

Ecumenical Relationships: Why and How

Minority Report

(The contents of this minority report are identical to the majority report with the exception of Challenges 4 & 5, and Category 2 Corresponding Relationship)

INTRODUCTION

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

Church Order article 50 (hereafter: 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 5 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

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/>.

39 **Challenge 1 – Categories and Rules of Relationships**

40 We have had clearly articulated rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) since the earliest days of our
41 federation.⁴ Our current rules have been in place since 1992.⁵ Prior to 1992 a number of our General
42 Synods made pronouncements on the topic of categories of relationships. GS 1977 (Coaldale) decided
43 to offer the OPC a temporary relationship called “ecclesiastical contact” as a next step to what then
44 was termed “full correspondence” or EF as we know it today.⁶ On the other hand, when the church
45 at Surrey requested GS 1980 (Smithville) to appoint a committee to study “the feasibility of having
46 another, less comprehensive relationship (i.e. a relationship different from correspondence) with the
47 OPC and possibly other churches of our Lord...which stand in a different tradition” Synod denied the
48 request concluding that “There is no reason to establish a different form of permanent ecclesiastical
49 relationship with other churches in the world than as regulated in the rules for correspondence”.⁷ GS
50 1986 (Cloverdale) instructed the ‘Committee on Correspondence with Churches Abroad’ that in its
51 discussions with the sister churches on rules to cover ecclesiastical relationships they were to urge
52 the sister churches “to maintain correspondence according to the adopted rules as the only form of
53 permanent ecclesiastical relationship.” This was followed by a further instruction to let the sister
54 churches know that it was not “common practice to formalize ecclesiastical contacts with Churches
55 with which correspondence cannot be established.”⁸ The same Synod also underlined that the
56 temporary contact relationship with the OPC was an “exceptional measure” and not designed to
57 become a common practice to formalize relations with churches with which correspondence cannot
58 yet be established.

59
60 This topic received renewed attention when, prior to GS 2010 (Burlington), the CRCA recommended
61 the establishment of four categories of ecumenical relationships,⁹ but the proposal was not
62 supported by the churches. The consequence was that GS 2010 decided not to accept the proposal,
63 reinforcing the choice through the decades to have only one set of rules for only one category of
64 ecumenical relationship, namely, EF.¹⁰ However, the historical resistance to having multiple
65 categories with distinct rules continued to bump up against the reality that one size does not fit all.
66 Indeed, since 2010 our synods have effectively implemented all four proposed categories of
67 ecumenical relationships, and no church has ever questioned this.¹¹

68
69 In summary then, while the adopted rules for EF leave us with just one category (EF) the practice of
70 our synods clearly acknowledge that the general topic of ecumenical relations has an element of a
71 spectrum to it with multiple categories. Furthermore, none of the synods ever provided a rationale
72 for the position that there should only be only one form of permanent ecclesiastical relationship. In

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

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).

73 order for our churches to best execute CO 50 in today's ecclesiastical realities we will need to change
74 our approach to one where there is more than one category defined by only one set of rules.
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76 **Challenge 2 – Purposes of Ecumenical Relationships**

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

85 Some federations appeal to John 17 when introducing ecumenical relationships. This is something
86 that resonates well with the CanRC churches. When we begin there, the principle and ultimate
87 objective of EF is to progress towards federative church unity on the assumption that the unity Jesus
88 prays for, while being spiritual in character, should come to concrete expression as well in
89 organizational and structural ways. That is a lofty goal, and one that is reflected in the history of
90 contact with the URCNA as well as the FRCNA.¹³

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

100
101 Some other federations turn to Ephesians 4, reminding us that the unity of the church is an expression
102 of a unity of faith, articulated in love.¹⁴ Churches with such an understanding engage in relationships
103 with other churches to give concrete expression of an acknowledged unity of faith. The objective of
104 such a relationship is to mutually encourage and assist each other as well as to exercise mutual
105 accountability. Such an approach does not rule out possible eventual federative church unity, but the
106 present-day focus is on identifying opportunities to encourage each other and provide mutual
107 assistance. Areas of collaboration or cooperation could be related to topics as diverse as theological

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.

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]

108 education, mission endeavors, or various kinds of diaconal activity.¹⁵

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

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114 ***Challenge 3 – A Historical Dimension***

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

125

126 Other times, however, when church federations do not have such a shared history, it may be more
127 realistic to settle for a relationship which is less intense and comprehensive. That should not be
128 construed in any way to be an indication of less spiritual unity; it would simply be an
129 acknowledgement of historical circumstance.

