

REPORT OF THE COORDINATORS FOR THE COMMITTEE FOR CHURCH UNITY (CCU)

To: General Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019

Esteemed brothers,

Mandate

General Synod Dunnville 2016 decided the following:

To reappoint the CCU-C, adding two additional coordinators, and mandating them:

1. To seek ways to facilitate the work of building unity on the local level, as well as visiting churches and classes of the URCNA, particularly in the United States;
2. To discuss with CERCU how to make progress towards federative unity should Synod Wyoming mandate CERCU to pursue this;
3. To monitor any developments in the URCNA with respect to ‘doctrinal affirmations.’
(*Acts of General Synod Dunnville 2016, Article 77*)

Activities

1. On June 1, 2016, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C.J. VanderVelde attended a breakfast meeting consisting of Niagara-area CanRC and URCNA ministers in Jordan, Ontario to discuss the decisions of Synod Dunnville 2016 pertaining to unity efforts as well as to discuss what was on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016 of the URCNA pertaining to unity efforts. We discussed navigating impasses and envisioning a future.
2. Rev. den Hollander and Rev. VanderVelde attended a few days of Synod Wyoming 2016, which was held from June 14-17, 2016 in Wyoming, Michigan. Rev. VanderVelde brought fraternal greetings on behalf of the CanRC; see appendix #1 for the address. See appendix #2 for an article published in *Clarion* about Synod Wyoming.
3. The four coordinators met for the first time after Synod Dunnville 2016 on September 9, 2016 for a meeting together at Binbrook, Ontario. At this meeting, we reviewed our mandate as coordinators for the CCU, as given by Synod Dunnville 2016. We also reviewed the decisions of Synod Wyoming 2016 and how they impact our work as coordinators. Moreover, we discussed how to deal with invitations from URCNA Classes to send a fraternal delegate to their Classes. We decided that if invited we would ask whether there would be opportunity to engage the matter of church unity in some kind of formal way at Classis so that our visit as coordinators would be worthwhile and within the framework of our mandate as coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity. Otherwise it can best be left to an area CanRC Classis to send a fraternal delegate to bring greetings. We decided that we would not go merely to bring greetings. We also agreed that we do not want to take away the role of area CanRC Classes in having contact with URCNA Classes. Furthermore, we discussed what points to raise in our meeting

with CERCU at the NAPARC meeting to be held on Nov 8-10 at Pompton Plains, NJ. Finally, we discussed the letter received from the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) about facilitating communication between the various inter-church relations committees functioning within the CanRC.

4. Rev. VanderVelde attended Classis Southwestern Ontario Sept 21, 2016, held at Sheffield, Ontario, as a fraternal delegate from Classis Central Ontario and used the opportunity to also bring greetings from the entire federation as a coordinator for the CCU.
5. Several of the coordinators had opportunity to fill the pulpit in URCNA churches far from home, and even to serve in an interim ministry in a URCNA congregation. Rev. Slomp travelled to PEI to fill the pulpit on June 19 and 26, 2016, and to Abbotsford, BC to fill the pulpit on July 3 and 10, 2016. Rev. den Hollander served as interim minister at PEI from Sept 15-Oct 24, 2016, performing many of the regular ministerial duties, including preaching, attending Council meetings, and providing pastoral care.
6. All four coordinators travelled to Pompton Plains, New Jersey for a meeting with CERCU on Nov 9, 2016 held in conjunction with NAPARC. This was the first meeting with our counterparts after Synod Dunnville 2016 of the CanRC and Synod Wyoming 2016 of the URCNA, and served as an opportunity to introduce the two new coordinators – Rev. Pol and Rev. Slomp – to CERCU as well as to discuss together the decisions of these two Synods as they relate to our efforts toward church unity. We raised the following points. (1) We indicated that we have a mandate from Synod Dunnville 2016 to pursue church unity with the URCNA and asked whether CERCU would be willing to help us carry out our mandate. Since Synod Wyoming 2016 still did encourage the Classes and churches to continue to engage the matter of church unity, we asked whether the CERCU reps of the various Classes would help us come to the various Classes and churches to address the matter of church unity. We indicated that as coordinators for church unity we would not come to Classes only to deliver fraternal greetings, but we would come if there would be opportunity on the agenda to engage the matter of church unity in some kind of formal way so that our visit as coordinators would be worthwhile and within the framework of our mandate as coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity; we indicated that otherwise it would be best if an area CanRC Classis would send a fraternal delegate to bring greetings. This was received well by the members of CERCU, and they would present this in their reports as liaisons to their respective Classes. (2) We inquired about the possibility of coordinating pulpit exchanges between CanRC ministers and URCNA churches in areas where there are no local CanRC churches. This idea too was received well by the members of CERCU, and they would present this in their reports as liaisons to their respective Classes. (3) We asked once again whether a colloquium on Reformed church polity could be held at a subsequent URCNA Synod, considering that the colloquium on the covenant held at Synod Visalia 2014 was so successful in clearing up misconceptions. The members of CERCU did not support the suggested colloquium on church polity since they thought that the matter of church polity was still too controversial among the URCNA and it would be counterproductive for the pursuit of unity. (4) We raised the matter of damage done to the CanRC reputation by the charge of “hierarchy” levelled against CanRC church polity as reflected in the criticisms of the PJCO in, for example, the overture from Classis Pacific Northwest against the PJCO which went to Synod Wyoming 2016. We asked

whether CERCU would be willing to help clear our name in this matter and undo the damage to our reputation. (5) We presented a copy of the *Acts* of Synod Dunnville 2016 to CERCU.

