quickly notice the absence of any mention of pulpit fellowship and intercommunion (Lord’s Supper attendance) in the categories *Corresponding Relationship* and *Ecumenical Contact*.

However, in conversation with the Committee on Ecumenical and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) of the OPC we learned that, while their rules for Corresponding Relationship and Ecumenical Contact make no reference to pulpit supply and intercommunion, this does not exclude these things from happening at a local level. In the OPC both these elements are regulated by the local session²⁹ and not by the rules for ecclesiastical relationships. The CEIR of the OPC informed us that the presence of these two specific elements in their rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship are there to serve as a reminder of a positive duty in that relationship, rather than a duty exclusive to that relationship. However, the CEIR did indicate that the force of the presumption that these things will take place might wane a bit as “as we move from category 1 to category 2 or, even more so, to category 3.”

Whereas the OPC can draw up rules for EF that serve as a reminder of the positive duty in that relationship but not necessarily an exclusive duty, we are not in a position to do likewise for the reasons already highlighted. It is incumbent, then, on our committee to propose rules that make clear where and under what circumstances the rules now currently functioning in EF might also function in other ecumenical relationships.

Since like the OPC we have made a distinction in entering relations with churches that are geographically proximate and those that are geographically distant (with the exception of those with whom we have substantial contact or a shared history) we deem it wise that any new categories of relationship be crafted to reflect these distinctions. Furthermore, along with the OPC we deem it wise that when it comes to EF with churches, particularly those that are geographically distant, it may be necessary to adjust the relationship, without prejudice, to a different category. This could also happen following a

²⁸ See Appendix for these Rules

²⁹ OPC Book of Church Order chapter XIII art. 7

204 regular assessment to determine whether objectives are being met.

205 **2. Church Order**

206 Given the results of our study of how CO 50 can be best executed in today's ecumenical realities it is
207 apparent that the current wording of the article is dated and that a revision is warranted. At present this
208 article reads, "*The relation with churches abroad shall be regulated by general synod. With foreign
209 churches of Reformed confession a sister-church relationship shall be maintained as much as possible. On
210 minor points of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice churches abroad shall not be rejected.*"

211 A revision is warranted in the following areas:

- 212 1. The designation of other churches as "churches abroad" and "foreign churches" does not
213 reflect the reality that we have numerous relationships that involve churches that are both
214 "foreign" and "domestic".³⁰
- 215 2. The term "sister-church relationship" does not reflect the spectrum of the ecumenical
216 relationships that we presently have.
- 217 3. The phrase "minor points" needs reformulation to fit our current context. That current context
218 is that minor differences on points of doctrine, worship and governance should not be an
219 obstacle to ecumenical relationships. Regarding the triad "doctrine, worship, and
220 governance" we note:
 - 221 a. These reflect the three marks of the true church (BC article 29)
 - 222 b. Including a reference to "doctrine" reflects the position we have come to while we
223 discussed "divergencies" and "differences" with other churches.³¹
 - 224 c. "Worship" and "governance" reflects "Church Order and ecclesiastical practice"
 - 225 d. The phrase "Reformed confession" in the first sentence points out the standard for
226 determining whether something is "minor" or not.

227 **3. Number of Committees**

228 The CanRC has had from one to four committees actively involved in some aspect of ecumenical
229 relations at any given time in its history. Currently, two committees, comprised of fifteen members,
230 undertake the work in ecumenical relations as mandated by general synod. Prior to GS 2019 there were
231 four committees. The challenges encountered by having multiple committees include:

- 232 • the increasing role of continental and global ecumenical conferences in inter-church relations;
- 233 • the complexity of communications between churches regarding third-party relationships
234 when a church has more than one inter-church relations committee;
- 235 • consistency in the execution of CO 50 by CanRC committees;
- 236 • recent synod decisions to ensure "broad committee" representation at the ICRC³²;
- 237 • increased inter-church relations at classis or regional synod level (that are beyond the
238 mandate of general synod).

239 There has been a recent attempt to encourage cooperation between the committees. GS 2016
240 (Dunnville) mandated the four committees it appointed to cooperate more closely with each other. This

³⁰ For example, the ERQ, RCUS, and OPC.