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).

130 **Challenge 4 – A Local Dimension**

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

137

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

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146 Sometimes the grass-roots component may be even more local: meaningful interactions can
147 develop between local churches. In this context there may be a desire for this budding relationship
148 to express itself through pulpit exchanges and fellowship at the Lord’s Supper.

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150 While the ultimate responsibility for the purity of preaching lies with the local consistory (Acts
151 20:28; CO Art. 15) it is of such critical importance that the churches have decided to be accountable
152 to one another in this matter.¹⁸ At the Classis level there is knowledge and expertise for the
153 examination of students for the ministry (CO Article 4). But it is at the federative level where
154 investigation into another church federation's confessional standards, church polity and practice
155 occurs through interactions with another federation’s ecumenical relations committee (CO Article
156 50). Understanding a local church's commitments as part of a federation of churches is necessary
157 before entering into an ecclesiastical relationship.

158

159 This approach ought not be characterized as “hierarchical” or “top down”. Ecclesiastical relations
160 begin at a local, “grass roots” level and move through the assemblies in a methodical way. This
161 process is not hierarchical but rather invites and requires much input from the local churches in
162 making decisions. Scriptures teach us the wisdom to be gained by many counsellors (Proverbs
163 11:14, 24:6), and so local churches commit themselves to the Church Order and submitting to the
164 decisions of the major assemblies. For a local CanRC to make arrangements for pulpit fellowship
165 with a local non-sister church federation when the CanRC synod has decided on grounds of doctrine
166 or practice not to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with this church federation would be
167 inconsistent with this commitment.

168

169 Although leaving the establishment of ecclesiastical relations at the federative level may slow down
170 the development of local interactions it ensures that careful investigation occurs and serves to
171 promote consistency in ecclesiastical relations within the federation.

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173 **Challenge 5 – A Global Dimension**

174 It is not feasible to enter into and maintain a relationship of EF with all true and faithful churches
175 around the globe - even if it is desirable.¹⁹ Thus in the course of time the CanRC have concentrated
176 on relations geographically close to us, preferring to leave those geographically distanced from us
177 to sister churches in that region.²⁰ Even here in North America we have chosen not to pursue EF
178 with all true and faithful churches. The desire to express and practice unity in faith as part of the
179 catholic church has seen the CanRC participate in ecumenical bodies such as the International
180 Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) and the North American Presbyterian And Reformed
181 Council (NAPARC). However member churches of these organizations do not conduct independent
182 investigations into the doctrine and practice of the other member churches, and so the CanRC does
183 not enjoy the privileges of EF with all the member churches of these organizations. For example,
184 with respect to NAPARC GS 2013 (Carman) considered “The committee’s conclusion with respect to
185 the advisory character of NAPARC should be underlined: ‘Our participation in NAPARC does not
186 mean that we have recognized all its member churches as being true and faithful; rather, we have
187 agreed to meet with them on the basis of an established constitution and bylaws.’ It is important
188 that local congregations understand that these agreements do not put us into EF with every
189 NAPARC church. The self-testimony required by NAPARC member churches is not sufficient basis for
190 us to recognize them as true churches, but sufficient basis for us to dialogue together with them at
191 NAPARC as a discussion partner” (GS 2013 Carman art. 77 C. 3.3).²¹

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193 **PART B – CONSIDERATIONS**

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195 **1. Categories and Exercise of Ecumenical Relationships**

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

204

205 The three categories of the OPC are a combination of both the ‘levels’ approach and the ‘spectrum’
206 approach. The ‘levels’ approach involves their categories of *Ecclesiastical Fellowship* and
207 *Corresponding Relationship*. The latter is entered into when mutual contact with another church is

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 See Regional Synod East, November 13, 2019 art. 11 on a decision of Classis Central Ontario re: access to the pulpit.

¹⁹ GS 1954 art. 44, 49, 54.

²⁰ GS 1992 art. 112, GS 1998 art. 72, GS 2007 art. 142. A recent example is found in GS 2016 art. 120.

²¹ Similarly 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).

208 undertaken to become better acquainted with a view to entering into EF in the not-too distant future.
209 Such a church would have to be either situated in North America or have some form of substantial
210 contact or history with the OPC. Meanwhile, on the 'spectrum' side there is the category of
211 *Ecumenical Contact*. This category is for churches outside of North America.