7. We did not meet with CERCU at the occasion of the 2017 NAPARC meetings because CERCU was pressed for time due to various meetings with different denominations while at NAPARC, and because we mutually agreed that there were not enough substantial things to discuss at that time which would warrant the expense of travelling there.
8. Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. W.B. Slomp represented the CanRC as fraternal delegates at Synod Wheaton 2018 of the URCNA held June 11-15, 2018 in Wheaton, Illinois. They were there for the duration of Synod Wheaton. Rev. Slomp delivered fraternal greetings to Synod on behalf of the CanRC; see appendix #3 for the address.
9. On August 2, 2018, Rev. den Hollander and Rev. VanderVelde met over breakfast with Rev. John Bouwers and Rev. Steve Swets, both members of the URCNA's CERCU, at their invitation. The discussion focused on how best to move forward in our relationship as churches. Rev. den Hollander and Rev. VanderVelde expressed the willingness of the CCU to meet with the entire CERCU at the occasion of the upcoming NAPARC in Philadelphia, PA in November 2018.
10. At the time of writing this report, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. W.B. Slomp were scheduled to meet with CERCU at the occasion of the upcoming NAPARC meeting at Philadelphia in November 2018.

Other Developments

Classis Manitoba of the CanRC was held concurrently with Classis Central US of the URCNA on April 3-4, 2017 at Christ Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Most of the important parts of the respective Classes were conducted in joint session. Each Classis also met separately to deal with other points on the agenda. This was the first time in the history of the CanRC and URCNA relationship that such an event took place. It is another step forward in our relationship.

Classis Niagara of the CanRC also did something similar with Classis Ontario-East of the URCNA on March 8, 2018 when both Classes followed each other and were held at the same place so that delegates to each Classis could witness the proceedings of the other. This was done in the Wellandport URC building.

A concurrent Classis was scheduled to be held on September 19, 2018 between Classis Ontario West of the CanRC and Classis Southwestern Ontario of the URCNA, but this was postponed for another time because of serious internal matters on the agenda of Classis Ontario West of the CanRC.

Synod Wyoming 2016 on Unity Matters

There were three important overtures on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016 in relation to unity efforts. In one way or another, these overtures would significantly slow down the unity process, if not halt it altogether for the foreseeable future.

First, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Central US April 13-14, 2015 seeking to change the mandate of CERCUC. The mandate of CERCUC currently reads: "With a view toward complete church unity, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." The overture proposed that it read: "With a desire to pursue a broader unity with churches that share a common confession and faith, and acknowledging the desirability of union with churches of like faith and practice, where feasible, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." In explanation, Ground #6 stated: "The current terminology *'With a view toward complete church unity...'* appears to be used by the committee in a way which seems to keep driving toward organic union with the Canadian Reformed Churches without recognizing differences in like-faith, like-practice and the desire of churches in our federation to acknowledge them as a true church but not proceed further at this point."

Synod Wyoming 2016 decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that "While appreciating the concerns raised by the overture, the current language of 'with a view toward complete unity' has provided encouragement in our ecumenical pursuit which has borne good fruit." Another ground reads, "Some of the grounds of the overture argue against an application of the mandate rather than against the mandate itself and do not, therefore, necessitate changing the mandate." And finally, "Recent recommendations by CERCUC concerning the CanRC demonstrate sensitivity to the concerns outlined in the overture" (Article 37).

Second, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 asking Synod "...to declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (a church order proposed for use in the prospective union of the United Reformed Churches with the Canadian Reformed Churches) is unusable for that purpose." The overture asserted that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) "vacates" a principle held dear by the URCNA, namely, that authority in Christ's church resides with the local eldership and not broader assemblies. The overture maintained that this principle is violated by such stipulations as having to maintain a seminary, licensure by Classis, counselors appointed for vacant churches by Classis, the role of deputies of Regional Synod, having Regional Synods, admission to the pulpit, etc.

In dealing with this overture, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided to "...declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) is in need of further revision in order to comply more fully with our Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government." Three grounds are adduced. The first ground is: "This is evidenced by many overtures requesting changes to the

PJCO.” The second ground is: “Several requirements in the PJCO conflict with Principle 5, such as synodically approved hymns, synodical deputies, classical approval for table fellowship and pulpit exchanges, and the calling of ministers requiring approval from other churches.” The third ground is: “There is still significant concern in our churches about the hierarchical tendencies of a federational seminary” (Article 44).

In addition, regarding the PJCO, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided that “...this further revision be undertaken when the federation is ready to enter into Phase 3A with the Canadian Reformed Churches.” And for that reason, Synod Wyoming decided “...to dismiss the PJCO Committee with thanks, including all past members who have worked so diligently” (Article 44).