³¹ GS 2007 art. 80.4.6 stated: "The [CRCA] correctly observes that the goal of growing together in the unity of faith can be pursued under [EF Rules]. *Existing differences in confession and polity have not proven to be impediments for [EF].* Thus, within the context of [EF], the one can learn from the other about varying legitimate ways to summarize God's Word and how to put into practice its principles, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each. We can also learn from each other about other matters of common concern which develop from time to time in the life of the churches. From such interaction, as opportunities arise, each federation can sharpen the other as iron sharpens iron." (Emphasis added) For a broader description see the "Historical Overview".

³² GS 2016 art. 121 3.3 and 4.3.

241 led, for example, to a delegation to the ICRC consisting of members of three of the four committees.
242 Attempts to ensure committees were aware of each other's activities met with varying success. For
243 example, three of the four committees shared their minutes. However, there was also a fear of breaching
244 confidentiality and thus not everything was always shared. Looking back at the experience between 2016
245 and 2019, the CRCA and CCCNA believe it would be better to have just one committee.

246 We note that the norm for most church federations is to have one committee.³³ A single committee
247 will be able to address the noted challenges more effectively and efficiently than two or more committees.
248 Transparency within one committee will be much easier to maintain than among multiple committees.
249 Finally, from other churches' perspectives, contact with one church committee resolves the issue of which
250 committee it should address on any given issue.

251 The CCCNA and CRCA have always been made up of ministers and (former) elders. At present, there
252 are eight members on the CCCNA and seven on the CRCA. It is evident that there is much value in having
253 experience and continuity on the committee, as inter-church relationships have a personal component to
254 them.³⁴ At the same time, regular committee turnover is also desirable, as this brings new experiences
255 and perspectives to the table.

256 Since much of our relationship work is now accomplished in multilateral settings (ICRC and NAPARC) a
257 decrease in total numbers would be appropriate. This would also be in keeping with previous requests to
258 GS from some CanRC churches that we should limit the human and financial resources we apply towards
259 ecumenical relations.

260 The most effective and efficient way for the work mandated by a general synod to be executed will be
261 by one committee. In the end, it is the churches, via synod, that determine what the committee does, and
262 it is to the churches that the one committee is accountable.

263 While the introduction of categories of relationships will decrease the overall work required in the
264 execution of CO 50, merging the committees into one will broaden the scope of what the members of the
265 committee deal with. We recognize this has been a reason for synods to create separate committees (most
266 recently the subcommittee The Netherlands). It would be wiser, though, for synods to limit themselves to
267 determining *what* needs to happen, and to leave it to the committee to determine *how* given mandates
268 will be executed and by whom. This is the way in which the CCCNA already operates, with its
269 subcommittees East and West (a vague memory of the time when there was a contact committee for every
270 individual relationship in North America). The CRCA also has a division of labour, with individual members
271 being assigned a portfolio and a partner to assist them, and the pair being accountable to the committee
272 as a whole. These approaches are similar to that of a synod making use of advisory committees to complete
273 its business.

274 **4. Ecumenicity at General Synods**

275 There is a lack of rules or guidelines about the roles and responsibilities of the convening church of
276 general synod and the CRCA / CCCNA. Unfortunately, this has resulted in some confusion, unmet
277 expectations, and inconsistencies in previous years during the months preceding our recent general
278 synods. A review of our past practices as well as the present practices of other churches, particularly in
279 North America, has resulted in a series of recommendations in the next section.

³³ For example, the FRCA recently established one committee for all its ecumenical relations; in previous years they also had multiple committees.

³⁴ The committee has received encouragement from another federation to increase the length of service by committee members.

