

Report of the Church Order Sub Committee to Synod Dunnville 2016

1. Mandate

Regarding mandate, Synod Carman 2013 decided:

4.6 To reappoint the current committee with the mandate to continue working with the church order committee of the URCNA:

4.6.1 To make further changes to the Church Order and the Forms for Discipline in light of the letters received from the churches;

4.6.2 To finalize the synodical regulations.

(Acts of General Synod Carman 2013, Article 149, p. 187):

2. The Committee and its activities

The committee members are Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg (convener), and Dr. Art Witten. Since Synod Carman 2013 the committee met five times.

Since Synod Carman 2013 the committee did not have any face to face meetings with the URCNA committee members. Near the end of November 2013 the committee sent the URC brothers a letter containing:

- 1) a copy of Article 149 of Synod Carman, including our mandate;
- 2) a copy of the *modus operandi* that we adopted to fulfill our mandate (see section 4 below);
- 3) a request to indicate if they have received any input from any URCNA churches that will require further negotiation;
- 4) a recommendation that we have a joint meeting early in 2014.

In response the URC brothers indicated that they were not ready for such a meeting given that CERCU was busy with efforts to stimulate unity between the two federations that would utilize PJCO 2012. The committee therefore indicated appreciation for these developments, a willingness to “wait and see what develops”, and a readiness to help in whatever way it could.

3. Mandate to make further changes to the Church Order in light of the letters received from the Churches (4.6.1)

Synod Carman 2013 considered the following:

3.2. Because it is not in the purview of Synod to do the joint committee's work and because there is no apparent urgency to finalize the PJCO, the letters from the churches that deal with minor matters in the PJCO 2012 ... should be referred back to the Church Order subcommittee for consideration and evaluation.

3.3 Some letters deal with major items and require input and direction from Synod, including the following...`

Article 7 (et al) – Place of Deacons...

Article 7 – Examination of Ministers from Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship...

Article 26 – Church Visitors...

Article 43 – Admission to the Lord's Supper...

Article 57 – The Reception and Departure of Members

This led to mandate 4.6.1 (a).

To carry out this mandate the committee reviewed both the Synod Carman directives as well as the letters sent by the churches to Synod 2013 regarding the PJCO. It did so with the following *modus operandi*:

1. Where these directives or input convince us that provisions in PJCO 2012 could/should be modified, we will propose modifications for negotiation with the URC brothers;
2. Where these directives or input do not convince us that provisions in PJCO 2012 ought to be modified, we will explain our rationale to General Synod 2016 and/or remind this Synod of rationale that has already been submitted to previous synods.

See the following attached documents

1. Attachment 1: "Response to the directives"
2. Attachment 2: "Other items from the letters of the Churches"

4. Mandate to make further changes to the Forms for Discipline in light of the letters received from the Churches (4.6.1)

Synod Carman 2013 considered the following:

3.2. Because it is not in the purview of Synod to do the joint committee's work and because there is no apparent urgency to finalize the PJCO, the letters from the churches that deal with ...the proposed Forms for Discipline should be referred back to the Church Order subcommittee for consideration and evaluation.

3.6. ...*The committee notes that the proposed forms still quote from the NIV 1984, but highlights this as a matter for further review*

This led to mandate 4.6.1 (b)

The committee noted the letter of Carman West dated Feb 1, 2013 and hoped to discuss this with the URC brothers, but was not able to do so.

The committee hoped to meet with the URC brothers to fulfill this mandate, but was not able to do so.

5. Mandate to finalize the synodical regulations (4.6.2)

Synod Carman 2013 considered the following:

3.2. *Because it is not in the purview of Synod to do the joint committee's work and because there is no apparent urgency to finalize the PJCO, the letters from the churches that deal with...the draft synodical regulations.... should be referred back to the Church Order subcommittee for consideration and evaluation.*

This led to mandate 4.6.2

The committee considered the input from Abbotsford to the effect that neither the PJCO nor the draft regulations themselves indicate how the regulations might be changed. The committee decided to note that as a “to do item” as we continue to work on the regulations.

The committee hoped to meet with the URC brothers to fulfill this mandate, but was not able to do so.

6. Decisions of URCNA Synod Visalia 2014 re. PJCO

6.1. Report of the URCNA PJCO committee to Synod Visalia

The report of the URCNA PJCO committee to Synod Visalia was very short. Following is the most pertinent paragraph: *“Since the last synod, no information was brought forward by United Reformed Churches regarding the Proposed Synodical Regulations for use in a joint federation. Given this lack of feedback to the committee from the churches, and uncertainty about how to proceed in cooperation with the Canadian Reformed Churches, the committee did not meet since last synod. The PJCO Committee understands that the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) is proposing a specific recommendation to Synod Visalia for the PJCO's continued work toward unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches”* (Acts of Synod Visalia, p. 186).

6.2. Report and Recommendation of CERCU to Synod Visalia

CERCU served Synod Visalia with a number of recommendations regarding the PJCO (Acts of Synod Visalia, pp. 175-176):

Recommendation 10: “That Synod receive for information the announcement of CERCU that it plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that we proceed to Phase Three A of church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, we would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*.”