Third, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 “...to direct CERCUC to discontinue all further action, advancement, processes, efforts or steps towards unification with the Canadian Reformed Churches and specifically advancement to Phase 3, Step A.” Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that “CERCUC has responded to the concerns of the overture by deciding to not make a Phase Three, Step A recommendation for at least six years.” Another ground is that “Synod has approved the work of CERCUC, including its synodical reports in which an affirmative case for pursuing union has been made.” Yet another ground is that “The overture is inconsistent with our commitment as a member of NAPARC in which we agree with ‘the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.’” And still another ground is that “The communications received by synod on this issue speak against Overture 13 and articulate the fruit the churches have experienced through the pursuit of unity with the CanRC” (Article 54).

In evaluating Synod Wyoming 2016’s decisions on these matters, we note that things could have been worse but things could also have been better. Thankfully, the mandate of CERCUC remains as it was and still includes the phrase “with a view toward complete church unity.” The mandate of CERCUC still articulates the vision in a clear and strong manner. We can also be thankful that Synod Wyoming unanimously defeated the overture to discontinue all action and efforts towards unification with the CanRC. Instead, there is a breather of at least six years before CERCUC recommends stepping forward to Phase 3A, leading to merger. We should note, however, that this is to be a period of “at least” six years -- meaning that six years is the minimum -- and this language suggests that it may very well be longer.

Synod Wyoming did decide – as was also decided by at least the past two Synods – “...to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA...” in various ways, such as pulpit exchanges and seeking dialogue regarding outstanding areas of concern (Article 55). For this too, we can be thankful.

Regarding the PJCO, we can be thankful that Synod Wyoming did not declare it to be “unusable” – as the overture requested – but that Synod took the hard edge off the overture by deciding that it “is in need of further revision.” However, the fundamental concern remains, namely, that aspects of the PJCO are thought to “conflict” with the Reformed principle for church government that authority resides with the local consistory. This is a disappointing conclusion and shows that we are far away from agreement on some church polity matters.

In addition, the PJCO committee – the only committee left of the ones established back in 2001 – has now been dismissed also. There is no longer a Songbook Committee, a Theological Education Committee, and a PJCO Committee. Without any committees left to discuss the issues, most likely the six or more years of breather will not be very productive in overcoming the obstacles to merger. Since Synod London 2010, every successive URCNA Synod has taken steam out of the merger efforts: all committees were gradually dismissed, it was decided to work with the OPC on a common songbook rather than with the CanRC, a decision was made to “table indefinitely” any encouragement for CERCU to move toward proposing to enter Phase 3A, and it was decided to have a breather of at least six years before CERCU makes a Phase 3A recommendation. It is hard not to be discouraged by all these developments.

Although we can be disappointed that the CanRC-URCNA relationship has taken several steps backwards as far as committee work is concerned, we can be thankful that the less formal aspects of the unity pursuit continued to take steps forward. CanRC-URCNA brothers and sisters are involved with one another and working together at the local level in many places as evident, for example, from coordinated youth events, Christian education, outreach efforts, and concurrent Classes taking place. In many places, we steadily have been getting to know one another better and there has been much mutual encouragement. We can continue to build on these relationships locally into the future, and we can hope and pray that the LORD will bless this with greater unity.

Synod Wyoming 2016 on Other Matters

Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously adopted the proposed hymns to be the hymn portion of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. Synod Visalia 2014 had already adopted the Psalm section. The proposed hymns for the hymn section were already approved at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s (OPC) 2016 General Assembly. This means that the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* – a combined effort between the OPC and the URCNA – is ready to be published (Article 46). [It has since been published in 2018.]

With respect to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), Synod Wyoming 2016 agreed with the recommendation of the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) and decided to remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) of ecumenical relations. Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI-NTT) and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA). Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (EF) (Phase Two) with the Calvinistic Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRC-NTT) and the Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCC) (Article 38).

Interestingly, Synod Wyoming also agreed with the recommendation of CECCA and decided by a fairly close margin of votes to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) with the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA). This generated some discussion because the GKSA have women deacons, although a recent Synod of the GKSA “...confirmed by a substantial majority their practice of prohibiting women from the offices of Elder and Minister.

This reflects their Scriptural conviction that women should not participate in the governing body of the church.” In the GKSA, deacons are not part of the ruling body of the church. The discussion was partly generated by the fact that the GKSA is still in fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), although “...the GKSA continues to give a clear witness to the CRCNA regarding matters relating to the authority of Scripture, including the prohibition against ordaining women into the teaching and ruling offices of the church” (Article 38 and 41).

Decisions by Synod Wyoming to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) must be ratified by a majority of consistories by December 31, 2016 in order to go into effect. [The decisions to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) with the GGRC-NTT, the FCC, and the GKSA were ratified by the churches.]

Synod Wheaton 2018 of the URCNA held at Wheaton College, Ill, from June 11-15, 2018

Church Unity and Other Matters

Synod Wheaton 2018 of the URCNA met concurrently with the general Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, with common devotional times and several joint gatherings. Throughout these meetings all songs were selected from the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (TPH), produced as a joint venture of the music committees of the URCNA and the OPC. In the combined meeting on Tuesday evening, this TPH was presented, received joyfully, and the churches of both the URCNA and the OPC were encouraged to make use of it. Regarding this TPH, Synod decided to allocate funds to create a digital version of the songbook to be published on the web and to develop a mobile app, as well as electronic versions of the liturgical forms, prayers, creeds, and confessions, and create a mobile app of the creeds and confessions.