PART C – RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Categories of Ecumenical Relationships

We recommend that the Canadian Reformed Churches adopt three categories of ecumenical relationships as follows:

- Category 1: Ecclesiastical Fellowship
- Category 2: Corresponding Relationship
- Category 3: General Contact³⁵

2. Rules for Ecumenical Relationships

We recommend that the Canadian Reformed Churches adopt the following rules for the exercise of ecumenical relationships:

Rules for the exercise of Ecumenical Relationships³⁶

A. *That we acknowledge the scriptural mandate (Ephesians 4 and John 17) to express the unity of the church by entering into relationships with other churches where it is consistent with biblical unity and truth as a visible demonstration of the unity of the church.*

B. *Because the undertaking of a bilateral relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (category 1) carries with it a commitment of substantial resources for its exercise, good stewardship of limited resources requires that these relationships ordinarily be reserved for situations in which the church under consideration for Ecclesiastical Fellowship (category 1) is either geographically proximate to the CanRC (i.e., situated in North America), or has some other form of substantial contact or history with the CanRC (e.g., missionary endeavors, transfers of members, etc.).*

C. *The Committee on Ecumenical Relations (CER) shall periodically review category 1 and 2 relationships (Ecclesiastical Fellowship and Corresponding Relationship) to ascertain whether the desired substantial contact is being (or given the limited resources, is able to be) maintained. When the CER finds that, in God's providence, there has not been the desired significant contact for at least five years, it may propose to the upcoming General Synod (and consult with its counterpart in the other church prior to doing so) that the churches adjust the relationship, without prejudice, to one of category 2 (Corresponding Relationship) or category 3 (General Contact).*

Categories of Relationships

Category 1: Ecclesiastical Fellowship is based on an understood unity of the faith, involving churches Reformed in their confessional standards, church order and life. This relationship is maintained with churches with whom we have intense meaningful contact. This relationship is to be exercised where possible and desirable by:

1. *Exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies;*
2. *The exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting Christian unity;*
3. *Agreement to respect the procedures of discipline and pastoral concern of one another;*
4. *Pulpit fellowship;*
5. *Reception of each other's members at the Lord's Supper according to local regulations;*
6. *Reception of each other's members upon transfer of membership according to local regulations;*
7. *Consultation on issues of joint concern, particularly before instituting changes in doctrine, worship and governance that might alter the basis of the fellowship;*
8. *Joint action in areas of common responsibility;*
9. *Exchange of relevant ecclesiastical materials, including:*

³⁵ For a visual presentation of what the differences between the categories are, see appendix 2.

³⁶ We acknowledge our indebtedness to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and their Rules for Ecclesiastical Relationships which we have adapted for our own use.

- 323 a. *The Minutes/Acts of the major assemblies;*
324 b. *Yearbooks/Directories of the churches;*
325 c. *The most recently published edition of the Confessional Standards;*
326 d. *The most recently published edition of the Church Order;*
327 e. *The most recently published edition of an approved psalter or psalter-hymnal.*

328 **Category 2: Corresponding Relationship** is based on an understood unity of the faith, involving
329 churches Reformed in their confessional standards, church order and life. This relationship is
330 maintained with churches with whom we have less intense meaningful contact. Such a relationship
331 can be maintained at a federative level with another federation of churches or at a local level with
332 another individual church. When such relations materialize locally, churches ought to give account
333 to classis in accordance with classis protocols. This relationship is to be exercised where possible
334 and desirable by:

- 335 1. *Welcome of fraternal observers at appropriate major assemblies;*
336 2. *Agreement to respect the procedures of discipline and pastoral concern of one another*
337 3. *Pulpit fellowship with the concurring advice of classis;^{37 38}*
338 4. *Reception of each other's members at the Lord's Supper according to local regulations;*
339 5. *Reception of each other's members upon transfer of membership according to local*
340 *regulation;*
341 6. *Communication on issues of joint concern.*

342 **Category 3: General Contact** is mutual contact with the member churches of NAPARC and ICRC
343 with which we do not have Ecclesiastical Fellowship or Corresponding Relationship (categories 1
344 and 2), or with other churches as determined by general synod. This relationship is to be exercised
345 where possible and desirable by:

- 346 1. *Meetings, both formal and informal, of delegates to the annual meeting of NAPARC and the*
347 *quadrennial meeting of the ICRC and at other opportunities as they arise;*
348 2. *Mutual labours as members of NAPARC and ICRC in the discharge of the purposes of the*
349 *council/conference;*
350 3. *Welcome of fraternal observers at the major assemblies;*
351 4. *Other instructions from general synod.*

352 **3. Revision of Church Order article 50**

353 We recommend that CO 50 be reworded as follows:

354 *Ecumenical relationships with other churches of Reformed confession shall be entered into where*
355 *feasible and be maintained according to the rules adopted for this purpose by general synod. Minor*
356 *differences on points of doctrine, worship and governance should not be an obstacle to entering*
357 *into ecumenical relationships with these churches.*

358 **4. Single Committee**

359 We recommend that Synod appoint one committee to be mandated to oversee all aspects of ecumenical
360 relations, and to name this committee the Committee on Ecumenical Relations (CER).

