



Clarion

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*General Synod
Smithers
Approaching*

Reunion

*What is a
General Synod
Anyway?*



General Synod – May 2007 – Smithers, BC



J. Visscher

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General Synod Smithers Approaching

On May 9, 2007, in the beautiful northern British Columbia town of Smithers another synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) will convene. This time twenty-four brothers from across the land will meet together (in the past it has always been sixteen, but those numbers were increased by the last synod) and deal with an agenda that grows longer by the day. As in the past, no one can predict the length of this assembly, although most of the delegates are no doubt hoping that a time period of two weeks will be sufficient.

The agenda

So what's on the agenda? The usual matters include any number of general items, letters and overtures from various churches, lengthy committee reports, a list of appeals from both churches and members, and appointments.

Of particular interest to our readers may be what is in the reports of the different synodical committees. This time all of these reports have been printed, bound, and sent to the local churches for their scrutiny, discussion, and reaction. No doubt here and there some churches have shared the contents of these reports with their members; however, others have not done so and so this editorial will attempt to inform you.

Churches abroad

The first report to be found in volume one is from the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA). It is 110 pages in length. Some of its highlights include continuing the relations of ecclesiastical fellowship with the following churches:

The Free Church of Scotland,
The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing),
The Free Reformed Churches of Australia,
The Free Reformed Churches of South Africa,
The Presbyterian Church in Korea, and
The Reformed Churches in The Netherlands.

The CRCA recommends that membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches be continued.

With regard to new relationships, the CRCA recommends that ecclesiastical fellowship be established with:

The Gereja-Gereja Reformasi of Indonesia,
The Reformed Churches of New Zealand.

At the same time the CRCA recommends that Synod not enter into a relationship with several other churches at this time for various reasons (The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands – Restored, The Gereja-Gereja Reformasi Calvinis of Timur, The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, The United Reformed Churches in Myanmar, The Independent Reformed Church in Korea).

Of special note in the CRCA's report is the request that Synod Smithers "consider carefully the limits of what we can and should do as churches in the world. . . ." In addition the CRCA would like Synod to re-consider whether it is really the task of the CRCA to study all sorts of topics and issues that arise in the life of our sister churches.

Contact with churches in the Americas

Next, we turn our attention to the 128 page report of the Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas (CCCA). Among its recommendations are to continue ecclesiastical fellowship with the following churches:

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church,
The Reformed Church in the United States,
and

The Reformed Churches in Brazil.

The CCCA also recommends that the CanRC enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches of Quebec. Furthermore, it recommends that our federation join the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (also called NAPARC).



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On an investigative level, it recommends that the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America be studied with a view to offering it a relationship in the future. At the same time it is recommended that further attempts to contact the Korean Presbyterian Church in America be discontinued.

What is also noteworthy is that the CCCA recommends to Synod that it "consider the synopsis of previous discussions with the OPC as the completion of this part of the mandate." For many years already some of our synodical committees have been told over and over again to discuss the same matters with other churches (visible and invisible church, assurance of faith, covenant of grace, descent into hell, Sabbath observance, church polity, fencing the Lord's Supper, and more). Clearly, the CCCA, as well as the CRCA, is tired of this endless repetition and would like to see some resolution on these matters.

The Theological College

Once again the Board of Governors of the Theological College submits its report to Synod. It includes a number of recommendations as well. Some of these have to do with the appointment and re-appointment of governors. Another has to do with the appointment of Prof. G. H. Visscher as Principal for the years 2008 – 2011.

The Pastoral Training Program also comes with recommendations. The first is to keep this program separate from the College curriculum; the second is to make it mandatory for students entering into the ministry of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches; the third is to leave funding for this program up to the churches.

Finally, and most recently, the Board sent another recommendation to Synod with copies to the churches and this has to do with the appointment of a fifth professor in 2010.

