

REPORT SUBCOMMITTEE NETHERLANDS OF THE CRCA FOR SYNOD DUNNVILLE 2016

INTRODUCTION

Since Synod Burlington 2010 the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) has a Subcommittee Relations churches in the Netherlands (SRN) which focuses on relations with the churches in the Netherlands, namely:

- I. the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands liberated (Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland vrijgemaakt)
- II. the Reformed Churches restored (De Gereformeerde Kerken hersteld)
- III. the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in provisional federation (Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland)

Synod Carman 2013 continued with the SRN and reappointed the brothers originally appointed by Synod Burlington: Rev. J. DeGelder, Rev. J. Moesker, brother G.J. Nordeman and Dr. C. Van Dam.

Since this report makes use of many abbreviations, we list them with the references here.

CanRC – the Canadian Reformed Churches
RCN - the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands liberated
RCR - the Reformed Churches restored (Netherlands)
RCNvv - the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in provisional federation
NRC – Netherlands Reformed Churches (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken)
LRCA – Liberated Reformed Church at Abbotsford
FRCA – Free Reformed Churches of Australia
OPC – Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (USA)
CRCA – Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad of the CanRC
EF – Ecclesiastical Fellowship (see rules page 23-24)
SRN – Subcommittee Relations churches in the Netherlands
BBK – RCN Deputies for Contact Foreign Churches
TUK – Theological University Kampen
DKE – Deputies for Church Unity in the RCN
CO – Church Order

I. RELATIONS WITH THE REFORMED CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS (RCN)

A. MANDATE

Synod Carman 2013, after dealing with the report of the SRN regarding relations with the RCN (Acts, Article 148), decided to continue at this time the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the RCN under the adopted rules, but at the same time, as per the rules for EF (1&6), also sent a letter of admonition to Synod Ede 2014. This letter expressed brotherly love for the RCN but brought forward serious concerns regarding deviation from Reformed hermeneutical principles, the work of the Deputies Men/Women in the Church, the growing relationship with the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC)

without resolution of some crucial differences, and a growing sense of estrangement of the CanRC from the RCN. Synod also decided the following (Acts, Article 148):

4.6. To reappoint a subcommittee of the CRCA with the following mandate:

4.6.1. To maintain contact with the BBK of the RCN and represent the CanRC at the next synod of the RCN. If possible, the CRCA subcommittee should be present when this synod's letter is dealt with by the next synod of the RCN;

4.6.2. To inform BBK of our decision concerning female delegates;

4.6.3. To continue to observe developments at the TUK;

4.6.4. To monitor the work of the Deputies concerning the Role of Women in the Church and assess their report as well as the decisions of the next Synod of the RCN regarding that report;

4.6.5. To monitor the ongoing unity discussions between the RCN and the NRC and to review the decisions of the next Synod of the RCN regarding unity with the NRC;

4.6.6. To review the results of the revision of the RCN church order;

4.6.7. To monitor the results of the RCN's involvement with the "National Synod;"

4.6.8. To monitor the developments regarding the application of Article 67 of the RCN Church Order;

4.6.9. To work in consultation with the deputies of the FRCA and OPC;

4.6.10. To report to the churches six months prior to General Synod 2016 giving special attention to the question whether or not we continue in Ecclesiastical Fellowship.

B. COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES (Mandate 4.6.1 and 4.6.2)

1. Contacts

The SRN met 8 times and maintained correspondence with the Deputies Contact Foreign Churches (BBK) of the RCN as well as with the deputies church relations of some of the sister churches. We forwarded the decisions of Synod Carman to the BBK, also those concerning female delegates to our assemblies. On two occasions we represented the CanRC at Synod Ede 2014. Brother G.J. Nordeman attended the Foreign Delegates Week (Mar. 24-29, 2014) and all four members of the SRN were present at Synod Ede's discussion of letters of admonition and the report Deputies Men/Women in the Church (May 16-17, 2014). At the latter visit we were also able to meet for discussions with some of the BBK deputies. On June 1, 2015 we were also able to meet with Rev. K. Batteau of the BBK for a heart-to-heart discussion concerning the decisions of Synod Ede about the letter of admonition addressed to that synod by the Synod Carman of the CanRC.

2. Response to Synod Carman 2013 Letter of Admonition to Synod Ede 2014

Synod Ede received a number of letters of admonition or expressions of concern from foreign sister churches in addition to the letter sent by Synod Carman 2013. Sadly, Synod Ede lumped the CanRC letter of admonition sent by Synod Carman in with letters of admonition and concern from other foreign churches. This resulted in a response to some of our concerns and a cursory treatment of others. The SRN

received a written response from Synod Ede dated December 1, 2014 (with decisions of Ede appended)¹ in which they stated the following: “Therefore we appreciate your letter as an expression of your love and care as sister-churches, genuinely concerned about the well-being and faithfulness of our churches in The Netherlands. It is our hope and prayer as well, that the CanRC and the RCN may stand side by side, remaining faithful to God until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, even when traditions may change and new circumstances may require new answers, we hope and expect that we can help each other to remain faithful to the Lord and His Word, as our common foundation.”

However, in the response of Synod Ede to Synod Carman’s letter there was no indication that any change in the hermeneutical direction of the Theological University of Kampen (TUK) is on the horizon. Instead, Dr. S. Paas and Dr. K. van Bekkum, about whose statements and theses our letter of admonition had expressed grave concern, were vindicated and were appointed to positions at the TUK. In the same document our concerns about the hermeneutical direction the RCN was moving in regards to the role of women in the church were brushed aside. Synod stated in the letter of response, “We also wish to investigate how we can do justice to the two dimensions taught by Scripture: that of the different responsibilities given by God to man and woman, as well as that of the equivalence of man and woman. We believe that such an investigation is certainly possible in a Reformed church, as long as the arguments are based on Scripture.” It is fine to stipulate “as long as the arguments are based on Scripture,” but the issue for us is (as brought to the fore in the report of Deputies Men/Women in the Church to Synod Ede) exactly how Scripture is being interpreted in the context of the changing hermeneutical approach at the TUK and in the RCN as a whole.

Finally, in Synod Carman’s letter concern was expressed about the growing relationship of the RCN with the NRC. The letter we received stated concerning this, “In our view, you seem to ignore an increasing confessional development within the NRC, and the intention of the NRC to critically review the hermeneutical basis of their decision to allow female elders and pastors.” We do not see this response as very reassuring, especially the second part about a review of the hermeneutical basis of the opening of all offices to women in the NRC. Instead, in its contact with the NRC Synod Ede has determined that, as a result of discussions with NRC about hermeneutics, the NRC decision to open all offices to women is no longer an impediment to moving toward unity. So we see a change in the RCN position on the hermeneutics rather than an NRC critical review.

At the conclusion of the letter, Synod Ede states, “It is our prayer that this letter and material will help to alleviate your concerns and may contribute to restoring mutual confidence in each other.” We are afraid that the contents of the letter and the attached decisions of Synod Ede did not restore our confidence in our sister-churches in the Netherlands. Rather, we are disappointed to report that as shown in the following reports concerning the TUK, the Synod Carman 2013 letter of admonition has not had the hoped-for effect and the RCN are continuing in the direction they have been taking over the past number of years.

C. THE THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY IN KAMPEN (Mandate 4.6.3)

The TUK is the school of the churches for the training for the ministry. This school officially strives for confessional faithfulness and high academic standards. However, we as deputies are concerned that, emanating from the TUK is evidence of a weakening of the classic Reformed view of Scripture as found in Scripture (e.g., John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) and confessed in the Belgic Confession Articles 2 to 7. In addition to what has been mentioned in our 2012 Report to Synod Carman (2013) regarding the

¹ See appendix.

weakening view of scripture at the TUK and in studies on the role of women in the church, we have additional reasons for concerns which we pass on in this report. In summary, they are:

1. Concerns around the issue of homosexuality
2. The response of Synod Ede to Synod Carman's letter voicing our concerns about the TUK
3. Burger's views on Christ's sacrifice

1. The TUK on Homosexuality

One would expect that the Theological University in Kampen (TUK) would give a strong unified leadership on the much discussed ethical issue of homosexuality. This has not happened and it appears that it will not happen either.

On January 20, 2012, the TUK hosted a conference on homosexuality. Speakers from the broader Reformed community were invited. The proceedings were published later that year in a book entitled *Open en kwetsbaar: Christelijk debat over homoseksualiteit (Open and Vulnerable: Christian Debate about Homosexuality)*. This volume was number 11 in the TUK-Bezinningsreeks, an official series put out by TUK.

The speakers were obviously not all agreed, but two general features are striking about the book. There is very little exegesis or asking what Scripture says and there is much talk of the current culture and the need for the church to accommodate as much as possible to homosexuals so that they feel welcome in the church. It is of course a given that the church should welcome all, but the point here is that biblical norms were not at the forefront but human perceptions and feelings. What follows is a sampling of what was said at the conference by speakers associated with the TUK.

In chapter 2, the editor and organizer of the conference, Dr. Ad de Bruijne, outlines three approaches for a church to take with respect to homosexuals, ranging from the traditional condemnation of homosexual practice as sinful (in the line of Dr. J. Douma) to tolerating homosexuals living together in a sexual relationship as long as they do so in love and faithfulness. In this case, there is no need for church discipline. No evaluation or preference is given for any of these approaches.