361 ³⁷ The provision of the concurring advice of classis is in line with the role that the Church Order of the CanRC prescribes for the involvement of classis in matters related to pulpit access. See Church Order articles 4, 5 and 21. As a situation of local CR is limited to solely the pulpit of a local church (it does not extend to all the pulpits in a classis or beyond), there is no need to involve Regional Synod deputies.

³⁸ Brs. H. de Boer, H. Schouten, and A. Witten, all members of the CRCA, have concerns with this point and have indicated they will be submitting a minority report to GS 2022.

362 **5. Size of the Committee**

363 We recommend that Synod appoint twelve members to the CER from across the federation, one of whom
364 should be the convenor.

365 **6. Number of Consecutive Terms on the Committee**

366 We recommend that Synod set the length of time on the committee to be four renewable three-year terms
367 for a total of twelve years.

368 **7. General Mandate**

369 We recommend that Synod give the CER the following general mandate

- 370 a. *To continue contact with churches with whom we are in ecumenical relations;*
371 b. *To send an appropriate number of delegates to represent the CanRC churches at ICRC and*
372 *NAPARC;³⁹*
373 c. *To work in consultation with individual CanRC churches and classes that maintain contact with*
374 *churches for which the CER also has a mandate;⁴⁰*
375 d. *Upon request, to advise CanRC churches regarding the identity of other churches and our*
376 *relationship with them;*
377 e. *To report on any contact with a church with whom we are not in an ecumenical relationship;*
378 f. *To appoint one of its members to validate and submit to the treasurer of the General Fund all*
379 *expenses being submitted for committee work;*
380 g. *To submit its report to the churches five months prior to the convening of general synod;⁴¹*
381 h. *To appoint two of its members to facilitate hospitality support for fraternal delegates and*
382 *observers, in consultation with the convening church, at each general synod.*

383 **8. Protocols for Hosting at General Synods**

384 We recommend that Synod adopt the following protocols for hosting fraternal delegates and observers to
385 general synod:

386 **a. Invitations:**

387 *It is the responsibility of the CER to send invitations to all churches in category 1 (Ecclesiastical*
388 *Fellowship), and to any church in category 2 (Corresponding Relationship) or category 3 (General*
389 *Contact) when it deems this to be of benefit to our ecumenical relationship with them. The CER*
390 *shall inform the convening church of these invitations.*

391 **b. Hospitality:**

392 *It is the responsibility of the CER, in consultation with the convening church, to facilitate the*
393 *transport of invited delegates and official observers between a nearby airport, the location of the*
394 *synod meetings, and their place of accommodation, and to provide lodging and meals for all those*
395 *invited (and spouses if applicable) for the duration of their attendance at the general synod. Costs*
396 *associated with this hospitality shall be paid out of the general fund.*

397 *The CER will assign two members to support the convening church and synod in hosting invited*
398 *delegates and official observers from other churches, explaining procedures, ensuring delegates*
399 *have the materials they are entitled to, etc., especially as some delegates will be from foreign*
400 *(church) cultures. These two members are also expected to be present at synod to serve as liaisons*
401 *between the guests and the convening church as well as the synod. Costs associated with this*

³⁹ This is a new component but aligns with Article 149 2.2.1.6 of GS 2019.

⁴⁰ This covers both local contacts (e.g. CanRC-URC) and mission contacts (e.g. CanRC-IRB).

⁴¹ Assuming synod convenes in early May. The reason for 5 months, as opposed to 6, is that NAPARC meets in mid-November. Further, old deadlines had to take the speed of Canada Post into account, today reports are sent almost instantly. Finally, 5 months means reports would arrive mid-December, allowing churches 3 months to consider the report and make a submission to synod in response.