Contact with the other Reformed churches

Some year ago a synod appointed a separate committee called "The Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity." Its chief aim was to seek ways to further unity with churches such as the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches in North America, and the United Reformed Churches in North America. Of these churches, most of our time and energy has been directed towards the URCNA.

With respect to the work of the respective committees, it can be reported that the committees dealing with the Proposed Church Order have worked together in brotherly harmony and made good progress towards the fulfillment of their mandate.

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Church News

Mailing address change

Owen Sound Canadian Reformed Church has a new mailing address effective immediately:

PO Box 304, Owen Sound, ON N4K 5P5

Examined by Classis Niagara on March 21, 2007 and received consent to speak an edifying word in the churches (CO Art. 21), upon successful completion of the current academic year:

Student Rolf den Hollander

Examined by Classis Ontario West on March 21, 2007 and received consent to speak an edifying word in the churches (CO Art. 21), upon successful completion of the current academic year:

Student Stuart Harsevoort

and

Student Cornelis Kleyn

Accepted the call to the Free Reformed Church of Darling Downs, WA, Australia:

Rev. C. Vermeulen

of Elora, Ontario.

Accepted the call to Winnipeg (Redeemer), MB:

Rev. J. Poppe

of the Free Reformed Church at Albany (West), WA, Australia.

Declined the call to Taber, Alberta:

Rev. J. Moesker

of Vernon, British Columbia.

The committee dealing with a common Songbook could also report that good progress had been made.

The only committee that could not report real progress was the committee dealing with Theological Education. While the meetings were brotherly and cordial, the URCNA committee members were "not prepared to entertain any proposal for theological education that mandates at least one federational seminary." Seeing that this was an integral part of the CanRC committee members' mandate, there was no negotiation room left to them and a stalemate developed. The matter will now be referred to the respective synods for a decision.

The Book of Praise

The Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* also submitted a lengthy report of some 213 pages. Large parts of this report include an update of the Three Forms of Unity, the forms, and the prayers making use of the NIV Bible references. Two Forms of Subscription are proposed for adoption and inclusion in the next edition of the *Book of Praise*.

Of special interest to our readers will be the recommendation to adopt provisionally an additional twenty-eight hymns for testing by the churches by way of the publication of a supplement. Also, it is proposed that Dr. W. Helder be engaged to work on a revision of the Psalm section.

Bible translations

Thankfully the report by the Committee on Bible Translations is shorter. It pays special attention to the English Standard Version (ESV) and supplies Synod with the results of its preliminary investigation. It also wonders whether a full investigation of this translation is necessary seeing that "the vast majority of congregations are content with the NIV" and asks Synod for direction.

Website

Since we are very much into the age of computers and electronic means of communication, it is not at all surprising to find a report from the Committee for the Official Website of the churches. This committee recommends that it be mandated to revise the website when necessary, provide web services, and contact the URCNA website committee for closer cooperation.

Coming to a close

In closing, appreciation should be expressed to the various committees for preparing these reports and submitting them on time to the churches. A mountain of work was done by them, as well as by the printer.

Needless to say, much could be said about the work of all of these committees and their innumerable recommendations. Because this editorial is approaching its space limits, this description of report

highlights will have to do for now. I reserve the right, however, to come back to some of these recommendations at a later date, if times allows. No doubt others may want to interact with these reports as well and you are urged to do so. If you do not have a copy of these reports and would like to study them further, please contact your local church council. The pages of *Clarion* are available to all who want to make constructive comments.

In any case, suffice it to say, that Synod Smithers 2007 will have its work cut out for it. I wish the brothers who are preparing for this synod much wisdom and I wish the brothers and sisters of the Church at Smithers every blessing as they continue to make everything ready.



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Reunion



MATTHEW 13:52

“But go, tell his disciples and Peter. . .”