In Chapter 4, Dr. Maarten van Loon, who studied under De Bruijne, asks whether the disapproval of a homosexual relationship characterized by love and faithfulness can be substantiated from Romans 1. The classic Reformed approach was that Romans 1 condemns homosexual relationships because they are against God's creation ordinance (Rom 1:26-27). Van Loon then challenges this understanding by questioning whether the apostle Paul was forbidding homosexual behaviour by writing what he did. The text does not contain a specific prohibition of homosexual practice. Such a prohibition is derived from the text but not actually stated in the text. Even if one could derive a prohibition from Romans 1, the next question is whether the condemnation of homosexual practice as done in the days of the apostle can be made a general condemnation that also applies to homosexuals who today have a committed sexual relationship of love and faithfulness. Such homosexual practice was not known to the apostle. Finally Van Loon asks whether ethical issues should be decided on exegetical grounds. His conclusion is that if we want to maintain Romans 1 as a passage teaching us to forbid homosexual behaviour done within the bonds of love and faithfulness, then we have our work cut out for us.

Although every author has the right to limit his discussion to a passage of his choosing, his self-imposed restrictions mean that he did not do justice to the principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture. As a result the discussion was skewed and one is left with the unsatisfied feeling that injustice was done to the topic at hand. This was the only chapter that had Scripture as a focus and it is a disappointment. One senses in his questioning and somewhat negative approach to the traditional exegesis of Romans 1 a

desire to accommodate to the current culture of tolerance for homosexual practice. The churches and their membership, including the homosexuals, are not helped with this approach. For more on Van Loon's interpretation, see the notes on his book *In liefde en trouw?* found below in this section.

In Chapter 5, De Bruijne notes how times have changed. Not too long ago homosexual practice was virtually universally rejected. Now church discipline is hardly used against practising homosexuals in the RCN. According to him, only about a third of practising homosexuals are kept from the Lord's Supper. De Bruijne asks whether we should have a new approach since many homosexuals are leaving the church. To answer that question De Bruijne approaches the issue by affirming that the key thing for a Christian is to have life in Christ. In Christ the new life emerges from the old existence of sin. We today may experience by the power of the Spirit of Christ a beginning of that new life that will one day be completely realized. His life must become our life. For that reason the Christian life does not gravitate around separate norms and commandments, but around Christ who renews us by the Spirit.

De Bruijne continues by noting that at first glance the Bible reserves sex for the relationship between man and woman. But is it possible that this connection is culture bound so that we today can also understand homosexual relations as a possibility and variant within God's creation which God had always intended but which in the time of the Bible was not yet recognized as such? From the subjective dimension of the unity with Christ, this could in principle be possible (60). De Bruijne rejects this way of thinking. Homosexual behavior is a manifestation of the brokenness of human life since the fall into sin.

However, all this does not yet mean that homosexual relationships are unthinkable as a compromise for the time preceding the fullness of the kingdom of Christ. No one is perfect and perfectionism is an evil. Christian life has something of a compromising character. Now it should be clear that to engage in homosexual behaviour as a permanent option is not in accordance with the challenge to follow the crucified and resurrected Christ. One cannot rest in homosexual behaviour. But De Bruijne does say that in a pastoral situation you may have to temporarily acquiesce in a homosexual relationship as those involved seek to grow in Christ (62). For this reason, he pleads for restraint or no church discipline around practicing homosexuals. Such discipline only serves to alienate them from the church. (63). Furthermore church discipline is not administered uniformly today so why should we pick on the homosexuals? But, as with all compromise, the full gospel and biblical norms need to be preached, including that sexual communion is to be only for the relationship between husband and wife.

De Bruijne also states that we need to further investigate the homosexual identity as a modern phenomenon before we can properly apply the relevant passages of Scripture in today's cultural context (66). How this would affect calling homosexual behavior sinful is not clear from De Bruijne's subsequent analysis which is rather open-ended.

De Bruijne raises good points in his treatment of an important subject but on balance this chapter is very disappointing. Biblical norms somehow seem lost within discussions of how to meet the needs of homosexuals. It is also noteworthy that while De Bruijne suggests the possibility of acquiescing in homosexual relationships out of pastoral considerations, Synod Zwolle-Zuid 2008 took a rather different position. This synod was faced with the question whether a consistory should proceed with disciplining homosexuals who were living together because they had said that they would sexually abstain. Synod addressed the issue by declaring that the consistory is fully justified to continue in warning those involved because such a living together should be rejected. One must not underestimate the power of Satan and sin and place oneself into temptation. The church should also be aware of the negative consequences of publicly tolerating homosexual practice (*Acta*, art. 52). De Bruijne's pleading for a more tolerant attitude to homosexual relationships without any clear biblical grounds stands in stark contrast to what the churches through their general synod had decided merely four years earlier and his pleading does not serve the well-being of the churches he serves nor the well-being of the homosexuals whom he is trying to help. Appealing to changing cultural contexts cannot undo the fact that Scripture calls homosexual

relationships sinful. Our concern for doing God's will and upholding his ordinances should take precedence over being compromising to those struggling with homosexuality. This point is clearly brought to the fore by Dr. Wolter Rose.

In chapter 11, Rose raises an important biblical voice. He emphasizes that one's love for Christ should be determinative and have precedence. He gives a moving testimony as a celibate homosexual, acknowledging that it is a struggle not to give in to homosexual feelings. But he fights temptation by seeking to know Christ. "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). You can only say that, he writes, if you have seen something of the glory of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:4-6) (120-121). Rose's voice needs to be heard in the RCN.

In addition to the above, it can be noted that Maarten van Loon wrote a special study entitled, *In liefde en trouw?* (2012). It deals with homosexual relations in the Christian congregation from the perspective of Romans 1. This is also an official publication of the TUK, being number 10 in its series: TU-Bezinningsreeks. Van Loon concludes his book-length study by affirming that in his view the Bible gives no room for homosexual relations in love and faithfulness. An important fact for coming to this conclusion is that Romans 1:26 speaks of homosexual relations as "unnatural". This term refers to a normative creation order. At the same time, Van Loon thinks it is important to factor in the notion of the brokenness and groaning of creation in order to leave room for pastoral compassion for those who struggle with homosexuality (116-117). Van Loon later notes that such pastoral compassion can take the form of allowing a homosexual couple to live together if they promise to sexual abstinence, a position also favoured by De Bruijne (121). A question arises: is this not going too far? We do not tolerate heterosexual couples who are in love to live together under the promise of abstinence. Does Christ not teach us to pray "Lead us not into temptation?"

Although Van Loon himself affirms that Scripture gives no basis for homosexual relations in love and faithfulness, he does list other alternatives in approaching homosexual relations within the congregation and points out their strengths and weaknesses. These alternatives do in some measure tolerate homosexual relationships (117-123). It is therefore puzzling, given his own position, to nevertheless see him recommend these alternatives for study in orthodox Christian circles and to affirm that he does not want to say that exegetical and hermeneutical research can solve once for all the question of the ethical implications of the way the Bible speaks of homosexuality (125-126).

2. Decisions Of Synod Ede and Evaluation

The Synod of Ede (2014-15) responded to the objections from all the foreign churches by making one set of decisions to be sent to all the churches involved. This decision was sent to the sister churches and quotations from the decisions of synod are taken from their authorized English translation as received in their letter to our committee.

The synod stated that they appreciated hearing the concerns of the sister churches and that the Dutch churches wish to remain faithful to the Scriptures and the Reformed confessions. One must however realize that the Reformed Churches of today are not the same as those of forty years ago. This fact does not mean that they are less Reformed. Furthermore, the synod stated "that differences of opinion regarding certain authors, or regarding (parts of) certain reports by deputies, should not be blown up to objections against the 'Reformed Churches.'" As basis for the above, the synod said: "The Reformed Churches are living churches existing in a rapidly changing ecclesiastical context in the Netherlands. The views on contacts with other churches, the role of the church federation (e.g. the need for uniformity within the federation), the task of the churches in society, and the necessity to present the gospel in a way that is relevant for today, are unmistakably different than in the eighties of the last century. The churches are finding their way in these matters that is deliberately in line with the Scripture and with the Reformed

confessions. This way is not infallible and requires constant alertness. In this context the expression of the concerns by the sister churches is welcomed.”

When it comes to concerns expressed regarding the views of Scripture tolerated at the TUK as detailed in our previous report, Synod Ede decided (*Acta*, page 28):

- a. to instruct the Board of Trustees of the TU to provide the synod with a concept response to the criticism submitted by the sister churches abroad of the publications by instructors and researchers at the TU. This response should take the form of a generous exposition, accessible to a broad audience, and it should address the individual publications.
- b. to advise the Board of Trustees to strive for the TU’s involvement in the continuation of the scientific dialogue with theologians connected to the churches that expressed their objections.

Grounds:

1. The Board of Directors supervises the Reformed character of the education and research at the TU and is primarily responsible for responding to objections raised against it (Constitution of the TU).
2. Objections submitted in the past have been refuted, but the communication of this refutation was possibly not sufficiently broad.
3. For the relationship with the sister churches, it is important to maintain a good exchange in the theological field, as recently happened at the Hamilton conference on hermeneutics.

Synod also decided:

to urge the sister churches abroad to keep serving us and each other as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

Grounds:

1. Insofar our churches wish to remain in the confession of God’s Word there is no reason to review the existing contact.
2. Insofar our churches are increasingly dealing with the continued secularization in the lives of God’s children, we have much need of the support and forbearance of our sister churches abroad.