212
213 Moving from the OPC's categories to their rules we find ourselves in somewhat unfamiliar waters.
214 The reason for this is that the most contentious issues in the CanRC surrounding ecumenical
215 relationships are non-issues in the OPC. We are referring to pulpit fellowship and Lord's Supper
216 attendance (and the related matter of membership transfer). When one reads the rules for each of
217 the OPC categories then from a CanRC perspective one will quite quickly notice the absence of any
218 mention of pulpit fellowship and intercommunion (Lord's Supper attendance) in the categories
219 *Corresponding Relationship* and *Ecumenical Contact*.

220
221 However, in conversation with the Committee on Ecumenical and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) of the
222 OPC we learned that, while their rules for Corresponding Relationship and Ecumenical Contact make
223 no reference to pulpit supply and intercommunion, this does not exclude these things from
224 happening at a local level. In the OPC both these elements are regulated by the local session²² and
225 not by the rules for ecclesiastical relationships. The CEIR of the OPC informed us that the presence of
226 these two specific elements in their rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship are there to serve as a reminder
227 of a positive duty in that relationship, rather than a duty exclusive to that relationship. However, the
228 CEIR did indicate that the force of the presumption that these things will take place might wane a bit
229 as "as we move from category 1 to category 2 or, even more so, to category 3."

230
231 Whereas the OPC can draw up rules for EF that serve as a reminder of the positive duty in that
232 relationship but not necessarily an exclusive duty, we are not in a position to do likewise for the
233 reasons already highlighted. It is incumbent, then, on our committee to propose rules that make clear
234 where and under what circumstances the rules now currently functioning in EF might also function in
235 other ecumenical relationships.

236
237 Since like the OPC we have made a distinction in entering relations with churches that are
238 geographically proximate and those that are geographically distant (with the exception of those with
239 whom we have substantial contact or a shared history) we deem it wise that any new categories of
240 relationship be crafted to reflect these distinctions. Furthermore, along with the OPC we deem it wise
241 that when it comes to EF with churches, particularly those that are geographically distant, it may be
242 necessary to adjust the relationship, without prejudice, to a different category. This could also
243 happen following a regular assessment to determine whether objectives are being met.

244

245 **2. Church Order**

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

²² OPC Book of Church Order chapter XIII art. 7

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A revision is warranted in the following areas:

1. The designation of other churches as “churches abroad” and “foreign churches” does not reflect the reality that we have numerous relationships that involve churches that are both “foreign” and “domestic”.²³
2. The term “sister-church relationship” does not reflect the spectrum of the ecumenical relationships that we presently have.
3. The phrase “minor points” needs reformulation to fit our current context. That current context is that minor differences on points of doctrine, worship and governance should not be an obstacle to ecumenical relationships. Regarding the triad “doctrine, worship, and governance” we note:
 - a. These reflect the three marks of the true church (BC article 29)
 - b. Including a reference to “doctrine” reflects the position we have come to while we discussed “divergencies” and “differences” with other churches.²⁴
 - c. “Worship” and “governance” reflects “Church Order and ecclesiastical practice”
 - d. The phrase “Reformed confession” in the first sentence points out the standard for determining whether something is “minor” or not.

270 **3. Number of Committees**

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

- 275 • the increasing role of continental and global ecumenical conferences in inter-church
276 relations;
- 277 • the complexity of communications between churches regarding third-party relationships
278 when a church has more than one inter-church relations committee;
- 279 • consistency in the execution of CO 50 by CanRC committees;
- 280 • recent synod decisions to ensure “broad committee” representation at the ICRC²⁵;
- 281 • increased inter-church relations at classis or regional synod level (that are beyond the
282 mandate of general synod).

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There has been a recent attempt to encourage cooperation between the committees. GS 2016 (Dunnville) mandated the four committees it appointed to cooperate more closely with each other. This led, for example, to a delegation to the ICRC consisting of members of three of the four

²³ For example, the ERQ, RCUS, and OPC.

²⁴ 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”.

²⁵ GS 2016 art. 121 3.3 and 4.3.

287 committees. Attempts to ensure committees were aware of each other's activities met with varying
288 success. For example, three of the four committees shared their minutes. However, there was also a
289 fear of breaching confidentiality and thus not everything was always shared. Looking back at the
290 experience between 2016 and 2019, the CRCA and CCCNA believe it would be better to have just one
291 committee.

292
293 We note that the norm for most church federations is to have one committee.²⁶ A single committee
294 will be able to address the noted challenges more effectively and efficiently than two or more
295 committees. Transparency within one committee will be much easier to maintain than among
296 multiple committees. Finally, from other churches' perspectives, contact with one church committee
297 resolves the issue of which committee it should address on any given issue.