Mark 16:7a

On Sunday morning following his death on the cross, Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He who came down from heaven and took upon Himself our flesh, He who was crucified, dead, and buried, overcame death. Neither death nor grave could hold Him captive. No longer was He under the curse of the cross. He conquered sin and Satan. In Jesus the saying has come true, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Jesus was not the only one victorious. Scripture says that He is the *firstborn* from the dead. There are benefits for his believers, too. As the Heidelberg Catechism states in Answer 45, “First, by his resurrection He has overcome death, so that He could make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by his death. Second, by his power we too are raised up to a new life. Third, Christ’s resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.” The benefits of Christ’s resurrection are forgiveness of sins, renewal of life, and eternal fellowship with the Son.

Two angels who were present Sunday morning at the empty tomb proclaimed the truth of Christ’s resurrection to the women who came there. They said, “He has risen! He is not here!” They further proclaimed the benefits of Christ’s resurrection for those who believed in Him. “But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.’”

How does the message and reminder of a *reunion* between Jesus and his disciples proclaim the benefits of the resurrection?

Consider that even with the news of Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples may have felt they were in no position to go to Galilee. How could they, after they had abandoned Jesus? But precisely when the disciples did not feel worthy to be Jesus’ disciples, He brings to them the message and benefits of the resurrection: forgiveness, renewal, and fellowship. Note that they were referred to as *his* disciples. They were *still* his disciples, even though in the hour of bitter trial they left Him and fled. They were *still* his disciples, even though in the hours after the death and burial, they were hiding in fear and shame. These words of the Lord to his disciples are evidence of his tender, forgiving love. Despite their shortcomings and weaknesses, Jesus was still calling them in love to repent and find in Him blessed forgiveness. On the basis of that forgiveness, the planned reunion could take place.

Consider further that the Lord said through the angel, “and Peter.” Peter was singled out. Why? The Lord will minister to Peter in a special way on account of his personal denials during Jesus’ trial. Of all the disciples, Peter experienced the greatest shame and horror in abandoning Christ. Previously, Peter boldly promised that even if everyone else deserted Jesus in the hour of truth, he would not. He said he was prepared even to go to death with the Lord if that was necessary. In the end however, Peter produced those terrible denials, which were accompanied by the swearing of an oath and the calling down of curses. Therefore the Lord addressed him

specifically with a word of love and forgiveness. Peter too should consider himself part of the circle of the disciples. Through his repentance and the forgiveness of Jesus, Peter should be at the planned reunion also.

Mark records for us this beautiful little touch. The angels’ words directed toward the *disciples* and *Peter* demonstrate the power of Christ’s work, overcoming Satan, sin and death. They clearly show the benefits of Christ’s saving work confirmed in the resurrection.

Jesus’ words of assurance for his disciples and Peter are also for us, today. Even though we were conceived and born in sin, and thus by nature are subject to all sorts of misery, including condemnation, we may still, by his grace, be joined to Him. Although often we show weakness of faith and lack of trust, so that in a sense we abandon Him and deny Him, Christ offers us his full forgiveness. Today we can abide in Him and enjoy unity with God, thanks to his sacrifice on the cross and the power of his resurrection. Furthermore, one day there will be a meeting in the air. When Jesus Christ returns on the clouds of heaven, He will gather to Himself all his chosen ones, and they will enjoy his presence and rejoice in his forgiveness forever and ever!

Therefore we need to ask: Do we know our sins? Have we abandoned the Lord? Let us repent and seek the Lord’s presence and trust his promise. Let us not doubt his Word. In the gospel of the Resurrection we may know that Jesus is a merciful and gracious Saviour, who shows us his tender forgiving love. He wants us at the reunion.

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What's a General Synod Anyway...?

When brother VanHuppelen got the letter from the clerk of the regional synod that Synod had chosen him as one of the delegates to the next general synod, he was surprised, to say the least. Sure, he had said "yes" when the chairman of the consistory had asked who would be available next year May, but he had not given it much thought. After all, there were many others with a lot more experience than he had. He had only been to a classis once in his lifetime. And now he got this!

