

REPORT SUBCOMMITTEE FOR RELATIONS WITH CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS CONCERNING DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN (HERSTELD)

1. Background

The official Dutch name of this federation is *De Gereformeerde Kerken (hersteld)* [DGK]. In this report, for the purpose of clarity and consistency, we will continue to use the Dutch acronym DGK. The DGK is a federation of churches which came into being in 2003/2004 when the first groups of concerned people left the GKv. More information can be found on their official website: <https://gereformeerde-kerken-hersteld.nl/>. Currently the federation consists of 11 congregations of which 2 are preaching points. They have 5 ministers in active service and 3 retired ministers. Total membership stands at approximately 1300. The churches meet on a regular basis in 2 classes. Efforts are continuing to reach out to others. Talks with a view to unity with the Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland (GKN) were initiated by General Synod Groningen 2014 and reconfirmed by Synod Lansingerland 2018. Moreover, informative evenings are being organized for the concerned in the Reformed Churches (liberated), from here on referred to as GKv. The churches maintain a program of Training for the Ministry. It currently has one student. The DGK has an official sister church relationship with the Liberated Reformed Church at Abbotsford (LRCA) and maintains some form of contact with churches in Northern Ireland, South Korea, and of late with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (Borneo). They requested a sister church relationship with the Free Reformed Churches in Australia (FRCA). The FRCA invited 2 representatives from the DGK to attend their 2018 General Synod Bunbury at which the request was considered. The FRCA decided to continue to monitor developments in both the DGK and the GKN, to await recommendations from the churches on how to proceed with these relations, and to monitor the relationship that exists between the DGK and the LRCA working in close contact with the CanRC deputies regarding these developments. The previous FRCA synod (2012) had indicated that the DGK sister church relationship with the LRCA is a potential obstacle in their contact with the DGK. This could change; see Synod Lansingerland below.

Regarding the DGK the committee received the following mandate from Synod Dunnville 2016:

4. Recommendation

That Synod decide:

4.1 To maintain contact with The Reformed Churches (DGK) and continue to monitor developments within this federation, paying special attention to the relationship between the DGK and the Liberated Reformed Church at Abbotsford (LRCA). (Acts Art. 117)

2. Contact

The subcommittee maintained contact with the DGK through correspondence and a face-to-face meeting. In a letter dated August 16, 2016 we informed the DGK of the decisions of GS Dunnville 2016 regarding our relationship with the DGK (Art 117) and the decision regarding the Liberated Reformed Church Abbotsford (Art. 119). The subcommittee reiterated the fact that Synod Dunnville maintained the understanding of GS Carman 2013 that the Ecclesiastical Fellowship which the DGK has with the LRCA remains an impediment to closer contact. Also, a copy of the *Acts of Synod Dunnville 2016* in pdf format was forwarded to them for their information together with a request for a meeting with the deputies BBK of the DGK in the Netherlands in 2017.

A letter dated October 12, 2016 was received from the deputies BBK of the DGK informing us of their correspondence with the consistory of the CanRC Abbotsford regarding a proposed meeting to discuss the history of the LRCA. Since the consistory of the CanRC Abbotsford had declined to participate in such a meeting the DGK welcomed the opportunity of a meeting with deputies of the CanRC subcommittee.

In a letter dated October 31, 2016 to deputies BBK of the DGK a meeting in person was arranged and finalized.

The full subcommittee had opportunity to meet with 4 Deputies BBK of the DGK on March 31, 2017 in Ermelo, the Netherlands. The meeting was opened with Scripture reading, prayer and the singing of a Psalm. The DGK deputies expressed their happiness with our analysis of, and our response to the GKv report “*Man, Vrouw & Ambt*”. They appreciated that our message towards the GKv is clear. We could explain what it means in practice that the relationship between the CanRC and the GKv is strained and restricted. They agreed with us that behind many of the new developments in the GKv lies a new way of reading the Scriptures, without binding to the reformed confessions. The DGK deputies asked what our view was of the GKN. This was difficult to answer since the CanRC has never made a statement about these churches. Also, as subcommittee we have never expressed a particular position. We did express our appreciation and thankfulness that there is a new opportunity for ongoing discussions between the GKN and DGK. The DGK brothers shared this gratitude and hoped that it will be possible to conclude that both churches stand on the one foundation of Scripture and the reformed confession. They agreed that if this could be agreed upon they have the calling to work at unity. As CanRC deputies we expressed the hope that, under the Lord’s blessing, these discussions may bear fruit.

The relationship the DGK has with the LRCA and what this means for a possible relationship between the CanRC and DGK was discussed extensively. During the last few years there has been some confusion about this matter. In the past we, as CanRC deputies had expressed our disappointment that DGK had based its decision for a sister church relationship only on information from the LRCA, and had never talked to the other party. They received only one-sided information. Then, when the DGK approached the Abbotsford CanRC, to hear from them about the start of the LRCA, the consistory of Abbotsford indicated that it did not see it their duty to talk with DGK about this issue. There were a number of reasons for this, but an important one was that, in their view, the matter at the root of the establishing of the LRCA was not local, but federational matter. GS Dunnville agreed and therefore this brings the discussion back into the court of the CanRC deputies. As committee we cannot make specific ‘official’ statements. Therefore we acknowledged that these are federational issues in the CanRC: the sister church relationship with the OPC and other Presbyterian churches, the fact that we actively pursue ecclesiastical unity with the URCNA, our membership of NAPARC, etc. But as deputies we maintained that the picture that the LRCA gives of the CanRC is not correct.