402 *hospitality shall be paid out of the general fund.*

403 **c. Fraternal Delegates: (churches with which we have Ecclesiastical Fellowship (category 1))**

404 *Fraternal delegates shall:*

405 *i. have access to all internal synod documents;*

406 *ii. be invited to participate in deliberations in meetings of advisory committees;*

407 *iii. be given an opportunity to address the synod. Prior to their address one of the two CER*
408 *members shall introduce the fraternal delegate(s) to the synod.*

409 *iv. be given the privilege of the floor (entitled to deliberate and advise, but not vote)*

410 **d. Fraternal Observers: (churches with which we have Corresponding Relationship or General**
411 **Contact (categories 2 and 3))**

412 *Fraternal observers shall:*

413 *i. be given an opportunity to address the synod. Prior to their address one of the two CER*
414 *members shall introduce the fraternal observer(s) to the synod.*

415 *ii. be given the privilege of the floor during the time of their bringing greetings to the synod*
416 *on behalf of the churches that sent them.*

417 *iii. be given other privileges if synod executive deems that to be of benefit.*

418
419 Respectfully submitted by

420 the CCCNA: D. Vandeburgt, G. Bos, M. Jagt, J. Temple, H. VanDelden, L. Vanderveen, S. Vandavelde, P.
421 Veenendaal;

422 the CRCA: O. Bouwman, R.C. Janssen, A.J. Pol, S.C. VanDam

423 (Brs. H. de Boer, H. Schouten, and A. Witten, all members of the CRCA have indicated they will be
424 submitting a minority report to GS 2022)

425

APPENDICES

1. *GS 2019 Article 149 – CRCA & CCCNA (Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad & Committee for Contact with Churches in North America)*

1. Material

- 1.1 Report of the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) (8.2.2.1)
- 1.2 Report of the Committee for Contact with Churches in north America (CCCNA) (8.2.3.1)
- 1.3 Letters from the following churches: Toronto (8.3.2.4); Grassie-Covenant (8.3.2.7); Tintern Spring Creek (8.3.2.8)

2. Observations

- 2.1 The CRCA and CCCNA submitted a combined report describing obstacles they encountered in operating as separate committees with a measure of overlap in their responsibilities:
 - 2.1.1 In multi-lateral situations such as the ICRC or NAPARC, challenges arose in relation to which committee should delegate how many men. GS 2016 mandated the two committees to consult with each other on the delegation to the ICRC.
 - 2.1.2 The two committees have inconsistent policies in some matters (e.g., whom to invite to our general synods). They have also experienced a lack of awareness about each other’s work when it came to representing the CanRC at sister churches’ General Synods or Assemblies so that they inadvertently worked at cross purposes.
 - 2.1.3 The CRCA and the CCCNA also report that the OPC “asked if the CanRC could cross-pollinate their inter-church relations committees (CRCA and CCCNA) to make it easier for our inter-church relations committees to function together.”
- 2.2 Consequently, the CRCA and the CCCNA jointly recommend that Synod “mandate” the “CanRC inter-church relations committees” to do “a study of how CO article 50 can best be executed.” The committees request that the result of their study become “part of our ecclesiastical regulations.”
 - 2.2.1 This study should include the following topics:
 - 2.2.1.1 Whom to invite as delegates and whom to invite as observers to our general synods?
 - 2.2.1.2 Who is responsible for extending this invitation?
 - 2.2.1.3 What are the rights and privileges of delegates and observers during synod? How are they cared for during the time of synod and how can they interact with members of synod?
 - 2.2.1.4 What synod materials are delegates and observers respectively entitled to?
 - 2.2.1.5 Who is responsible for ensuring delegates and observers receive the materials they are entitled to?
 - 2.2.1.6 How to have CanRC representation at multi-church conferences (e.g. ICRC, NAPARC).
 - 2.2.2 This study should also indicate “how the CanRC inter-church relations committees might most effectively and efficiently work together.” Answers to challenges about working together ought to include matters as:
 - 2.2.2.1 The flow of information between the CanRC inter-church relations committees;
 - 2.2.2.2 The cooperation between CanRC inter-church relations committees;
 - 2.2.2.3 The pros and cons of consolidating and reorganizing all inter-church relations committees into one, taking into consideration reflection on this in the past;
 - 2.2.2.4 The pros and cons of maintaining different types of relationships.
- 2.3 The Toronto-Bethel CanRC supports the concept of studying how the churches can best execute our inter-church relations and offers some additional perspectives. For various reasons (e.g., Article 50 CO speaks of “churches abroad”, but migrations of peoples increasingly means that these foreign churches are in reality living in our own communities; further, becoming one federation of churches with the sister churches living on our own continent is difficult to achieve