In its dealings with the Report submitted to Synod by the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU), Synod adopted a number of recommendations. Among them Synod “encouraged local churches and classes to take advantage of the opportunity presented with the Canadian Reformed Committee for Church Unity being supplemented with more members who can help answer questions, speak at local churches and at classes, and promote the unity of our churches.”

Throughout the duration of Synod Wheaton the fraternal delegates of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Rev. William den Hollander and Rev. Willem B. Slomp, were received warmly, were invited to engage in all Advisory Committee deliberations, and received the privilege of the floor. The address by Rev. W.B. Slomp (see Appendix #3) was well-received, as expressed by many a delegate in personal conversations. Although the attention for the pursuit of unity with the CanRC is going through a time of “breather,” the reception, interaction, and personal conversations testified to a continued (and with some, growing) appreciation and expression of unity!

In other matters, we note that Synod Wheaton entered into Ecumenical Contact (Phase 1) with the African Evangelical Presbyterian Church, as well as entering into Ecumenical

Fellowship (Phase 2) with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW). Synod also decided to discontinue the relationship of Ecumenical Contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv/RCN) due to the decision to open all offices in the church to women, regardless of many and repeated admonitions.

Synod Wheaton, at different times, gave much attention to the work of missions (both domestic and foreign), executed by the respective federations of churches. They did so in a colloquium to review the history of missions, recounting the activities of missions. They also received a variety of reports and presentations of domestic and foreign missionaries. Synod mandated the federation's Mission Committee to investigate the current OPC model and the older CRC model (including financing) for their missionary endeavours, to see if they are feasible for the URCNA in their missionary endeavours. Synod re-appointed Rev. Richard Bout as the Missions Coordinator. After much deliberation, Synod voted not to create two Missions Coordinator positions – foreign and domestic – choosing to retain one position of Missions Coordinator. At the conclusion of Synod, Friday afternoon, Synod set aside a full hour to discuss matters related to missions. The Missions Committee requested feedback from the churches how best to move forward as a federation.

Synod Wheaton received several overtures indicating a strong desire to have Synod make a clear statement concerning the institution of marriage. Synod adopted without dissent the “Affirmations Regarding Marriage” as a Doctrinal Affirmation. These affirmations will be published on the federational website, as well as made available to those who request it from the Stated Clerk (Rev. Ralph Pontier, who was re-appointed in that position).

Doctrinal Affirmations

Synod Wheaton 2018 adopted without dissent “Affirmations Regarding Marriage,” which faithfully outline in sixteen points the Biblical teaching on marriage. This document is available on the website of the URCNA.

No other doctrinal affirmations were adopted since our report to Synod Dunnville 2016.

Considerations

We have many things to be thankful for when considering the relationship between the CanRC and the URCNA. In many places there is cooperation in evangelism, youth activities, education, and conferences. There are pulpit exchanges, joint worship services, concurrent Classes, interim ministries by CanRC ministers in URCNA churches, and ministers and candidates are being called across federational lines. We thank the LORD for all these blessings. At the same time, it is clear that the process toward merger has slowed down considerably.

We would like Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 to consider the following with a view to disbanding the Committee for Church Unity (CCU) – including the coordinators, the sub-

committees, and related committees – and handing the URCNA portfolio over to the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA).

1. Synod Wyoming 2016 decided to enter a breather of at least six years, during which CERCU will not propose entering into Phase 3A with the CanRC, leading to merger. In its report to Synod Wheaton 2018, CERCU wrote the following: “Given this commitment, our interaction as CERCU with our Canadian Reformed counterparts has been reduced at the committee level. As matters stand, it appears to us that a Phase Three, Step A recommendation would also be unlikely by Synod 2022. Of course, the Lord’s ways are not our ways, but we believe much would have to change before we could be confident of our churches’ readiness and willingness to take the next step on the path toward church union with the Canadian Reformed Churches. While we do see it as our task to encourage and assist the churches in the pursuit of our ecumenical calling toward greater unity, we have also become convinced through our years of engagement together that such unity must finally be given by God in a way that is clear to all the churches. As such, when the churches are ready and enthusiastic about moving forward, we believe such a recommendation should come from the churches” (*Provisional Agenda*, p. 138). This means that there will be four more years of breather, and probably longer. It is also noteworthy that the CERCU report says that the initiative to move along in the unity process in a formal way will have to come from the local churches – which suggests that things are not likely to happen soon.
2. All URCNA sub-committees created to work toward church unity have been disbanded for some time already, with the last committee disbanded by Synod Wyoming 2016. Our sub-committees and related committees have no counterparts with whom to discuss.
3. In the past two years since Synod Wyoming 2016, we as coordinators for the CCU have been largely idle, in the sense that invitations to come to churches and Classes of the URCNA for presentations have not been forthcoming.
4. Giving the URCNA portfolio to the CCCNA will take pressure off the URCNA in the sense that whatever talks will take place within that context will not have the pressure of being conducted by a CanRC committee created to achieve organic unity. In the end, this may prove to be beneficial to progress in our relationship as churches. The CCCNA can deal with the URCNA as a federation with which we are in Ecclesiastical Fellowship, and can raise the matter of church unity as the occasion warrants.
5. The URCNA never had a special committee devoted to the unity efforts with the CanRC, while the CanRC did have a special committee devoted to the unity efforts with the URCNA. Handing the URCNA portfolio to the CCCNA levels the playing field.