"You better figure out soon what it is all about," his wife said. He nodded, still somewhat taken aback. He had some general ideas about the workings of a general synod and what you are supposed to do as a delegate, but not more than that. His wife was right. It would indeed be good to find out more about it.

Next Sunday that feeling became even stronger. Several people had heard about it and came up to him. "Congratulations Bob," one brother said, "that's quite a honour." Bob was not so sure. Was it? But others had questions he could not answer. "How long will you be gone? A week or a month? What will you be doing all the time? And what will you be talking about? Is it not boring? What do we actually need a general synod for?"

How we operate

Let's have a look at the questions brother Bob VanHuppelen sees himself confronted with. Even if you are not delegated to the general synod it is good to know a little bit about it, for somehow we will all be affected by some of the decisions of such a synod.

First of all, you cannot really say anything useful about the role, the place, the authority, etc. of a general synod, if you don't have a good picture of what we are and how we operate as Canadian Reformed Churches. The Bible makes very clear that the Lord Jesus Christ not only gathers, defends, and preserves his church in this world, but that He is also the only head of the church. And this is not just a pious banner or letterhead, but we want to take this seriously as a reality that also determines our practices.

As churches we operate together in what you could call a federation model. That means that we have autonomous local Canadian and American Reformed Churches that work together in a structure outlined in Article 29 of the Church Order. And all these churches – by means of delegates – come together once every three years in a general synod (Art 49 CO). So we don't have headquarters, we don't have a permanent board of directors, we

don't have a CEO or a stated clerk, and if for some reason you want to address all the churches the most effective way would be sending out fifty separate letters.

It is actually quite simple. The brothers that are delegated to a general synod come together, finish the business they are supposed to do, and go home again. And then for about three years there will be no such a thing as a general synod. So you shouldn't say, "In 2007 the Synod meets in Smithers and in 2010 the Synod will meet again." Then you give the impression that we do have a permanent board of directors that get together once every three years.

It sounds good to put the emphasis on the fact that we are a federation of autonomous local churches, but what does that mean for the authority of a general synod? Does it have any authority? When such a synod makes decisions, or comes to conclusions or judgments, do we take these as wise advice, or is there more to it?

In the Articles 30 and 31 of the Church Order we have adopted some basic rules to set the standard for this authority. Like any major assembly, a general synod may deal only with ecclesiastical matters, church stuff. And then with those things only *which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to*

the churches in common. When those criteria are met we have agreed as churches that *whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God and with the Church Order.* It all sounds pretty straightforward. And in a way it is. But one of the things we can run into sometimes is that we don't always agree on which matters "belong to the churches in common."

One thing should be clear. Not everyone may always agree with every decision of a general synod, but in the Canadian Reformed Churches its authority is not a matter of top-down leadership. Decisions are made *with common consent*, to steal the title of a well known book on the Church Order. In the general synod Reformed churches cooperate in a harmony and a mutual trust that is based on, or rooted in, the unity of faith. If this unity of faith is lacking, it becomes very hard to make it work.

Questions

Organizing a general synod comes with a lot of practical details, some of which are regulated in the Church Order, while others are not. It is good to realize that there is no specific biblical requirement for most of these things and that you don't need that either. I think then of questions like, "How often do we hold a general synod?" Or, "How many delegates make up a general synod?" Or, "How many officers does a general synod need to operate well?"

In our churches we have a long standing tradition and rule to have a general synod once every three years, but in principle once every two or four years would be okay too, of course. As far as the number of delegates is concerned, for the last fifty years our synods had

sixteen delegates, but General Synod Chatham 2004 decided to increase the number to twenty-four. That may seem a lot bigger, but compared to the general synods or assemblies of some of our sister churches, like the OPC, the RCUS, and the URCNA, our synods are still very small.