Evaluation of Synod’s Decisions.

It is striking that Synod Ede requested from the TUK a response that “should take the form of a generous exposition, accessible to a broad audience, and it should address the individual publications.” However, it does appear that Synod Ede did not expect anything different from past responses. It stated as grounds for revisiting the issues raised that “objections submitted in the past have been refuted, but the communication of this refutation was possibly not sufficiently broad.” So it appears that in Synod’s view it was a matter of bad communication. This did not look promising from our perspective. Receiving the official response from the TUK via Synod Ede confirmed our fears. This response was received as Appendix 4 (presumably to the *Acts* of Ede) entitled, *Theological University: Response to Foreign Sister Churches*. In §1, the Board of Trustees of TUK state that “The purpose of this letter is to give a clear description of how the objections have been handled, and how according to our firm conviction, they have been answered adequately.”

As a consequence, nothing new is found in the response of TUK to our concerns as expressed in our report to Synod Carman 2013 (Appendix 5). It is troubling that no actual discussion of the concerns ever

took place about Dr. Paas and Dr. Van Bekkum, neither at synod nor in correspondence with BBK which included the report of TUK. Our concern that our objections were not taken seriously was confirmed with the Synod Ede's appointing Dr. Paas as Professor of Missiology and Dr. Van Bekkum remains at the TUK. We did receive Dr. Van Bekkum's response to ecclesiastical and ecumenical critique of his dissertation (March 20, 2014) and despite his good intentions were disappointed with it. Our concerns with his work as articulated in our 2012 report were not taken away.

3. Hans Burger and Christ's Sacrifice

Dr. Hans Burger, appointed by Synod Ede as university docent in Systematic Theology, recently published an essay "Voorbij de offerkritiek" [Beyond Critiquing the Offering] with subtitle, "Het beeld van het offer" ["The Image of Sacrifice"].² He notes that today words like sacrifice, scapegoat, and sin offering tend to have a negative connotation. How then can we speak of Christ's sacrifice as something positive when the word sacrifice has such a negative connotation in our culture for someone who has not grown up in the Christian faith (52)? What follows in Burger's writing is quite confusing. It appears that Burger wants to express the gospel in such a way that it is more understandable and acceptable to our current postmodern culture by downplaying the element of sacrifice. He unjustly suggests that the Bible is also critical of sacrifice (53) and questions dogmatic formulations of Christ's sacrifice. He writes that it is important to distinguish Scripture's speaking of Jesus's death as a sacrifice "from dogmatic articulations such as 'Jesus brings a sacrifice by bearing our punishment in our place as payment for our guilt. In this way he gives the required satisfaction to God and acquires our salvation.' This train of thought you do not find in this way in the New Testament" (53-54). This is an incredible statement since the Scriptures clearly teach all these truths.³ With this statement he appears to deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ. Indeed, he states that Jesus's death was not a sacrifice strictly speaking. But, on the other hand he acknowledged that he is the lamb that takes away the sins of the world and that his blood brings peace (54-55). Nevertheless, Burger considers the biblical concept of the substitutionary atonement as a medieval understanding of Christ's death which suited their cultural context.

Our current culture is not so receptive to this notion and so Burger looks for a more culturally acceptable understanding of what Scripture says concerning Christ's sacrifice. He opines that the sacrifice of Christ consisted in Christ's complete dedication in obeying his Father in order to fulfill his mission. In this way Christ makes us people who like him are dedicated to God. The cultic image of sacrifice emphasizes the positive of Jesus who in his dedication covers our sins and changes us to people dedicated to God. In this way our whole life becomes a sacrifice. With this type of reasoning Burger downplays, ignores, or even denies the importance of Christ's paying for our sins with his bloody sacrifice in order to satisfy God's justice as confessed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism (LD 3 to 6). Indeed, he comes close to making a caricature of God as unfair to demand sacrifice. After mentioning how God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Burger writes: "The Bible does not therefore picture a strict God who wants to see blood. As if God wants to see people die, no matter what the cost. As if he is a Father who is so bloodthirsty that he just goes ahead and sacrifices his own Son: a miserable, immoral God."⁴ But Burger glosses over the fact that God is holy and that his justice must be satisfied. Burger continues by speaking of God's love, but says very little of God's justice. Apparently in Burger's opinion, such would not be appealing or understandable to our current culture. For Burger, God's sacrifice in Christ is "primarily an appeal to our heart. It is a loving invitation not to continue to reject God's love but to answer it. . . .

² Hans Burger, "Voorbij Het Offerkritiek (Het Beeld Van Het Offer)," in *Cruciaal: De Verrassende Betekenis Van Jezus' Kruisiging*, Henk Bakker and et al. (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2014), 51–65.

³ With respect to Christ's sacrifice in our place: Rom 5:8; 6:4-5; 2 Cor 5:21; as bearing our punishment: Isa 53; 1 Pet 2:24; Heb 9:28; as payment for our guilt: Matt 20:28; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 1:18-19.

⁴ Burger, "Voorbij Het Offerkritiek," 64. The original reads: "De Bijbel tekent dus geen strenge God die bloed wil zien. Alsof God wil dat er koste wat kost doden vallen. Alsof hij een Vader is die zo bloeddorstig is dat hij dan maar zijn eigen Zoon slachtoffer: een nare, immorele God."

Connected immediately with the death of Jesus as sacrifice is the appeal that we give our life as thank and praise offering with full admiration for God ” (65). “So Christ’s sacrifice is the secret of our life dedication.”

While it is biblical to speak of God’s love in connection with Christ’s sacrifice (e.g. John 3:16), one also needs to underline the importance of God’s justice and the principle of the necessity of blood atonement (cf. Lev. 17:11). By neglecting penal substitution, Burger seems to be articulating a neo-orthodox view of the atonement. Similar to Burger, neo-orthodoxy teaches that salvation should not be seen in the forensic context of the courtroom, “whereby Christ, by his substitutionary action obtains a benefit that is then passed on to others. Rather, salvation is to be found in the very being of Christ, and therefore union with Christ becomes the key doctrine.” United to Christ, we share in his reconciled humanity and so receive God’s blessings.⁵

In sum, in trying to be more culturally relevant or understandable, Burger’s essay raises the question whether he still upholds the full biblical teaching of substitutionary atonement. Unfortunately, his views do little to encourage trust in the TUK among the supporting and sister churches.⁶

D. WORK OF DEPUTIES MALE/FEMALE IN THE CHURCH (Mandate 4.6.4)

1. Background

The role of women in the church and whether they may serve in church office has been under discussion at RCN synods since Synod Amersfoort 2005. This synod appointed a committee (Deputies Male/Female in the Church) to look into how the churches view the role of men and women in the church. These deputies presented a report to Synod Zwolle 2008 which offered statistics of opinions in the churches. However, the deputies offered no definite practical direction. In spite of concerns expressed by, among others, the foreign delegates of the CanRC⁷, Synod Zwolle 2008 decided to push ahead with the issue and appointed new Deputies M/F in the Church to examine whether the Bible allows for women to also hold office in the church. This committee reported to Synod Harderwijk 2011, and put forward two lines of interpretation about what the Bible says about women and church office – one which excluded women from church office, and another which opened the way for them to serve in church office. According to the report, both lines of interpretation were considered to fall within the bounds of Scripture. No practical conclusions were offered by the deputies, however. In spite of words of deepening concern about the direction the RCN were taking by the SRN⁸ among others, Synod Harderwijk forged ahead on the issue of women in office and decided (Acts GS 2011, Art 29) to appoint Deputies Male/Female in the church with the mandate to answer the following questions:

1. Is it permissible, on the basis of Scripture, beside brothers, also to appoint sisters in the church to the office of deacon? Which consequences will the answer to this question have for the task and the responsibilities of deacons?
2. Is it permissible, on the basis of Scripture, beside brothers, to appoint also sisters in the church to the offices of elder and minister?

⁵ A. T. B. McGowan, “The Atonement as Penal Substitution,” in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 197; see also pp. 194, 197-200..

⁶ The above is sufficient for our purpose, but much more could be said about Burger’s essay. See, e.g., the discussions in Rev. D. de Jong’s blog: <http://www.bijbelknopendoos.nl/kn24.htm>; <http://www.eeninwaarheid.info/>; and the review of *Cruciaal* by J. Douma: <http://www.jochemdouma.nl/boekbespreking/>.

⁷ See Committee On Relations With Churches Abroad of the Canadian Reformed Churches - Report to General Synod 2010, Part F, page 21, line 932ff (available online at <http://www.canrc.org/?assembly=77>).

⁸ See Report of the CRCA Subcommittee for Contact with the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands Liberated (RCN) to Synod Carman 2013, address page 27 (available online at <http://www.canrc.org/?assembly=181>).

3. Given the answers to the above questions, which common statements and agreements are required and/or possible?

2. The Report Deputies M/F For Synod Ede 2014

The report to Synod Ede 2014 which Deputies M/F issued in the fall of 2013 urged the RCN to declare that in the light of its new direction of Bible interpretation there is no Biblical reason why women cannot serve in all church offices. The introduction of this report put forward the issue as the deputies saw it: “How do we read the Bible? At the same time, this theological problem is partly engendered by social and cultural shifts, and by changes in the way church members think and live.”⁹ The report ascertained that church members in the RCN experience a growing tension between the opportunities available to women in society and the restrictions on the roles of women in church life. However, the Bible gives obvious directives about the relations between men and women in Genesis and the apostle Paul states in certain passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 that women are not to speak or have authority in church. How are we to read those passages? The report asserted that due to the current socio-cultural developments surrounding the role of women, there is “real uncertainty” as to how the Pauline statements about the role of women in the church must be read.¹⁰ Those passages were reviewed and re-interpreted in such a way that, instead of giving normative prescriptions concerning the role of women for all times, they were read as a requirement for the church to adjust women’s roles according to the prevailing culture.