473 at a solely federational level). Toronto concludes that “our current practice of EF no longer suits
474 our context and needs to be re-evaluated.” Toronto recommends that the proposed study include
475 reflection on “if and how ecclesiastical fellowship can be acknowledged and experienced at a
476 local/classical level while being considered at a federative level to avoid a hierarchical approach
477 that can hinder local church interaction.”

478 2.4 The Grassie-Covenant CanRC shares its opinion that “adopting a more clearly defined structure
479 to govern inter-church relationships would provide more clarity and consistency in our efforts to
480 achieve Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) with other faithful churches.” As an example of a “more
481 clearly defined structure,” Grassie-Covenant draws Synod’s attention to the 5 levels of EF used
482 by the Heritage Reformed Congregations (with details supplied), with the suggestion that Synod
483 consider making a decision to implement a structure in that line.

484 2.5 The Tintern Spring Creek CanRC advises Synod of their conviction that “it would be beneficial for
485 our federation to have a better policy as to our purpose and method in establishing and
486 maintaining” existing and new relations with other churches. Tintern Spring Creek feels that too
487 many resources are currently being used in establishing and maintaining relationships.
488 Accordingly, Tintern commends to Synod’s attention the Rules for Ecclesiastical Relations of the
489 Orthodox Presbyterian Church (with details supplied).

490 3. Considerations

491 3.1 Already at GS 2010 the CRCA requested Synod to consolidate and reorganize inter-church
492 relations by disbanding the CRCA and the CCCNA and creating one Committee on Inter-church
493 Relations. Synod did not follow through with that request because (among other reasons) the
494 CCCNA had not been part of the conversation. Now both the CRCA and the CCCNA express some
495 dissatisfaction with the full separation of the two committees.

496 3.2 The influx of migrants to Canada plus our growing awareness of Reformed Christian communities
497 amongst these migrants prompts a reshuffling of the relationship between foreign mission and
498 local mission. This in turn suggests that we do well to re-examine the interface between mandates
499 typically given to a Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) (per CO Art. 50) and
500 those given to the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA).

501 3.3 Given these new realities, our current structure for the ecclesiastical relations could benefit from
502 a careful re-examination. Rules followed by other NAPARC and ICRC churches could assist us in
503 improving our patterns of establishing and maintaining relationships.

504 4. Recommendations

505 4.1 Synod decide to instruct both the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) and the
506 Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA) to jointly:

507 4.1.1 Do a thorough study on how CO Art. 50 can best be executed in today’s ecclesiastical realities.

508 The items flagged in Observations 2.2-5 should be incorporated into the study.

509 4.1.2 Submit a report to the churches 6 months prior to the convening of the next Synod.

510 ADOPTED

511

512
513

2. Summary Overview – Visual Representation of the Categories

Description	Category 1 Ecclesiastical Fellowship	Category 2 Corresponding Relationship	Category 3 General Contact
Exchange of fraternal delegates/observers at major assemblies	●	○	◉
Agreement to respect procedures of discipline and pastoral concern	●	●	●
Joint action in areas of common responsibility (e.g. mission, ICRC, NAPARC)	●	○	○
Pulpit fellowship	●	○	
Table fellowship	●	○	
Transfer of membership	●	○	
Consultation on issues of joint concern (doctrine, worship, governance)	●	○	
Exercise of mutual concern and admonition	●		
Exchange of relevant ecclesiastical materials	●		
Specific general synod mandate	●	●	●

514
515
516
517

● least (if any) conditions/restrictions

○ some conditions/restrictions

◉ further conditions/restrictions

For details on what these conditions and restrictions are, please see the main section of the report.