Recommendation 11: “That Synod urge the churches to seriously consider which, if any specific articles or stipulations of the PJCO they believe should be changed before it can be adopted for a united federation, and seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their classis.”

Recommendation 12: “That Synod approve the cooperation of the PJCO Committee with CERCU for the working on as yet unresolved difficulties that will be encountered in formulating a plan of union.”

Recommendation 13: “That Synod continue to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting Canadian Reformed ministers to fill our pulpits, inviting Canadian Reformed representatives to our classis meetings, seeking open dialogue with Canadian Reformed brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with Canadian Reformed congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection.

Grounds:

a. Those who have been involved in the process of facilitating greater unity have been profoundly impacted with the spirit of unity. Throughout the process, further dialogue has consistently resulted in warm and cordial relationships and misconceptions have been dispelled.

b. This would be an encouragement to the Canadian Reformed Churches who through their synodical communications have expressed their willingness to continue working through the challenges involved in seeking unity.

c. Our own unity as emerging URCNA churches was formed through much of these kinds of relations and interactions before our own official start together.”

6.3. Pertinent Decisions of Synod Visalia

1. Synod Visalia adopted recommendation 13 above (Acts of Synod Visalia, Article 26).

2. Synod Visalia tabled indefinitely the following recommendation from its advisory committee (Acts of Synod Visalia, Article 53):

“That Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that we proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches so that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, they would begin Development of a Plan of Union.

Grounds:

- a. This is consistent with the mandate given to CERCU.*
- b. While this decision does not prejudice any decision in 2016, it does encourage the committee to do the work of presenting this matter for our consideration in 2016.*
- c. This would also encourage the consistories to do the work of writing overtures and communicating with the committee on this matter.”*

3. Synod Visalia adopted the following recommendation from its advisory committee (Acts of Synod Visalia, Article 69):

1. That Synod instruct the PJCO Committee to await further work on the PJCO until after the anticipated decision at the next Synod concerning the proposal to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC.

Ground:

The PJCO work properly belongs to Phase 3A and we are not yet in Phase 3A with the CanRC.

4. Synod Visalia adopted the following revised recommendation from its advisory committee (Acts of Synod Visalia, Article 73):

That Synod urge the churches to seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the PJCO they believe should be changed before it can adopted for a united federation; and seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their classes.

Grounds:

- a. This is consistent with the decision of Synod 2012 as reflected in Article 53.4 and 53.5 of the Acts of Synod 2012.*
 - i. Article 53.4: That Synod accept for continued study the Proposed Joint Church Order 2012 as the Church Order for a united federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America and the Canadian Reformed Churches.*
 - ii. Article 53.5: That Synod strongly encourage the churches to review Proposed Joint Church Order 2012 and inform them that suggested changes should be directed to Synod by way of overture through the classis.*
- b. This will be an effective way to address concerns from the consistories related to this pursuit of unity.*

6.4. Comments on these reports and decisions

While we were pleased with the positive introduction and set of recommendations that CERCU submitted to Synod Visalia, we were disappointed and confused by the decisions of Synod Visalia itself.

Synod Visalia, in Article 53, decided to “table indefinitely” the recommendation of its advisory committee to “...encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that we proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches so that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, they would begin Development of a Plan of Union” (see 6.3 above). If our understanding is correct, “tabling indefinitely,” particularly in an American context, means “to postpone consideration indefinitely.” We find this very disheartening! Does this not indicate that the unity process, at the very least, is “indefinitely on hold”?

It is true that Synod Visalia, in a subsequent article (Article 73), adopted a recommendation of its advisory committee to “*instruct the PJCO Committee to await further work on the PJCO until after the anticipated decision at the next Synod concerning the proposal to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC.*” It appears that this “anticipated decision,” however, refers to the very decision that was “tabled indefinitely.”

On a positive note, Synod Visalia did not disband its PJCO committee.

We find these decisions confusing and contradictory. In any case, they have the effect of putting our work “in limbo.” These decisions also made it difficult for the committee to even come to a recommendation as to whether or not the Canadian Reformed Churches should even maintain a PJCO committee. In the end we deemed it prudent to perhaps at least have a PJCO committee available if Synod Wyoming 2016 does in fact decide to proceed to Phase 3A. We also decided to suggest that Synod Dunnville mandate the CCU coordinators to seek clarification from CERCU regarding this “limbo situation.”

7. Conclusion

The committee thanks the Lord for the work that it could do. We pray that the Lord will bless our efforts as we move forward as federations towards full unity.

8. Recommendations

The committee recommends that:

1. Synod thanks the committee for the work it has completed;
2. Synod accepts our report and recommendations as a response to the mandate given by Synod Carman and therefore also refrains from entertaining further changes to the PJCO at this time.
3. Synod mandates the CCU coordinators to seek clarification from CERCU regarding the “tabled indefinitely” situation.
4. Synod reappoints the committee (perhaps with an additional member for continuity down the road) and mandate it to resume its work as mandated by Synod Carman 2012 only if Synod Wyoming 2016 pursues Phase 3A or mandates their joint CO committee to take up contact with us.

9. Appendix

In order to perform its work given by Synod Carman 2013 the committee incurred a total of \$ 0.00 in expenses.

Respectfully submitted,
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