There was one dissenting deputy, D.A.C Slump, whose criticisms of the report were appended to it. He pointed out that far too much weight was given to the cultural context while insufficient weight was given to the creation ordinance concerning the place of men and women. This deputy also concluded that “the report does insufficient justice to the significance that the Word of God, including that spoken by the mouth of Paul, has for today.”¹¹ In other words, he criticized how the report treated the Word of God.

The SRN studied the report of the RCN Deputies M/F to Synod Ede and were able to include their critique of this report in their presentation to Synod Carman 2013 of the CanRC. The SRN concluded the following: “We found the reports of the Deputies M/W in de Church to Synod Zwolle-Zuid 2008 and Synod Harderwijk 2011 rather disconcerting. Western society has embraced the role equality of women, and this certainly places a great deal of pressure on churches which seek to maintain the directives of God’s Word in regards to the role of women in the church. We understand the societal pressures our sister churches are enduring in a secular and progressive Dutch society. But this makes it all the more imperative that we support, encourage and admonish each other as Reformed churches in this world to stay close to the inspired and authoritative Word of God. That is our intent in commenting on the three parts of the work of the Deputies M/W in the Church over the past years.”¹²

As the BBK of the RCN requested our Synod to address them directly about major concerns, Synod Carman sent a letter of admonition addressed to Synod Ede 2014 which included an admonition about the process which has been followed with respect to the issue of women in church office. This letter stated, “In the RCN, as in any faithful church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the matter of women in office should not be framed as an open question. When the unambiguous teaching of the Word of God about male leadership in the church becomes a matter of debate, then we fear that a new and dangerous hermeneutical approach is showing its influence.”¹³

⁹ Report of Deputies M/F in the Church for Synod Ede 2014, page 5.

¹⁰ Report of Deputies M/F, page 8.

¹¹ Report of M/F, page 41.

¹² Report of the CRCA Subcommittee for Contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Liberated (RCN) to Synod Carman 2013, D II, page 15.

¹³ Acts General Synod 2013 of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Art 165, page 215.

3. Decisions Synod Ede 2014 Regarding the Report Deputies M/F

As mentioned above, the SRN was invited to attend the session of Synod Ede on May 17th when the Report M/F was placed in discussion. However, the foreign delegates invited to that session were told that there would be no opportunity given for delegates to take part in the discussions about that report. The discussion showed that many of the delegates at Synod felt that the approach of the report was deemed too radically different and too complex. In spite of that sentiment, though, some delegates expressed that it is culturally inevitable that women will in future also hold office in the churches and what is still needed is an interpretation which provides a reading of the Bible concerning women in office which is acceptable to the general membership of the RCN.

The discussion concerning the role of women in the church was continued on May 20th and concluded on June 5th. Synod Ede decided that it could not accept the argumentation of the Report of Deputies M/W in the Church. The Canadian delegates were gratified by the careful decision not to accept the hermeneutic presented in the report and to open all the offices to women.

Synod Ede, however, also stated that the matter of whether women may serve in all church offices remains an open question in the RCN and the Dutch brothers still felt that an interpretation of the Bible permitting women a greater role in church and even church office was possible. Synod saw two lines in Scripture: the line of equality between men and women and the line of differing tasks given to men and women. Those two lines need to be retained. Synod decided the following:

Decision 3

a. To appoint a new committee “M/F and Office” to investigate:

1. how the offices can be structured so that in them women can be active for God’s kingdom; thereby taking into account the ground mentioned under Decision 2.
2. what the consequences are of such a structure, relative to the current forms and the church order.
3. what the opinions are within sister churches concerning the implementation of the offices of minister, elder, and deacon; this with a view toward maintaining the catholicity of the church.

b. To inform the sister churches, both nationally and internationally, concerning this Decision 3, and to request advice.

Grounds:

1. A continuing reflection on the questions concerning men and women in the offices of minister, elder, and deacon will be served by a critical study of the current structure of offices within the Reformed Churches in the light of the whole teaching of Scripture.
2. The structure of offices originating in the times of the Reformation, of ministers, elders, and deacons, is not directly derived from Scripture and may therefore be modified and/or extended according to circumstances.
3. Not all activities of the current officers deal directly with bearing responsibility for the spiritual leadership in the congregation; it is profitable to investigate which tasks may be executed by men as well as women.
4. A different implementation and definition of the offices of minister, elder, and deacon may have consequences for the content of the forms in current use, as well as for the rules of the church order.
5. According to the rules for sister church relations (Synod of Ommen, 1993), sister churches ought to be informed about the intended study and its results.¹⁴

Synod Ede also decided to appoint an additional Committee Male and Female in the Church to investigate working toward integration of Biblical education, the confessional norms, and the practice of the Reformed churches in connection with the roles and functions of women and men in their mutual

¹⁴ Decisions Ede 2014 available online at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/besluiten-gs-2014/>.

relations. This committee apparently is intended to advise churches with regard to the role of women in practice. The decision is as follows:

Decision 4

a. To appoint a new committee “M/F in the Church” to investigate: working toward integration of Biblical education, the confessional norms, and the practice of the Reformed churches in connection with the roles and functions of women and men in their mutual relations, by

1. describing actively how and on what ground in Reformed churches men and women in various situations use their talents in the congregation;
2. noting in connection to this strong points, best practices, but also difficulties and points of controversy, giving a first assessment of these matters, and communicate this to the churches;
3. entering and remaining in conversation about these observations and considerations with especially the employees of the Theological University and the Praktijkcentrum;
4. stimulating and supporting the conversation about the calling and right of women also to use their talents in the churches, with a view toward a practice that reflects the manifold message of the Scripture, with special attention to:
 - a. Scriptural and obedient reading of the Bible;
 - b. the influence of society on the thought and actions of Christians;
 - c. the special and complementary differences between man and woman.
5. in all the aforementioned activity, specifically asking women about their various experiences and convictions.

b. If there are developments in the churches in this respect that converge sufficiently, so that it is responsible to make general decisions, to submit proposals to the next general Synod.

c. To communicate relevant proposals to sister churches, both national and international, through the Contact Committee.¹⁵

4. Decisions Regarding the Relationship With NRC Impacting M/F

Synod Ede made another pronouncement which impacts the matter of women in office, and that was the decision concerning relations with the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC). Synod Carman’s letter to Synod Ede noted that these discussions have become warmer over time mainly due to the RCN having moved in the direction of the NRC in regards to the method of Bible interpretation and to looser subscription to the confessions. The NRC churches have declared that all church offices may be opened to women at the discretion of local churches and two of the decisions of Synod Ede concerning the contact with the NRC are as follows (our translation):

- to declare that due to the agreement in discussions concerning hermeneutics the hindrance which existed because of the opening of the offices to women in the NRC has been removed;
- to continue the contact with the NRC and to proceed from talks to discussions with an eye to church unity.¹⁶

5. Observations Concerning the Role of Women in the Church

We are thankful that Synod Ede did not accept the hermeneutics applied in the report of the Deputies M/F in the Church. Sadly however, the conclusions of that report were not put aside. The matter of women in church office remains a wide open question in the RCN. In fact, it would seem to us after hearing the synod discussions that for some the minds have been made up and all that is needed yet is an acceptable Bible interpretation to fit the conclusions.

¹⁵ Full decision available online at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/besluiten-gs-2014/>.

¹⁶ Full Dutch language decision of Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity (DKE) available online at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/besluiten-gs-2014/>.

The new “M/F and Office” and “M/F in the Church” deputies have, among other things, been instructed to involve the sister churches in some or other way. At a meeting of the Subcommittee with Rev. K. Batteau of the BBK of the RCN in Burlington on June 1, 2015 he elucidated on Synod’s decision and suggested that the grounds above implied opportunity for us to have input in the work of these committees. He offered to send us the contacts for both committees.

However, the openness to a new and different Bible hermeneutic which permits the ordination of females to office has in principle been maintained by Synod Ede and the process of moving in the direction of women in church office continues. According to a news item on the RCN website,¹⁷ the RCN of Utrecht Noord-West has already decided that the position of men and women in the church is one of equality and the consistory has announced its intent to open all offices for women. The local classis has cautioned this church to take into consideration what was decided at Ede, but the church has simply affirmed that it will inform the other churches in classis how it intends to proceed on this decision.

As well, the decisions with regard to the relationship with the NRC mean that the Bible hermeneutic utilized by those churches to open the church offices to women has in principle already been accepted as fully within the bounds of Scripture by Synod Ede. This decision has resulted in warmer local relations with the NRC in spite of the official difference with respect to women in church offices. For example, the RCN of Dalfsen-Oost announced on its website¹⁸ that along with the RCN of Dalfsen-West and the NRC of Dalfsen it has decided (with the advice of the Deputies for Church Unity) that there are no substantial differences between the RCN and NRC and that therefore they recognize each other as churches on the same foundation and will work closely together. The Lord’s Supper celebrations are open to one another’s members and the pulpits are open to one another’s ministers. One of the signatories of the agreement was the chairman of the consistory of the NRC, a female deacon. The first combined worship service took place June 7, 2015.