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299 The CCCNA and CRCA have always been made up of ministers and (former) elders. At present, there
300 are eight members on the CCCNA and seven on the CRCA. It is evident that there is much value in
301 having experience and continuity on the committee, as inter-church relationships have a personal
302 component to them.²⁷ At the same time, regular committee turnover is also desirable, as this brings
303 new experiences and perspectives to the table.

304
305 Since much of our relationship work is now accomplished in multilateral settings (ICRC and NAPARC)
306 a decrease in total numbers would be appropriate. This would also be in keeping with previous
307 requests to GS from some CanRC churches that we should limit the human and financial resources
308 we apply towards ecumenical relations.

309
310 The most effective and efficient way for the work mandated by a general synod to be executed will
311 be by one committee. In the end, it is the churches, via synod, that determine what the committee
312 does, and it is to the churches that the one committee is accountable.

313
314 While the introduction of categories of relationships will decrease the overall work required in the
315 execution of CO 50, merging the committees into one will broaden the scope of what the members
316 of the committee deal with. We recognize this has been a reason for synods to create separate
317 committees (most recently the subcommittee The Netherlands). It would be wiser, though, for
318 synods to limit themselves to determining *what* needs to happen, and to leave it to the committee
319 to determine *how* given mandates will be executed and by whom. This is the way in which the CCCNA
320 already operates, with its subcommittees East and West (a vague memory of the time when there
321 was a contact committee for every individual relationship in North America). The CRCA also has a
322 division of labour, with individual members being assigned a portfolio and a partner to assist them,
323 and the pair being accountable to the committee as a whole. These approaches are similar to that of
324 a synod making use of advisory committees to complete its business.

325
326 **4. Ecumenicity at General Synods**
327 There is a lack of rules or guidelines about the roles and responsibilities of the convening church of

²⁶ For example, the FRCA recently established one committee for all its ecumenical relations; in previous years they also had multiple committees.

²⁷ The committee has received encouragement from another federation to increase the length of service by committee members.

328 general synod and the CRCA / CCCNA. Unfortunately, this has resulted in some confusion, unmet
329 expectations, and inconsistencies in previous years during the months preceding our recent general
330 synods. A review of our past practices as well as the present practices of other churches, particularly
331 in North America, has resulted in a series of recommendations in the next section.
332

333 **PART C – RECOMMENDATIONS**

334

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

337 Category 1: Ecclesiastical Fellowship

338 Category 2: Corresponding Relationship

339 Category 3: General Contact
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341 2. We recommend that the Canadian Reformed Churches adopt the following rules for the
342 exercise of ecumenical relationships:
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Rules for the Exercise of Ecumenical Relationships²⁸

345 *A. That we acknowledge the scriptural mandate (Ephesians 4 and John 17) to express the unity*
346 *of the church by entering into relationships with other churches where it is consistent with*
347 *biblical unity and truth as a visible demonstration of the unity of the church.*
348

349 *B. Because the undertaking of a bilateral relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (category 1)*
350 *carries with it a commitment of substantial resources for its exercise, good stewardship of*
351 *limited resources requires that these relationships ordinarily be reserved for situations in*
352 *which the church under consideration for Ecclesiastical Fellowship (category 1) is either*
353 *geographically proximate to the CanRC (i.e., situated in North America), or has some other*
354 *form of substantial contact or history with the CanRC (e.g., missionary endeavors, transfers of*
355 *members, etc.).*
356

357 *C. The Committee on Ecumenical Relations (CER) shall periodically review category 1 and 2*
358 *relationships (Ecclesiastical Fellowship and Corresponding Relationship) to ascertain whether*
359 *the desired substantial contact is being (or given the limited resources, is able to be)*
360 *maintained. When the CER finds that, in God's providence, there has not been the desired*
361 *significant contact for at least five years, it may propose to the upcoming General Synod (and*
362 *consult with its counterpart in the other church prior to doing so) that the churches adjust the*
363 *relationship, without prejudice, to one of category 2 (Corresponding Relationship) or category*
364 *3 (General Contact).*
365

Categories of Relationships

366 ***Category 1: Ecclesiastical Fellowship*** *is based on an understood unity of the faith, involving*
367 *churches Reformed in their confessional standards, church order and life. This relationship is*
368 *maintained with churches with whom we have intense meaningful contact. This relationship*
369

²⁸ We acknowledge our indebtedness to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and their Rules for Ecclesiastical Relationships which we have adapted for our own use.