Recommendations

We recommend:

1. That Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Dunnville 2016 to seek ways to facilitate the work of building unity on the local level, as well as visiting churches and Classes of the URCNA, particularly in the United States.

2. That Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Dunnville 2016 to discuss with CERCU how to make progress towards federative unity should Synod Wyoming mandate CERCU to pursue this.
3. That Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 decide that the Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity have completed their mandate given by Synod Dunnville 2016 to monitor any developments in the URCNA with respect to ‘doctrinal affirmations.’
4. That Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 decide to disband the Committee for Church Unity (CCU) – including the coordinators, the sub-committees, and related committees (Church Order, Theological Education, Common Songbook, and Creeds and Forms) – and to hand the URCNA portfolio over to the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA).
5. That if Synod Edmonton-Immanuel 2019 decides to maintain the Committee for Church Unity (CCU), Synod note that, after having served on the committee for nine years, Rev. William den Hollander and Rev. Clarence VanderVelde do not wish to be reappointed to the committee. There is no end-of-term date for any CCU members, but nine years is the usual term for other committees and Rev. den Hollander and Rev. VanderVelde would like to have that applied to them.

Respectfully submitted, with brotherly greetings,

Rev. William den Hollander
Rev. Dr. Andrew J. Pol
Rev. Willem B. Slomp
Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde
Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity (CCU)

Appendix #1

Fraternal Greetings by Rev. C.J. VanderVelde to Synod Wyoming 2016

Dear brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

It’s a privilege and pleasure to once again be among you as you gather for another synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URNCA). My colleague Rev. William den Hollander and I are here to bring you greetings from the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). May God bless you in all your deliberations and decisions. May you seek his will in everything on the agenda.

First a little bit about what has transpired in the CanRC federation since we brought fraternal greetings at your last synod. The CanRC also had a general synod recently – in May 2016 at Dunnville, Ontario. Lasting nine days, it was our shortest general synod in recent times.

Several important decisions were made at Synod Dunnville 2016. Over the last 40 years there has been discussion in the CanRC about women voting in the churches. Synod 2010 decided to leave it in the freedom of the local churches. Synod 2013 overturned that decision and said that women should not vote in the churches. Synod 2016 decided to go back to the decision of 2010 to leave it in the freedom of the local churches. This topic has generated much discussion in our churches, and the last two synods received many appeals about this matter. Hopefully the churches can be at peace with Synod 2016's decision to leave it in the freedom of the local churches.

Another notable decision of Synod Dunnville 2016 is the decision pertaining to our Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN). Over the last number of years, we have been concerned about the direction of the RCN. Concerns about hermeneutics – as manifested at the federational seminary in Kampen as well as in discussions about the role of women in the churches -- led Synod 2013 to write a letter of admonition to the RCN. Since there was no change in course, Synod Dunnville 2016 decided to suspend temporarily several of the privileges associated with EF. Members of the RCN seeking membership in the CanRC and guests visiting the CanRC will no longer be admitted to the Lord's Supper simply on the basis of an attestation from their home church. In order to safeguard soundness in doctrine and life, ministers within the RCN can now only be called by a local CanRC church with the concurring advice of classis. Consistories are urged to exercise careful diligence before allowing visiting RCN ministers into the pulpit. The CanRC still have EF with the RCN, but the suspension of these two rules for EF -- pertaining to admission to the Lord's Supper and access to the pulpit -- indicates that the relationship is under strain. The committee dealing with issues surrounding the RCN was mandated to give special attention to the question whether or not to continue EF with the RCN when reporting to our Synod 2019. These are difficult and painful decisions for the CanRC since the RCN is the federation from which the CanRC originated in the post-World War II immigration to Canada. We know that the URCNA are also concerned about the direction of the RCN and have been hesitant to move toward EF with the RCN. Let us together pray that the RCN may turn from their course and abide by the Word of God.

Turning our attention to the unity efforts between the CanRC and the URCNA, we realize that there are some very significant overtures about this on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016. In one way or another, these overtures are about significantly slowing down the unity process, if not halting it altogether for the foreseeable future.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium at Synod Visalia 2014 on the doctrine of the covenant and the conclusion that there are no significant differences in covenant views between the CanRC and the URCNA was another important step on that road. Our increasing contact as Coordinators for Church Unity with churches and classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. We have visited all of the classes in the USA. We hope and pray that there will be more opportunities to build on the progress made.

Therefore, much depends on what Synod Wyoming 2016 will decide with respect to these overtures. May the vision of Synod Escondido 2001 -- which set this unity process in motion -- not be lost. May these overtures be an opportunity to do some deep soul-searching regarding the ecumenical imperative of Scripture. We all preach a gospel of reconciliation and fellowship between God and sinners saved by God's grace. Shouldn't this same gospel of reconciliation and fellowship be a motivating factor for a drive toward organic unity between church federations which share this gospel? What are we indicating to the world when our two federations which are so similar in faith, practice, and history can't get it together in a unity process? Wouldn't a determined and persistent pursuit of unity resulting in a merger be honouring to the Head of the church?