Taking the above decisions and practical measures into account, the SRN does not see much positive reaction to Synod Carman’s letter of admonition in this regard. We may be given opportunity to have some input as yet, but a decision in principle has already been made when a new hermeneutic which permits women to serve in church offices is accepted as Biblical alongside the long standing Reformed hermeneutic which on the basis of the same Bible has long barred females from ecclesiastical office.

The letter addressed to the SRN by Synod Ede stated: “We understand from your letter that you do not believe that it is legitimate to allow for any discussion about women holding church offices... We believe that such an investigation is certainly possible in a Reformed church, as long as arguments are based on Scripture.”¹⁹ The SRN does not believe that the CanRC simply believe that it is wrong to allow for any discussion about or investigation into women in office in any way, as the letter states. What we do not believe is permissible in a church which wants to be Reformed is a new kind of hermeneutic by means of which one can interpret the clear and obvious directives in Scripture (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 14:34) to mean quite the opposite of what they plainly and clearly state. To assert with this kind of a hermeneutic that an investigation is then still possible on the basis of Scripture is a hollow statement. To accept this approach to the Bible will in time not only open wide the way for women in office but it would considerably change the way the Bible is applied to many other significant ethical issues (such as the roles of husband and wife in marriage, homosexual practice) and doctrinal truths (substitutionary atonement).

¹⁷ As reported on the official website of the GKv at <http://www.gkv.nl/intentie-ambt-open-voor-vrouw-gkv-utrecht-noordwest/>.

¹⁸ Reported on the official website of the GKv Dalfsen-Oost at <http://dalfsen-oost.gkv.nl/index.php/thema?start=5>.

¹⁹ Idem

It may be useful to recall the reaction of the representative of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ireland, Rev. Lukas, to the report of Deputies M/F at Synod Ede. We believe he was very perceptive in his words addressed to Synod Ede. He stated:

“Firstly, we would like to address the issue of the report’s approach towards sister churches abroad, which in our humble opinion, is both dismissive, and at times, condescending. Mr. Moderator, the cultural context in which you operate, is by no means unique to the Netherlands. Those of us who live and work in modern, western, liberal, democracies, have witnessed similar changes in society’s attitude towards the role of women, and like you, we feel the pressure of those changes.

However, as the report recognizes, none of your sister churches are considering admitting women to the teaching and ruling offices. But rather than seriously engaging with those Churches, their opinions seem to be regarded as largely irrelevant, and are explained away, as reflecting ‘*local culture*’ and as holding on to the ideas and norms of the past (Report Deputies M/F to Synod Ede, 1.2.1, page 6 & 6.1, page 28). In fact, Mr. Moderator, the only opinions that do seem worthy of consideration in this report, are the opinions of those churches that have already admitted women to the offices. Many of which, because of their loose approach to Confessional subscription, could not be members of ICRC (i.e. PCI, PKN, NGK, etc). Mr. Moderator, we confess that we find this approach to sister churches, baffling (Report Deputies 1.2.1 page 6; 6.1 page 28 for PCI, and 6.1 page 28 ‘*traditional migrant churches have a strong inclination to hold the Dutch culture of the previous century, also when it comes to the way that the Bible is read and applied*’).”

We believe that these words of a representative of a sister church of the RCN with which the Canadian Reformed Churches have no official contact expose the prevailing attitude of many in the leadership of the RCN toward the admonitions expressed by sisters churches, including the CanRC.

E. UNITY DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN THE RCN AND THE NRC (Mandate 4.6.5)

1. Background

The SRN report to Synod Carman 2013 gave an overview of how the discussions and the contacts between the RCN and the NRC has developed between Synod Ommen 1993 and Synod Harderwijk 2011. A remarkable change of direction occurred in the beginning of the 21st century, which was reflected in the decisions of Synod Zwolle-Zuid 2008. The report also indicated that the closer relationship between the RCN and the NRC is not the result of changes in the NRC. It sees no evidence that the NRC has become more committed to the reformed doctrine as summarized in the reformed confessions. This led to the conclusion that this growing mutual agreement, harmony and understanding must be the result of the fact that our sister churches are changing.

Despite appreciation for the growing recognition between the two church federations, Synod Harderwijk 2011 still identified two areas of concern that the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity (DKE) were instructed to address in their ongoing discussions with the NRC:

1. women in office [synod gave as ground that the NRC decision to open the offices for the sisters of the congregation was still an obstacle]
2. the manner in which the binding to the confessions functions in the NRC.

2. Report to Synod Ede 2014

The report of DKE to Synod Ede 2014 mentions the following concerning these issues.

1. The Deputies identified in connection with The VOP Report,²⁰ adopted by the NRC, three areas of concern: (a) Hermeneutics [the understanding of Scripture], (b) Exegesis of particular passages, and (c) Practical decisions. They have discussed and have come to agree with the NRC on the hermeneutical foundations, so they can now trust each other in the way they handle the Scriptures. The result is that, according to the Deputies, the existing differences in exegesis of particular passages (about the issue of women in office), as well as the practical differences, have become minor issues and are less relevant. The Deputies report that these exegetical and practical differences have not been discussed with the NRC. They do not want to look back, and discuss how in the past (in the VOP-report of 2004) the NRC argued in favour of women in office. They want the RCN and the NRC to move forward, based on the hermeneutical agreement, regardless of exegetical and/or practical differences.
2. They did not consider it possible to say more about the binding to the confessions in the NRC than they had said already in the past. Therefore the matter of the role of the confessions in the NRC, as well as the question how deviations from the confessions are being dealt with, have not been discussed.

3. Decisions Synod Ede

Synod Ede decided to receive with joy the report on the discussions with the NRC, as well as the results of these discussions. Synod also followed the recommendations of DKE concerning the relationship between the RCN and the NRC and decided the following:²¹

Decision 1: deals with a matter of admissibility

Decision 2:

Synod joyfully takes note of the report of the discussions with the Committee for Contact and Communication [contact en samenspreking] of the NRC and the results of these discussions, as formulated in the report, and in particular in the paper ‘Second Agreement’.

Ground:

The report gives evidence that the discussions about hermeneutics show harmony, which becomes visible in the papers ‘First’ and ‘Second Agreement’.

Decision 3:

Synod declares that, because of the agreement in the discussions about hermeneutics, the obstacle that was present because of the decision of the NRC to open the offices for the sisters of the congregation, has now been removed.

Ground:

Despite the difference in practical outcomes concerning women in office, it has become evident that as churches we can trust each other in the matter of acknowledging and accepting the authority of the Scriptures.

Decision 4:

²⁰ VOP stands for “Vrouwelijke Ouderlingen en Predikanten”. This is the document that led the NRC in 2004 to open all offices in the church for the sisters in the congregation.

²¹ Our committee is responsible for the English translation of the original Dutch.

Synod decides to continue the contacts with the NRC and move from general discussions to discussions aimed at coming to ecclesiastical unity.

Ground:

Since now the most important obstacle has been removed, the way is open for discussions about actual ecclesiastical unity.

Synod Ede also received an invitation from the National Assembly (= Landelijke Vergadering) of the NRC to publicly declare together on October 31st, 2016, that the two federations 'are in state of re-unification'. Although Synod was thankful for this letter, and expressed joy that 50 years after the sad split both federations have grown so close again, it was decided not to accept the invitation for such a joint announcement with a set date for re-unification. The ground was that it would skip the phase of "discussions aimed at coming to ecclesiastical unity".

4. Observations

Surprisingly, in its decisions Synod Ede ignored the obvious fact that DKE did not see the need to fulfil its mandate. In its discussions with the NRC they simply did not address the matter of the binding to the confessions within the NRC at all (the functioning of the Form for Subscription, as well as the question how deviations from the confessions are dealt with).

Synod joined the Deputies in announcing agreement between the RCN and the NRC with respect to 'hermeneutical foundations'. At the same time, they ignored or minimized exegetical differences that lead to practices which are diametrically opposed to each other. What one considers biblical is for others clearly in conflict with the Scriptures.

This can mean one of two things. Either it raises serious questions about this so-called harmony in hermeneutics, or the reality is that for both federations differences in exegesis and practice have indeed become insignificant when it comes to women in office.

Although the discussions aiming at merger are still to begin, there is a clear commitment. And with this emphasis on the agreement about the hermeneutical foundations for reading and understanding the Scriptures, it seems that ecclesiastical unity between the RCN and the NRC has become inevitable.

This will have major implications in particular in two areas.

- i. Merger of the RCN with the NRC will pave the way for accepting women in office in the RCN, regardless of the possible conclusions of the "committee to study the offices and m/f in the church" that was appointed by Synod Ede. Even if this committee would conclude that the offices in the church should not be open for the sisters of the congregation, we question whether this can have any practical effect, since there is no indication that the NRC is going to close the offices again for the sisters.
- ii. Merger of the RCN with the NRC, with its more casual attitude towards the reformed confessions, will also have an impact on the confessional integrity of the RCN. The protection of this 'confessional integrity' has become weaker already with the introduction of the new subscription form in the RCN. More about this form can be found in the section in this report on the new C.O. of the RCN. An ambivalent attitude towards the confessions will only be strengthened and become more outspoken in case of a merger of the two federations.