370 *is to be exercised where possible and desirable by:*

- 371 1. Exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies;
- 372 2. The exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting Christian
- 373 unity;
- 374 3. Agreement to respect the procedures of discipline and pastoral concern of one another;
- 375 4. Pulpit fellowship;
- 376 5. Reception of each other's members at the Lord's Supper according to local regulations;
- 377 6. Reception of each other's members upon transfer of membership according to local
- 378 regulations;
- 379 7. Consultation on issues of joint concern, particularly before instituting changes in
- 380 doctrine, worship and governance that might alter the basis of the fellowship;
- 381 8. Joint action in areas of common responsibility;
- 382 9. Exchange of relevant ecclesiastical materials, including:
- 383 a. The Minutes/Acts of the major assemblies;
- 384 b. Yearbooks/Directories of the churches;
- 385 c. The most recently published edition of the Confessional Standards;
- 386 d. The most recently published edition of the Church Order;
- 387 e. The most recently published edition of an approved psalter or psalter-hymnal.

388
389 ***Category 2: Corresponding Relationship*** *is based on an understood unity of the faith,*
390 *involving churches Reformed in their confessional standards, church order and life. This*
391 *relationship is maintained with churches with whom we have less intense meaningful contact.*
392 *This relationship is maintained at a federative level with another federation of churches. This*
393 *relationship is to be exercised where possible and desirable by:*

- 394 1. Welcome of fraternal observers at appropriate major assemblies;
- 395 2. Agreement to respect the procedures of discipline and pastoral concern of one
- 396 another
- 397 3. Pulpit fellowship;
- 398 4. Reception of each other's members at the Lord's Supper according to local
- 399 regulations;
- 400 5. Reception of each other's members upon transfer of membership according to local
- 401 regulation;
- 402 6. Communication on issues of joint concern.

403
404 ***Category 3: General Contact*** *is mutual contact with the member churches of NAPARC and*
405 *ICRC with which we do not have Ecclesiastical Fellowship or Corresponding Relationship*
406 *(categories 1 and 2), or with other churches as determined by general synod. This relationship*
407 *is to be exercised where possible and desirable by:*

- 408 1. Meetings, both formal and informal, of delegates to the annual meeting of NAPARC
- 409 and the quadrennial meeting of the ICRC and at other opportunities as they arise;
- 410 2. Mutual labours as members of NAPARC and ICRC in the discharge of the purposes of
- 411 the council/conference;
- 412 3. Welcome of fraternal observers at the major assemblies;
- 413 4. Other instructions from general synod.

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415 3. We recommend that CO 50 be reworded as follows:

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

4. We recommend that Synod appoint one committee to be mandated to oversee all aspects of ecumenical relations, and to name this committee the Committee on Ecumenical Relations (CER).
5. We recommend that Synod appoint twelve members to the CER from across the federation, one of whom should be the convenor.
6. We recommend that Synod set the length of time on the committee to be four renewable three-year terms for a total of twelve years.
7. We recommend that Synod give the CER the following general mandate
 - a. To continue contact with churches with whom we are in ecumenical relations;
 - b. To send an appropriate number of delegates to represent the CanRC churches at ICRC and NAPARC;²⁹
 - c. To work in consultation with individual CanRC churches and classes that maintain contact with churches for which the CER also has a mandate;³⁰
 - d. Upon request, to advise CanRC churches regarding the identity of other churches and our relationship with them;
 - e. To report on any contact with a church with whom we are not in an ecumenical relationship;
 - f. To appoint one of its members to validate and submit to the treasurer of the General Fund all expenses being submitted for committee work;
 - g. To submit its report to the churches five months prior to the convening of general synod;³¹
 - h. To appoint two of its members to facilitate hospitality support for fraternal delegates and observers, in consultation with the convening church, at each general synod.
8. We recommend that Synod adopt the following protocols for hosting fraternal delegates and observers to general synod:
 - a. **Invitations:**

It is the responsibility of the CER to send invitations to all churches in category 1 (Ecclesiastical Fellowship), and to any church in category 2 (Corresponding Relationship) or category 3 (General Contact) when it deems this to be of benefit to

²⁹ This is a new component but aligns with Article 149 2.2.1.6 of GS 2019.

³⁰ This covers both local contacts (e.g. CanRC-URC) and mission contacts (e.g. CanRC-IRB).

³¹ 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.