I would like to quote from the Press Release of Synod Dunnville 2016. It says the following about the unity efforts: "In regard to the merger process with the United Reformed Churches of [sic] North America, Synod recognized that the work has proceeded more slowly than was originally expected when Synod Neerlandia 2001 initiated the process toward merger. Synod also took note of voices within the URCNA calling for a complete halt to the merger process. Nonetheless, Synod reappointed coordinators for the work of promoting unity with the URCNA and, in view of the workload and the importance of the issues at stake, even increased their number from two to four. In this way, our churches have said very clearly that we want to continue the unity process. We desire our present relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship to become one of ecclesiastical unity. We feel this is a matter of Christian love and obligation."

In its report to Synod Wyoming 2016, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) states that it will not make any recommendation to step forward to the next phase of relations with the CanRC for at least the next six years. We recognize that it may be necessary to have such a breather for the long-term well-being of unity efforts, but we also appreciate that CERCU is suggesting a general time frame. This is important so that the whole endeavor does not end up off the radar screen. We also appreciate CERCU's recommendation of "the patient pursuit of unity" and CERCU's commitment to assist churches in overcoming what they consider to be obstacles to merger. If there is to be a breather, let the years be filled with positive activity intended to solidify and cultivate the existing relationship.

The four Coordinators for Church Unity – Rev. William den Hollander, Rev. Dr. Andrew Pol, Rev. Bill Slomp, and myself – are willing and ready to come to any classis or local church to help overcome obstacles to merger. Our Synod Dunnville 2016 also kept in existence the various subcommittees for church unity. If Synod Wyoming 2016 would decide to reinstate subcommittees with a view to continuing the discussions without the pressure of moving to the next phase of relations in the near future, our subcommittees would be willing and ready to enter upon such discussions.

May all your deliberations and decisions be to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church!

Appendix #2 *Clarion* Article

Synod Wyoming 2016 of the URCNA

By Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde
Rehoboth Canadian Reformed Church of Burlington/Waterdown

Synod Wyoming of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) was held from June 14-17 at Wyoming, Michigan. Rev. W. den Hollander and I attended as fraternal delegates on behalf of the Canadian Reformed Churches, and I addressed the assembly on behalf of our churches. The address has been included elsewhere in this issue of *Clarion*. What follows is an account of decisions pertaining to unity matters as well as some other matters.

Unity Matters

There were three important overtures on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016 in relation to unity efforts. In one way or another, these overtures would significantly slow down the unity process, if not halt it altogether for the foreseeable future.

First, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Central US April 13-14, 2015 seeking to change the mandate of CERCU. The mandate of CERCU currently reads: “With a view toward complete church unity, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order.” The overture proposed that it read: “With a desire to pursue a broader unity with churches that share a common confession and faith, and acknowledging the desirability of union with churches of like faith and practice, where feasible, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order.” In explanation, Ground #6 stated: “The current terminology ‘*With a view toward complete church unity...*’ appears to be used by the committee in a way which seems to keep driving toward organic union with the Canadian Reformed Churches without recognizing differences in like-faith, like-practice and the desire of churches in our federation to acknowledge them as a true church but not proceed further at this point.”

Synod Wyoming 2016 decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that “While appreciating the concerns raised by the overture, the current language of ‘with a view toward complete unity’ has provided encouragement in our ecumenical pursuit which has borne good fruit.” Another ground reads, “Some of the grounds of the overture argue against an application of the mandate rather than against the mandate itself and do not, therefore, necessitate changing the mandate.” And finally, “Recent recommendations by CERCU concerning the CanRC demonstrate sensitivity to the concerns outlined in the overture” (Article 37).

Second, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 asking Synod "...to declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (a church order proposed for use in the prospective union of the United Reformed Churches with the Canadian Reformed Churches) is unusable for that purpose." The overture asserted that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) "vacates" a principle held dear by the URCNA, namely, that authority in Christ's church resides with the local eldership and not broader assemblies. The overture maintained that this principle is violated by such stipulations as having to maintain a seminary, licensure by Classis, counselors appointed for vacant churches by Classis, the role of deputies of Regional Synod, having Regional Synods, admission to the pulpit, etc.

In dealing with this overture, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided to "...declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) is in need of further revision in order to comply more fully with our Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government." Three grounds are adduced. The first ground is: "This is evidenced by many overtures requesting changes to the PJCO." The second ground is: "Several requirements in the PJCO conflict with Principle 5, such as synodically approved hymns, synodical deputies, classical approval for table fellowship and pulpit exchanges, and the calling of ministers requiring approval from other churches." The third ground is: "There is still significant concern in our churches about the hierarchical tendencies of a federational seminary" (Article 44).

In addition, regarding the PJCO, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided that "...this further revision be undertaken when the federation is ready to enter into Phase 3A with the Canadian Reformed Churches." And for that reason, Synod Wyoming decided "...to dismiss the PJCO Committee with thanks, including all past members who have worked so diligently" (Article 44).