F. REVISION OF THE RCN CHURCH ORDER (Mandate 4.6.6)

1. Background

General Synod Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 of the RCN appointed a Committee with the mandate to prepare a thorough revision of the existing CO at that time. The mandate was continued by General Synod Zwolle-Zuid in 2008. The Committee presented a report with a first complete draft to General Synod Harderwijk in 2011/2012. This Synod discussed the proposal extensively, and was able to present the first reading of a revised CO to the churches. Synod Harderwijk continued the Committee with the mandate to receive final input from the classes, and present the revised CO in second reading to the next general synod. The Committee presented its report with the final draft version of the proposed revised CO to General Synod Ede, 2014. On May 24, 2014 Synod adopted the revised CO, without making any significant changes in the proposed draft. The decision was made that the new CO will be operative per July 1, 2015.

2. Overall Impression

In the last 100 years or so, the old CO of Dort has been adjusted once in a while and gone through minor changes in the RCN. But that was a matter of patching up the wear and tear of a 400 years old document, so to speak. That CO was basically the same as the current CO of the CanRC. This time it has been a major overhaul. In this revised version the CO of the RCN has been thoroughly re-written and restructured. The result shows some interesting, and sometimes, significant changes. Although our overall impression is positive, we will come back on a few areas of concern. The renewed CO is a clear and well-structured document, most of the time written in contemporary, understandable language.

In general the language tends to be more “legal language” than it used to be in the old CO of Dort. This may have to do with the legal position of the churches in the Dutch legislation with regard to religious institutions. It may also be the effect of having two lawyers on the Committee. Most importantly, however – in general the revised CO continues to reflect the essential principles of Reformed Church polity, which also characterized the previous edition, which, as mentioned before, was basically a patched-up version of the old CO of Dort.

Interestingly, there is on the one hand a tendency to include more centralizing rules. This reflects the (perceived) need for a general synod to be more ‘facilitating’ or ‘give more direction’ when it comes to things that over time change and develop in the church (in Dutch the hard to translate expression: *het aansturen van nieuwe ontwikkelingen*). On the other hand the revised CO shows more flexibility, with rules that are more open-ended that seem to give room for local experiments.

We are grateful that overall the revised CO tries to maintain the uniquely reformed character of the CO of Dort in the fine balance between being anti-hierarchical and anti-independentistic at the same time.

3. Some Specific Observations

1. In this major overhaul the content of almost all the articles of the old CO have been retained. They have been re-formulated, taken apart and re-assembled differently; sometimes the material has been put in a different order and a different place in the CO – but most of it is still there. Some minor articles have disappeared, since they were considered outdated, and a few others have been omitted, because they would fit better in local or classical regulations.
2. The most significant changes are not found in what has disappeared, but in what has been added, and sometimes in the manner in which material has been re-written. We note the following shifts.

- a. The task of the minister has not changed, but his terms of employment are more specified and spelled out: conditions for part-time ministry; the legal relationship between him and his consistory. The churches will develop also a joint framework to provide for the minister in conformity with the standards accepted in society. The minister can also be ‘laid off’ temporarily.
 - b. Non-office bearers (men and women) can be “officially” employed (“appointed”) for pastoral or diaconal work in the congregation, either as volunteers, or as paid employees.
 - c. The separate responsibilities of elders and deacons have been more defined. This results in less combined meetings and less consultation: the consistory meets with the deacons at least twice per year and the deacons will give account of their work to the consistory only once per year. In this way the deacons will be much less involved in the leadership of the congregation. This also shows in the process for nomination of office bearers: the consistory decides the suitability for offices after consulting the deacons.
 - d. It appears that on the one hand this revised CO shows more centralizing tendencies, in adding to the CO more detailed rules. For instance:
 - the preparation for, and procedure of public profession of faith;
 - conditions for acknowledging baptism in other Christian communities;
 - church-membership and church-boundaries;
 - handling withdrawals;
 - more details for preparation for and solemnizing marriages;
 - the instruction for the classes to appoint for each church a neighbouring church;
 - the establishment of “ecclesiastical organisations” or “institutions”;
 - procedures for ecumenical contact and cooperation with other churches in The Netherlands;
 - regulations for matters of management and administration in local churches.

That does not mean that all these things are completely new as such. Quite often it is a matter of regulating practices in the churches that were generally accepted already, without being written in the CO. Perhaps it is helpful that now these things are clearly outlined in the CO, but it often seems unnecessary over-regulation. This could restrict the practical freedom of the local church to regulate its own matters.
 - e. On the other hand – this revised CO seems to take a step back, so to speak, in other areas, to leave more freedom and flexibility with the local churches – in particular in matters of liturgy and worship.
 - f. The whole chapter about “Ecclesiastical Discipline” has been drastically re-written, and is now more detailed and also re-structured with more clarity than it used to be. But there is nothing new here either, and the clear structure and language will serve consistories well.
 - g. In the section about the major assemblies it is noteworthy that the number of regional synods (*particuliere synode*) has been reduced from 9 to 4. The general synod is to decide which area is covered by each regional synod. Furthermore, there will only be a very limited role left for the regional synods. Besides electing delegates for the general synod, the only task is to act as “court of appeal” for personal appeals.
 - h. The old Art. 31 and 33 have been thoroughly re-written. This has resulted in a fairly lengthy chapter with detailed instructions for a proper appeal process. For most of the scenarios the thinking expressed in the old Art. 31 and 33 is still present, but it is basically a whole new chapter. One aspect in this section warrants a more detailed analysis (see point 3).
3. The history of Reformed Church Polity makes clear that Art.31 of the CO of Dort, as it has functioned throughout the centuries, protects the biblical principle that we must obey God more than man. This means that no human authority in the church can bind your conscience. This makes it an important article. Conflicts and difficulties in the church were often made worse when hierarchical structures tried to force local churches to obey man rather than God.

Did this biblical principle survive the revision of the CO in the RCN? Chapter F deals with the legal status and the implementation of ecclesiastical decisions. What remained the same is that the legal status of a decision does not depend on the formal approval of the local consistory. Art. F72.1 reflects the old Art. 31 rule that *whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote, shall be considered settled and binding*.....

But in Art. 31 there was still the “unless.....” clause. This has to do with the right of appeal. It is positive that in the revised CO this appeal process as well as the opportunity for revision of decisions of a general synod are spelled out more clearly than it used to be. However – this “unless.....” clause also addresses the question: what to do with a decision of an ecclesiastical assembly in case an individual or consistory decides to appeal this decision? Art. F73.2 stipulates that submitting an appeal against a decision, does not suspend the implementation of this decision.

Here is the re-wording of the “unless....” in old Art.31: *someone cannot be required to implement a decision, if this would bring him personally, in his conscience, in conflict with God’s Word* (Art. F72.4). This makes sense; submission to God’s Word overrules everything. But if this is true for an individual – what about a consistory? What if a consistory requests revision of a decision of a major assembly, but in the meantime is convinced that implementing this decision would be in conflict with God’s Word? Does the local church have the freedom not to implement such a decision as long as the appeal or revision has not been dealt with?

Here the revised CO is silent. To be sure – this was not explicitly stated in the old Art. 31 either. But neither did Art. 31 single out such a rule for individuals. It simply says that “a decision is settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with.....”, without indicating who can apply this “unless....” clause. Perhaps one could assume that what applies to individual members, by analogy applies to consistories as well. But it does not say so. On the contrary – the fact that individuals are specifically mentioned here, makes it questionable if, in case of a serious conflict [think of a decision that women can be ordained as office bearers (!)] a synod would agree with that interpretation.

At this significant point the new CO of the RCN appears to have a hierarchical overtone, and fails to respect the local consistory as the highest assembly in the church – directly accountable to Jesus Christ as the only Head of the church.

4. Throughout the revised CO there are many references to “general regulations” to be applied. Those “general regulations” outline in detail specific procedures in various areas. Most of these “general regulations” have been adopted by Synod Ede 2014/2015, but three of those could not be finalized before the closing date of this synod, and will be prepared for the next general synod, in 2017.
5. The revised CO does not stipulate that office bearers must be male. This is visibly left open, pending the result of the assigned studies by Synod Ede. Right now Art. B6.5 says: “Ambt m/v: gereserveerd”. [Office M/W: on hold]
6. Art.B7 stipulates that the office bearers are bound to the doctrine of the Bible, as summarized in the confessions, and that – upon entering into office – they will confirm this by signing the subscription form (Dutch: het bindingsformulier). The old subscription in use for this purpose was pretty well identical with the form in use in the CanRC. Synod Ede adopted a thoroughly rewritten and significantly different version. In our view it is also a considerably weaker version.

- a. Instead of declaring that *the whole doctrine contained in the 3 Forms of Unity fully agrees with the Word of God*, the new declaration is *to agree with the doctrine of the Bible, as confessed by the RCN in the 3 Forms of Unity*.
This fundamentally changes the role of the confessions in maintaining and protecting the true doctrine. There is no longer a direct, but an indirect binding to the confessions.
- b. Instead of the promise to take steps if *we would disagree with this doctrine or any part of it*, it now reads that we will take steps, *if we would experience a difference between the doctrine of the Bible and the content of the confessions*.
The question is not: is there a difference, but: do I experience a difference? The emphasis is on the subjective experience of the office bearer, and not on objective observations (by myself or perhaps by others).
- c. There is no longer a promise not to publish, preach or teach an opinion that disagrees with the doctrine of the confessions, and neither does the form mention the penalty of suspension as consequence of unwillingness to submit to the judgment of the church. This undermines the seriousness of teaching and preaching false doctrine.