This led to the next topic for our discussion: the practices within the OPC when it comes to admission to the Lord’s Supper and confessional membership (an open Lord’s Supper table, where the purity of the table is protected only by a verbal warning from the pulpit, and a profession of faith where members do not commit themselves to the reformed confessions). The DGK deputies posited that these practices are rooted in the problematic doctrine of the church as found in the Westminster Standards. They expressed disappointment that GS Dunnville 2016 decided that there is no longer need to talk about these issues. In the discussion about these topics different views and opinions came out. The CanRC deputies stressed that the Lord gathers his church worldwide, which results in churches that have different practices, because they have a different historical and cultural background and went through different developments. This does not mean that they cannot be faithful churches. Also, a relationship with such a church does not imply that the CanRC take over those practices. In this connection we assured DGK brothers that those practices in Presbyterian churches are not practiced in the CanRC. In response to a question about the membership of the CanRC in NAPARC we answered that NAPARC is a forum in which churches can meet and dialogue with each other, but this body has no authority and does not make any binding decisions.

The DGK deputies inquired about the relationship between the CanRC and the URCNA. We confirmed that at their last Synod the URCNA decided to put a moratorium on further talks about unity/merger with the CanRC. The push for this came in particular from URC churches on the American side of the border.

Over all in Canada we experience good relationships between local CanRC and URC. In that light the URC moratorium is disappointing. The DGK deputies pointed at concerns about the tolerance for theistic evolution among the teachers at Westminster Theol. Seminary in California.

The DGK deputies also asked about the decision of Synod Dunnville 2016 regarding the participation of the sisters in the voting for office bearers. They were wondering: “Do you think that it will be a step towards women in office?” We told them that within our sub-committee there are different opinions when it comes to the matter of women’s voting, but generally we are not really concerned that it will necessarily lead to a striving for women as office bearers in the church.

At the end of our meeting we asked the question: “How do you see us, as CanRC? Can you call us here your brothers in the Lord? Do you see our churches as faithful churches of Christ?” We referred to the negative response to this when we met with the DGK deputies in 2014. The answer was still evasive. It was considered by them too early to make such a statement. There are still several things between us that need to be resolved. The question is, have we made progress in this today? On the part of the DGK there is definitely the desire to come to this point. As committee we left this meeting with more positive feelings than we had the previous times. The atmosphere was cordial and friendly. The meeting was closed with singing and prayer.

3. Synod Lansingerland 2018 of the DGK

This general synod of the DGK was scheduled to be convened in February 2018. However, due to some serious developments in one of the local DGK congregations that had led to a split this general synod was convened in November to immediately deal with this matter. Unfortunately, decisions of the broader assemblies have been rejected by this church. This has resulted in the larger group of members having placed themselves outside the federation. Small pockets of members of surrounding churches have taken sides and it appears that they are now working on forming another ‘federation’ of churches.

This Synod also dealt with a letter from the GKN in which they informed the DGK of their decision to terminate the discussions regarding possible unity of the two federations. This was as the result of an article that appeared in the official DGK church magazine *De Bazuin* which appears to label the GKN as schismatic. The GKN demands that the DGK publicly distances itself from this article. Synod Lansingerland responded that they have no preconditions that need to be met and urged the GKN to reconsider their decision.

Regarding the LRCA, synod decided to maintain the sister church relationship. However, of significant interest is that the deputies for contact with the LRCA have been instructed to engage the LRCA in a discussion about their view on the catholicity of the church. This was articulated by Rev. M.A. Sneep in his address to Synod Bunbury 2018 of the FRCA as follows:

The synod decided to enter talks with the sister church at Abbotsford about the catholicity of the church in connection with the justification of its secession and its present ecclesiastical position. This decision has been made, because expressions of Abbotsford about churches with the Westminster Standards, have raised various questions with us regarding their vision on the catholicity of the church. We really hope that our sister church in Abbotsford will have an open mind for this discussion and that it may contribute to a right vision and way of acting, particularly there where the catholicity of the church is at stake. This decision makes it clear that DGK wants to be fully reformed and roundly catholic. In this light we’d like to enter talks with the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) as well.¹

¹ Acts Synod Bunbury 2018 of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, speeches pg. 26ff

Synod Lansingerland of the DGK decided to continue the contact with the CanRC provided that room is given to discuss internal developments within the CanRC regarding the liberation of the LRCA.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The sub-committee senses a change growing within the DGK regarding its view of the Church and the world-wide church gathering work of our Saviour. The Westminster Confession is no longer considered as unfaithful or not in harmony with Scripture. We believe it to be important to maintain some form of contact with the DGK and to continue monitoring developments within this federation even though they have maintained the relationship with the LRCA.

Rev. J. DeGelder

Rev. J. Moesker

G. J. Nordeman

Dr. C. Van Dam