Third, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 "...to direct CERCU to discontinue all further action, advancement, processes, efforts or steps towards unification with the Canadian Reformed Churches and specifically advancement to Phase 3, Step A." Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that "CERCU has responded to the concerns of the overture by deciding to not make a Phase Three, Step A recommendation for at least six years." Another ground is that "Synod has approved the work of CERCU, including its synodical reports in which an affirmative case for pursuing union has been made." Yet another ground is that "The overture is inconsistent with our commitment as a member of NAPARC in which we agree with 'the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.'" And still another ground is that "The communications received by synod on this issue speak against Overture 13 and articulate the fruit the churches have experienced through the pursuit of unity with the CanRC" (Article 54).

In evaluating Synod Wyoming 2016's decisions on these matters, we note that things could have been worse but things could also have been better. Thankfully, the mandate of CERCU remains as it was and still includes the phrase "with a view toward complete church unity." The mandate of CERCU still articulates the vision in a clear and strong manner. We can also be thankful that Synod Wyoming unanimously defeated the overture to discontinue all action and efforts towards unification with the CanRC. Instead, there is a breather of at least six years before CERCU recommends stepping forward to Phase 3A, leading to merger. We should

note, however, that this is to be a period of “at least” six years -- meaning that six years is the minimum -- and this language suggests that it may very well be longer.

Synod Wyoming did decide – as was also decided by at least the past two Synods – “...to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA...” in various ways, such as pulpit exchanges and seeking dialogue regarding outstanding areas of concern (Article 55). For this too, we can be thankful.

Regarding the PJCO, we can be thankful that Synod Wyoming did not declare it to be “unusable” – as the overture requested – but that Synod took the hard edge off the overture by deciding that it “is in need of further revision.” However, the fundamental concern remains, namely, that aspects of the PJCO are thought to “conflict” with the Reformed principle for church government that authority resides with the local consistory. This is a disappointing conclusion and shows that we are far away from agreement on some church polity matters.

In addition, the PJCO committee – the only committee left of the ones established back in 2001 – has now been dismissed also. There is no longer a Songbook Committee, a Theological Education Committee, and a PJCO Committee. Without any committees left to discuss the issues, most likely the six or more years of breather will not be very productive in overcoming the obstacles to merger. It is hard not to conclude that after six or more years we will be no further ahead and that, in fact, we will be even further behind in our relationship. Since Synod London 2010, every successive URCNA Synod has taken steam out of the merger efforts: all committees were gradually dismissed, it was decided to work with the OPC on a common songbook rather than with the CanRC, a decision was made to “table indefinitely” any encouragement for CERCU to move toward proposing to enter Phase 3A, and it was decided to have a breather of at least six years before CERCU makes a Phase 3A recommendation. As far as URCNA mechanisms and URCNA collective drive with a view toward merger are concerned, we are worse off in 2016 than we were in 2001 when it all started. It is hard not to be discouraged by all these developments.

Other Matters

Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously adopted the proposed hymns to be the hymn portion of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. Synod Visalia 2014 had already adopted the Psalm section. The proposed hymns for the hymn section were already approved at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s (OPC) 2016 General Assembly. This means that the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* – a combined effort between the OPC and the URCNA – is ready to be published (Article 46).

With respect to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), Synod Wyoming 2016 agreed with the recommendation of the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) and decided to remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) of ecumenical relations. Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI-NTT) and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA). Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (EF) (Phase Two) with the Calvinistic Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRC-NTT) and the Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCC) (Article 38).

Interestingly, Synod Wyoming also agreed with the recommendation of CECCA and decided by a fairly close margin of votes to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) with the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA). This generated some discussion because the GKSA have women deacons, although a recent Synod of the GKSA "...confirmed by a substantial majority their practice of prohibiting women from the offices of Elder and Minister. This reflects their Scriptural conviction that women should not participate in the governing body of the church." In the GKSA, deacons are not part of the ruling body of the church. The discussion was partly generated by the fact that the GKSA is still in fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), although "...the GKSA continues to give a clear witness to the CRCNA regarding matters relating to the authority of Scripture, including the prohibition against ordaining women into the teaching and ruling offices of the church" (Article 38 and 41).

Decisions by Synod Wyoming to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) must be ratified by a majority of consistories by December 31, 2016 in order to go into effect.

The next URCNA Synod is scheduled to be held, the LORD willing, at Wheaton College in Illinois, in June 2018.

Appendix #3

Address to Synod Wheaton 2018 of the URCNA By Rev. W.B. Slomp

Brothers, it is a pleasure and an honour for me, together with my colleague Rev. William den Hollander, to be present with you in Wheaton Illinois to represent the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and to enjoy your fellowship in the unity of the true faith. Such unity is possible only because of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He made us one and called us to be one and for that reason made us office bearers in his church so that, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:13, "... we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

It is a great joy for us that you have your Synod at the same time as the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (OPC) and that we may witness that. As you know, the CanRC have a common and cherished bond with both of you, that we, despite our different histories, need to share and to sustain. The CanRC were not established in North America until after the second world War, and then, with a few exceptions, have primarily remained in Canada. You have a much longer and broader history in North America, as does the OPC. And so, our history as immigrants from the Netherlands is not as deeply embedded in North American society as yours. Of course, we cherish our own history, not because of who we are, but because of the way that God, in spite of our sins, has shown his faithfulness to us throughout the centuries. Our CanRC history shows that the Lord has brought us back on the

straight and narrow path time and again when we were straying. We must learn from our past. We do not want to deny that history.