455 our ecumenical relationship with them. The CER shall inform the convening church of
456 these invitations.

457
458 **b. Hospitality:**

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

465
466 The CER will assign two members to support the convening church and synod in
467 hosting invited delegates and official observers from other churches, explaining
468 procedures, ensuring delegates have the materials they are entitled to, etc., especially
469 as some delegates will be from foreign (church) cultures. These two members are also
470 expected to be present at synod to serve as liaisons between the guests and the
471 convening church as well as the synod. Costs associated with this hospitality shall be
472 paid out of the general fund.

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

475 Fraternal delegates shall:

- 476 i. have access to all internal synod documents;
- 477 ii. be invited to participate in deliberations in meetings of advisory committees;
- 478 iii. be given an opportunity to address the synod. Prior to their address one of the
479 two CER members shall introduce the fraternal delegate(s) to the synod.
- 480 iv. be given the privilege of the floor (entitled to deliberate and advise, but not
481 vote)

482
483 **d. Fraternal Observers: (churches with which we have Corresponding Relationship or**
484 **General Contact (categories 2 and 3))**

485 Fraternal observers shall:

- 486 i. be given an opportunity to address the synod. Prior to their address one of the
487 two CER members shall introduce the fraternal observer(s) to the synod.
- 488 ii. be given the privilege of the floor during the time of their bringing greetings to
489 the synod on behalf of the churches that sent them.
- 490 iii. be given other privileges if synod executive deems that to be of benefit.

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492 Brother Harry DeBoer
493 Brother Henry Schouten
494 Rev. Arend Witten
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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

542 are in reality living in our own communities; further, becoming one federation of churches with the sister
543 churches living on our own continent is difficult to achieve at a solely federational level). Toronto
544 concludes that “our current practice of EF no longer suits our context and needs to be re-evaluated.”
545 Toronto recommends that the proposed study include reflection on “if and how ecclesiastical fellowship
546 can be acknowledged and experienced at a local/classical level while being considered at a federative
547 level to avoid a hierarchical approach that can hinder local church interaction.”

548 2.4 The Grassie-Covenant CanRC shares its opinion that “adopting a more clearly defined structure
549 to govern inter-church relationships would provide more clarity and consistency in our efforts to achieve
550 Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) with other faithful churches.” As an example of a “more clearly defined
551 structure,” Grassie-Covenant draws Synod’s attention to the 5 levels of EF used by the Heritage Reformed
552 Congregations (with details supplied), with the suggestion that Synod consider making a decision to
553 implement a structure in that line.

554 2.5 The Tintern Spring Creek CanRC advises Synod of their conviction that “it would be beneficial for
555 our federation to have a better policy as to our purpose and method in establishing and maintaining”
556 existing and new relations with other churches. Tintern Spring Creek feels that too many resources are
557 currently being used in establishing and maintaining relationships. Accordingly, Tintern commends to
558 Synod’s attention the Rules for Ecclesiastical Relations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (with details
559 supplied).

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561 **3. Considerations**

562 3.1 Already at GS 2010 the CRCA requested Synod to consolidate and reorganize inter-church
563 relations by disbanding the CRCA and the CCCNA and creating one Committee on Inter-church Relations.
564 Synod did not follow through with that request because (among other reasons) the CCCNA had not been
565 part of the conversation. Now both the CRCA and the CCCNA express some dissatisfaction with the full
566 separation of the two committees.

567 3.2 The influx of migrants to Canada plus our growing awareness of Reformed Christian communities
568 amongst these migrants prompts a reshuffling of the relationship between foreign mission and local
569 mission. This in turn suggests that we do well to re-examine the interface between mandates typically
570 given to a Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) (per CO Art. 50) and those given to the
571 Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA).

572 3.3 Given these new realities, our current structure for the ecclesiastical relations could benefit from
573 a careful re-examination. Rules followed by other NAPARC and ICRC churches could assist us in improving
574 our patterns of establishing and maintaining relationships.

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576 **4. Recommendations**

577 4.1 Synod decide to instruct both the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) and the
578 Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA) to jointly:

579 4.1.1 Do a thorough study on how CO Art. 50 can best be executed in today’s ecclesiastical
580 realities. The items flagged in Observations 2.2-5 should be incorporated into the study.

581 4.1.2 Submit a report to the churches 6 months prior to the convening of the next Synod.

582 **ADOPTED**

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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	●	●	●

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● least (if any) conditions/restrictions

○ some conditions/restrictions

○ further conditions/restrictions

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