The motivation for these changes was that the tone of the old subscription form was considered to be too negative. It was felt to foster an atmosphere of suspicion, instead of promoting loyalty and mutual trust. This revised form is seen as much more encouraging and positive. With this revised form of subscription the RCN does not adequately take to heart the many serious warnings in Scripture against false teaching and doctrinal errors. This is unfortunate, especially in light of the various concerns about developments in the RCN, expressed throughout this report

4. Conclusion

The revised CO of the RCN can be seen as a contemporary rendition of the old CO of Dort. Expressions and formulations we are all very familiar with have changed, and the set-up is very different. The claim is that this document continues to reflect the centuries-old principles of the church polity that has been applied in the Reformed churches since the 16th century. In many respects we can confirm this. However, some of the observations made in this section of our report, in particular in 3 (about old Art. 31) and 6 (subscription), are reason for concern.

G. RCN PARTICIPATION IN “NATIONAL SYNOD OF DORT” (Mandate 4.6.7)

1. Background

In the SRN report to Synod Carman 2013 we reported on the RCN’s participation in what is called the “National Synod”. This is not a major assembly of a particular church federation or denomination. This National Synod was set up and presented as a ‘discussion forum’ for Protestant churches in The Netherlands. Representatives of a number of Protestant churches meet each other and discuss matters of faith that are of common concern.

2. Synod Ede

In their report to General Synod Ede 2014/2015 the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity (DKE) explain how they have been involved in some of the activities of this National Synod, also called “Protestant Forum”. One of these activities was the effort to start discussions about faith in many different places in The Netherlands.

The Deputies have also participated in a second meeting of this National Synod, which was held in October 2013, in Dordrecht, the location of the well-known Synod of Dordrecht 1618/1619. The purpose

of these meetings is to prepare together for the commemoration of 400 years National Synod 1618/1619 – 2018/2019.

General Synod Ede 2014/2015 decided to instruct the Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity:

To continue to follow the developments around the National Synod/ Protestant Forum and, where possible, to participate in the activities that are being organized, with due observance of the own identity and responsibility of the Reformed Churches.

In the grounds for this instruction Synod states that the purpose of this National Synod is to listen to each other and speak with each other as churches, from the point of departure that we belong to Christ. Synod Ede also re-iterates the value of such contacts with other Protestant churches, without the goal of striving for ecclesiastical unity.

3. Observations

Perhaps one could defend the idea that speaking with one another as Protestant churches without any commitment, while at the same time carefully maintaining your own identity, won't do much harm. But you wonder what the benefits of such conversations would be. And the unguarded approach would still be reason for concern.

However..... in early June of 2015 the steering-committee in charge of organizing the National Synod, revealed its real goal: a federative bond of Protestant churches and faith-communities, with participating churches opening each other's pulpits for each other's ministers, and allowing each other's members to participate in each other's Lord's Supper celebrations. The ultimate goal is then the establishment of one Protestant Catholic Church.

If the next Synod of the RCN would decide that participation in the National Synod within this context should continue, the churches will be getting involved in a liberal ecumenical movement where lies and truth are both acceptable, beside each other. This will seriously undermine, and eventually destroy the Reformed identity of the RCN.

H. SONGS FOR WORSHIP (Mandate 4.6.8)

1. Background

Synod Carman also instructed our subcommittee to monitor the developments regarding the application of Art. 67 of the RCN Church Order. This article is (was....!) very similar to Art. 55 of the CanRC Church Order, and reads: "In the worship services the Psalms will be sung in a rhymed version adopted by general synod and further the Hymns approved by the general synod".

This part of our mandate was already a daunting instruction, given the variety of hymnals and songbooks from which selections of songs have been proposed during the last years, over and above the Psalms and Hymns in the existing *Gereformeerde Kerkboek [Reformed Churchbook]*. Over the years this had become a rather convoluted process in our Dutch sister churches. This process ended with the decision of Synod Ede 2014 to accept the new Protestant songbook in The Netherlands (*Liedboek – Zingen en bidden in huis en kerk*) for use in the churches. This songbook has an enormous variety of over 1000 songs, which makes "monitoring the developments" in this area even more difficult.

But the more recent developments, when it comes to music and singing in the worship services in the RCN, make it virtually impossible to fulfil this mandate. As we mention elsewhere in this report, Synod

Ede 2014/2015 adopted a drastically revised Church Order. In this new CO the old Art.67 as such has disappeared. This does not mean that there is nothing left about Psalms and Hymns.

In the new Church Order, Art. C37.2 says: “The churches abide by the general regulation for the worship services.” One would then expect something about music and singing in the worship services in such a general regulation.

2. Synod Ede

At this point in time the problem is that this “general regulation for the worship services” is one of the regulations that Synod Ede 2014/2015 did not finalize. This one will be dealt with and completed by the next general Synod in 2017.

But we do not have to wait until 2017 to learn how the rule of old Art. 67 is going to function in the churches. In fact Synod Ede 2014/2015 already abolished what was stipulated in old Art. 67, when it decided to leave the responsibility for the choice of songs which can be sung in the worship services with the local consistory. One of the grounds was that consistories, which are considered capable of judging the preaching of ministers, must also be able to judge what can be sung according to the standard of Scripture and the confession.

3. Observations

It is regrettable that the rule of (old) Art. 67 has disappeared. Given the total picture of the developments in the Dutch sister churches, there is reason for the concern that there will be no safeguard against songs that reflect and promote unbiblical teachings. And what you sing is what you are going to believe.

Since (old) Art. 67 of the RCN CO no longer functions, we suggest that if Synod Dunnville decides to appoint a new sub-committee for contact with the Dutch sister churches, this instruction should not be part of the mandate.

I. RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING RELATIONS WITH THE RCN

We recommend to synod that we restrict our sister relationship with the RCN. This more limited relationship should be understood as follows:

1. Rule numbers 4 and 5 for Ecclesiastical Fellowship which deal with the automatic acceptance of attestations from the RCN and the privilege of the pulpit for RCN ministers are to be considered to be null and void. Consistories are urged to exercise due diligence to ensure that those whose attestations from the RCN are accepted are sound in doctrine and conduct. Should a church desire to call a minister from the RCN, the concurring advice of classis is required before such a call is issued. In the case of visiting ministers from the RCN, consistories are urged to exercise careful diligence and should be fully assured of the sound doctrine and the godly life of the minister involved. Furthermore, consistories should advise their members who are travelling to the Netherlands not to automatically join a RCN congregation but to be discerning where they worship.
2. If the next Synod of the RCN makes a clear statement indicating that these churches are returning to acknowledging the full authority of Scripture and show that commitment by as yet acting on our concerns expressed in the letter of admonition from Synod Carman 2013 regarding the TUK, women in office, and other matters such as homosexuality mentioned in our reports, the normal sister relationship will resume. If however the next Synod of the RCN maintains the present

course of deformation then by that very fact this Synod will break the relationship of the RCN with the CanRC and the CanRC will consider the sister relationship to have ended.

We recommend that we restrict our sister relationship with the RCN for the following reasons:

1. Since Synod Burlington, 2010 (Art. 86), the CanRC have expressed their concerns with official decisions of the RCN relating to the TUK and urged the RCN as yet to deal with these concerns. Synod Burlington also noted, on the basis of the report submitted to it, their concerns about biblical hermeneutics functioning in the RCN (Art. 86). During the subsequent years, the CanRC subcommittee has continued to communicate similar concerns on behalf of the CanRC and these concerns have been summarized in a letter of admonition by Synod Carman 2013. But the RCN has refused to act upon these concerns and the point has now been reached that the RCN considers these matters finished, as is evident from the discussions leading up to their decisions on these issues (*Acta Ede*, Hoofdstuk 7, Artikel 7-24, pp. 68-70). The CanRC have now exhausted all the means available to them to warn the RCN on these concerns. By officially tolerating professors who hold unbiblical views the RCN has de facto accepted such views as legitimate at the TUK and within the churches. Such an acceptance is intolerable for the CanRC and it will not enable our sister churches to retain their Reformed character.

2. One consequence of the above is that in an official publication of the TUK on homosexuality, no consistent clear biblical guidelines are given. There is however much talk about the current culture and the need for the church to accommodate practising homosexuals as much as possible. The lack of direction given in such an official publication will lead to confusion and conflicting approaches on this issue in the churches. The CanRC do not want such views to become accepted in their midst. Other examples include the reports *Male/Female in the Church* and the appointment of professors against whom there were serious, legitimate objections.

3. In the drive for unity with the NRC, the decision has in effect been made to open the ecclesiastical offices to women, in spite of the fact that a committee which is to investigate this matter has been appointed. This unbiblical decision of essentially opening the offices to women and accommodating to current culture will have serious consequences for the RCN. It is a blatant example of the demands of the current worldly culture overriding the clear norms of Scripture. If that can happen in this area, why not in an area such as homosexuality? Again the CanRC are not able to tolerate a sister relationship with churches holding such views.

Your committee is recommending a restriction and thus a devaluation of our relationship and not a complete end to our relationship with the RCN at this time for the following reasons:

1. Our obligation to help each other as sister churches necessitates that we remain available to give our input on the matter of women in office. Synod Ede has decided that the new committee on “Male/Female and Office” is to investigate “what the opinions are within sister churches concerning the implementation of the offices of minister, elder, and deacon” (*Acta Ede*, Hoofdstuk 3, Article 3-22). The CanRC are duty bound to give such input and advice.
2. There are concerned office-bearers and members within the RCN who would welcome our input into this issue. It will be an encouragement to them.
3. By adopting a restriction of the sister-church relationship, the CanRC will send a very strong signal to the RCN that the concerns noted in our contact with them are weighty and would spell the end of our relationship if no change of direction is noted.

Rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship

1. The churches shall assist each other in the maintenance, defence and promotion of the Reformed faith in doctrine, church polity, discipline, and liturgy, and be watchful for deviations.
2. The churches shall inform each other of the decisions taken by their broadest assemblies, if possible by sending each other their Acts or Minutes and otherwise, at least by sending the decisions relevant to the respective churches (if possible, in translation)
3. The churches shall consult each other when entering into relations with third parties.
4. The churches shall accept one another's attestations or certificates of good standing, which also means admitting members of the respective churches to the sacraments upon presentation of that attestation or certificate.
5. The Churches shall open their pulpits for each other's ministers in agreement with the rules adopted in the respective churches.
In exercising these relations, the churches shall strive to implement also the following:
6. When major changes or additions are being considered to the confessions, church government or liturgy, the churches shall be informed in order that as much consultation can take place as possible before a final decision is taken.
7. The churches shall receive each other's delegates at their broadest assemblies and invite them to participate as much as local regulations permit.
(*Acts Synod Lincoln 1992, Art. 50, IV B 1-7*)

II. THE REFORMED CHURCHES (RESTORED) (RCR)

1. Background

The RCR is a federation of churches which came into being in 2003/2004 when the first groups of people left the RCN. The official Dutch name of this federation is De Gereformeerde Kerken (hersteld). More information can be found on their official website: <http://www.gereformeerde-kerken-hersteld.nl/>. The RCR had on a number of occasions approached the RCN with the request for further dialogue regarding the reason for their *liberation* in 2003. The RCN did not respond to these requests with any substantive suggestions other than that the RCR were wrong in leaving and must first return. The RCN has now informed the RCR that it is no longer interested in any further correspondence or contact.

Since our last meeting with the brothers of the RCR in 2012 several developments have taken place. Rev. E. Heres and his congregation at Dalfsen (approx. 90 members) have joined the bond of the RCR churches. There is also a program of Training for the Ministry. Rev. C. Koster and Rev. M. Dijkstra completed their theological studies and have been ordained as ministers. Currently the federation consists of 12 congregations with 5 ministers. Efforts are continuing to reach out to others. In different places there are talks with the Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland (RCNvv). Moreover, informative evenings are being organized for the concerned in the RCN.

2. Contact

The subcommittee had opportunity to meet with 4 Deputies BBK of the RCR on May 15, 2014 in Hasselt, the Netherlands. A number of matters of concern by the respective churches had our attention at that meeting. We were able to speak about these somewhat difficult issues in a brotherly way. We

questioned the brothers if the RCR still considers the CanRC a church on the wrong path and one which Reformed believers need to be concerned about. In response the RCR brothers expressed disappointment that Synod Carman 2013 did not respond to their letter to that body in which they had outlined their perceptions of the concerns. At the same time they were happy to note that there is more understanding now for the RCR and its struggles leading to the liberation from the RCN. However, if the CanRC maintains its declaration that the RCR is not far from being schismatic, they would find it difficult to see any use having to defend and explain the grounds for their liberation in 2003. We were able to explain that the opinion of Synod Carman and the churches is mainly based on the fact that RCR has a sister-church relationship with the Liberated Reformed Church in Abbotsford (LRCA). As long as this relationship is maintained closer contact between the CanRC and the RCR is impossible. This matter received considerable attention but we could not come to a common understanding.

Synod Groningen 2014 of the RCR

Much of our information has been gleaned from official reports and press releases published in the *Bazuin*, the official publication of the churches. In October 2015 we also received a cordial letter from the deputies BBK of the RCR informing us of the mandate given these deputies by Synod Groningen.

In its report to this synod the deputies BBK of the RCR reported on their work. Synod dealt with a number of proposals that could affect a possible future relationship. A study committee of 5 men had reviewed the Westminster Confession as to its faithfulness to Scripture. This resulted in a majority and minority report. The majority report compiled by 4 deputies concluded that 4 sections of the WC: covenant, church, assurance of faith, and church government, are not in agreement with Scripture and the Belgic Confession. Therefore the majority proposed not to accept the WC as a common confession in contacts with foreign churches. The other deputy in his minority report pointed out that the Lord in His church in different countries and peoples has followed different ways. The history of the Dutch churches is different than those in foreign countries. The 4 sections mentioned by the majority should be subject to further discussion in contacts with Presbyterian churches. The proposals of the majority and minority reports were not accepted and the reports are received as study reports.

A proposal to review the decision to enter into a sister church relationship with LRC Abbotsford was not adopted by the synod. The separation of the LRCA from the CanRC continues to be regarded as warranted. The CanRC continue to be portrayed as churches on a wrong path due to the relations with other churches whose practices are deemed unbiblical. Concerns had been expressed, however, that the deputies BBK had based the recommendation to enter into a sister church relationship with the LRCA on one-sided information. The deputies were therefore instructed to as yet take up contact with the Abbotsford CanRC in order to hear its consistory on the matters that led to the departure of those now being part of the LRCA. With regard to the CanRC the deputies were given the following mandate:

- a. to continue the contacts with the CanRC provided that room will be given within the CanRC, to discuss objections against internal ecclesiastical developments, that are associated with the liberation of the LRC.
- b. to encourage the CanRC to discontinue their sister-church relationship with the GKv, due to the ongoing unscriptural developments.
- c. to contact the CanRC at Abbotsford to hear their side of the matter concerning the liberation of Abbotsford. The brothers of the LRC Abbotsford shall be invited to be present as listeners at this discussion.

3. Conclusion and Recommendation

The sub-committee senses a difference of opinions growing within the RCR regarding its view of the Church and the world-wide church gathering work of our Saviour. Since the RCR is still a young federation with a small number of members, different views might be more pronounced. Perhaps as more concerned RCN members join this may abate somewhat. We believe it to be important to maintain some form of contact with the RCR and to continue monitoring developments within this federation even though they have maintained the relationship with the LRCA.

III. THE REFORMED CHURCHES NETHERLANDS (RCNvv)

1. Background

To help us become better acquainted with this federation, we received a *Presentation* in which the RCNvv provided detailed information about the Biblical and Confessional foundation, composition and history of their churches. It is available in the Dutch language on the federation's website: (<http://www.gereformeerdekerkennederland.nl>). From it we learn: "The Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland (GKN), without the insert 'in' and without further postal or informal addition, is the name of the denomination as decided on November 26, 2009. A federation of local Reformed churches who, from the Protestant Reformation, through the secession of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1834, the Doleantie in 1886, the Union in 1892 and the Liberation in 1944, 2003 and subsequent years want to live in 2013, only according to the Holy Scripture". Because of its small size and resulting limitations in the church order, the federation was initially called a provisional federation (voorlopig verband). This term is obsolete but in order to be able to differentiate the various reformed churches in the Netherlands, however, we will continue to use the addition vv.)

2. Contact

The SRN also had an opportunity to meet with 4 Deputies BBK of the RCNvv on May 14, 2014 in Ede. Present on behalf of the RCNvv were Rev. E. Hoogendoorn, Rev. L. Heres, br. J. de Bruine, and br. J. van Wijk. Rev. Heres had recently been ordained as the third minister in this small federation that currently consists of nine congregations. One congregation (Kampen) had separated itself from the RCN(lib) after the minister, Rev. Hoogendoorn, had been set aside through some unusual maneuvering by classis and consistory. Two congregations came out of the RCR. The others were local developments of individual concerned members from within the RCN(lib). In general, the meeting was a positive experience. The brothers of the RCNvv freely answered the questions presented to them and acknowledged that in the past not all things were necessarily done in a church politically correct manner. A new church publication, *De Weerklank*, had recently gotten off the ground. They expressed a commitment to work together with the RCR - should they be willing - in order to seek unity with them. At this time there still appear to be some obstacles. The brothers informed us that there have also been discussions with deputies of Reformed churches in Australia (FRCA) and South Africa (FRCSA). The RCNvv have asked the VGKSA to continue this contact. The RCNvv also requested the CanRC to be positive about maintaining a form of contact.

Subsequent to the May, 2014 meeting, we have learned that Dr. J. Douma has left the RCN and joined the RCNvv. In his booklet *Afscheid van de Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)* he justified his separation from the RCN and explained his view of the RCNvv as a faithful and Reformed church and milder in tone than the RCR. He also expressed in the booklet his feeling that the RCR presents itself as being the only true church. Another more recent development is that at its National Assembly of September 26, 2015, in response to the invitation of the RCR, it was unanimously decided to enter into exploratory dialogue with

the RCR. Finally, we also ascertained that in October, 2015, Rev. J.R. Visser of the RCN in Dronten-Noord accepted a call to the RCNvv in Zwolle.

3. Conclusion and Recommendation

The subcommittee appreciates the difficulties that may exist in a small federation as well as the need for a soundboard. Further encouragement to seek unity with the RCR and with concerned RCN members will be valuable. Therefore the sub-committee proposes that some form of contact be maintained with the RCNvv.

Rev. J. DeGelder
Rev. J. Moesker
G. J. Nordeman
Dr. C. Van Dam