But, we also need to understand and appreciate your history, especially those of you in the USA. To appreciate and understand each other takes time. When we first embarked on the road to unity together, many of us, especially from the CanRC, believed such unity could be accomplished in a fairly short time. After all, we both have the three forms of unity, and the Church Order of Dort. We had in mind what happened at the time of the two separate secession churches established in 1834 and in 1886, and the unity that took place six years later in 1892 and imagined that this will be possible in our situation. We were happy and excited as we anticipated establishing unity together.

However, the Lord had different plans. The process is taking longer than we anticipated. As federations of churches we both still had some maturing to do. Indeed, it is not always good to rush into things. Maturation is an ongoing process. We must learn to understand each other and to learn from past mistakes and sinful actions and thinking. To become mature is humbling, for you must recognize your own weaknesses and limitations. That is not easy. I also realize that for myself personally, even at my age. Maturity is something you strive for all your life. Constant self-examination is necessary and loving correction from those who are close to you. As Paul says in Philippians 3:12, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

The process that we have gone through in the last 20 or 30 years has been humbling, and yet joyful and greatly satisfying. It is a great blessing that we have been able to get to know each other, and that we can continue to do so as church federations. As stated in the positive report of your committee to synod our contact together has been “rich and deeply profitable.”

Personally, I feel a strong bond with the URCNA. It is a bond that I already experienced in the late 1980s and mid-1990s when I was a minister in Northern British Columbia. At that time I had regular and close contact with my colleagues who were going through the transition of joining the Alliance of Independent Reformed Churches which later on became the URCNA.

In those days we did not yet have pulpit exchanges. But, by the time I came to Edmonton, AB in 2002 that had changed. We had established an ecclesiastical fellowship wherein we could have pulpit exchanges fostering greater interaction which in time became more and more satisfying and stimulating. As an emeritus minister of the Immanuel CanRC in Edmonton Alberta Canada I regularly lead the worship services in your churches, locally and in the rest of the province, and in other parts of Canada. Many of my colleagues do the same. We also enjoy having your ministers on our pulpits. For me personally it is always a joy to lead your worship services. The Lord God has been good to us.

And so, brothers, I do not just speak for myself, but also for my colleagues and for the members of our churches, when I tell you that we feel a strong kinship with you and that we thoroughly enjoy the cooperation that we have in local endeavours such as combined worship services, home mission, Christian education, political action, and in broader endeavours such as combined classes, conferences, ministerials and seminary education. Such interactions are

helpful and stimulating. We truly feel quite at home among you and feel a strong connection because of our shared commitment to the reformed faith.

Yet, there are still some factors that keep us apart. For one thing, because of the geographic distance between us, those of you in the USA do not know us very well. Our last Synod of 2016 added two members to the unity committee, Rev. Andrew Pol and me, in the hope that along with the original members, Rev. William den Hollander and Rev. Clarence VanderVelde, more of us would be available to preach, to interact with you at your classis meetings, to answer questions and concerns and to work together in any meaningful way possible. We are still patiently waiting for your invitations from south of the border. We appreciate that you as synod also adopted a recommendation to that effect.

There are also matters that keep us organically apart. There is a perception that we are somewhat hierarchical in church polity. We believe that it is a wrong impression and we would welcome a colloquium to discuss this. It would be good to hear your concerns articulated so that we can carefully consider them, and if necessary, make the necessary changes. It is regrettable, therefore, that, as your report states that you “are currently not prepared for, or sufficiently interested in, such a discussion.” We understand, though, that you are willing to discuss this once we enter into phase 3A. We are thankful for that. Indeed, a lot of work has gone into the proposed joint church order (PJCO) which shows that in most ways we have much in common also in matters of church polity.

Where do we go from here? Our drive towards organic unity has been stalled. This is disappointing to many of us in the CanRC. But, we need to be mature and be patient and trust in the Lord and seek his will.

Throughout the ages we have seen that there are two ways in which God’s people go astray: by taking over worldly sinful practices and thinking, and by a legalistic interpretation and application of God’s law. Both are deadly. Both appeal to our natural instincts, to the sinful flesh. That is why we must be aware of those two dangers today as well. For we live in a postmodern culture that undermines the importance of history and that dogmatically imposes a rigid set of values divorced from the Word of God.

Brothers, we need to help and encourage one another to stay on the straight and narrow path that God has shown us in his precious Word. We need each other to guard against the appropriation of modern day morality on the one hand and dead orthodoxy on the other. Together we need to strive to be mature.

At this point we do not know yet where we are going in our relation as federations of churches. Are we going to be one United Federation? Perhaps in time we will. We don’t know. We are in God’s hands and must be obedient to him.

Brothers, it is our sincere desire and our prayer that the Holy Spirit may guide you in your deliberations and in the decisions you make and that the King of the Church guide you so that you may come to decisions that are pleasing in the God’s sight, and to the furtherance of God’s kingdom. To him be all the glory and praise!

On behalf of the CanRC, I bring you our warmest greetings.

Bill Slomp, Fraternal Delegate