*In the general synod
Reformed churches
cooperate in a harmony
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is based on, or rooted in,
the unity of faith*

Another question that comes up sometimes, especially in the minds of the brothers who have been delegated, is, "How long will this synod be?" The longest Canadian Reformed synod went on for about four weeks, but the last few synods were about two weeks or even a few days less. That depends on the matters on the agenda, of course, but also has to do with the manner in which our synods work. These meetings have a deliberative character. With sixteen (from now on twenty-four) men around the table you can have a thorough discussion that quite often will lead to a consensus on an issue.

In contrast the general synods or assemblies of some sister churches (like the URCNA and the OPC) have more than 100 members and last for only a week or less. It is clear that such a set up requires a totally different process of working through the agenda and coming to decisions. At the other end of the spectrum we have the general synod of our Dutch sister churches, that can go on for many months.

Who actually decides when and where a synod is being held? Well,

that's a decision of the previous synod. Keeping in mind the three years time frame, Synod will set a time and choose a place where the local church is then appointed as convening church for the next synod. But how do you pick a location? We have developed our own tradition here. After the first two, both held in Homewood-Carman, our synods have alternated between east and west. Initially the classical regions and the year of institution were also factors for choosing a convening church, but that has become more complicated with the increase in classes, as well as new institutions or separations. It may be a good idea – especially with a larger synod – to make some changes here. Keep alternating between west and east, but include also practical considerations like more churches in the area, accessibility, travel expenses, meeting facilities, etc.

The agenda

Not too long after its appointment the convening church will get going with the necessary preparations for the next general synod. It will probably appoint a few committees, for there is a lot of work to be done, from arranging lodging and meals to setting up computer systems and other technical stuff. And, of course, they receive and organize the material for the agenda and make sure that all the delegates will get their material in time.

But where does all that material come from? How does stuff end up on the agenda of a general synod? What are the matters a general synod should be dealing with and what should not be dealt with? And who decides that? I mentioned already what we have agreed upon in Article 30 of the Church Order about "ecclesiastical matters" and about issues that "could not be finished in the minor assemblies or

belong to the churches in common." But again, who decides that? In the end the churches do, quite often through the classes and regional synods.

This means that a general synod does not have the right to put matters on its agenda that do not come from the churches. A few brothers at synod may think that it is very important that as Canadian Reformed Churches we establish, let's say, a training centre for evangelism, or a retirement home for emeritus ministers. Regardless of what anyone might think of those ideas, if they do not come from one of the churches, they simply don't belong on the agenda of a synod.

When you look at the material on the agenda of a general synod, you can distinguish three main categories. There may be a few things that won't fit under either one of these, but that is usually small stuff. You have first the reports of the standing committees, then proposals or overtures from the churches, and finally appeals. Most letters from the churches pertain typically to the reports of the committees.

Standing committees are committees that take care of ongoing business between general synods. Think of the Theological College, the *Book of Praise*, the CanRef website, the many ecumenical contacts with other churches, and Bible translation. These committees report about their activities and are again instructed and appointed for another period of three years. They send their reports to the churches some six months before synod and most likely your consistory has been busy reviewing these reports for the upcoming synod in Smithers.

The proposals or overtures that come from the churches can be

about anything, as long as they fit the criteria of Article 30 of the Church Order. This is a simple rule, but to determine whether this is the case or not is sometimes easier said than done.

Appeals can come from churches that disagree with a decision or judgment of a previous synod and ask the synod to withdraw or change the decision. In those cases Article 33 of the Church Order comes into the picture. *Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.* This is again one of these rules that sound easy, but when you are going to apply it you have to determine whether the grounds given are really new or not. And we don't always agree on that.

Appeals can also come on the table as the result of a local conflict that could not be solved locally. This has then led to appeals to a classis and a regional synod and when the decisions of these assemblies did not solve the issue, the general synod is asked to judge.

The broadest assembly

If you have kept up reading so far you may still not be very excited about attending a general synod. Well, for about half of our church members that's okay. You are all off the hook, dear sisters. And brothers, believe me, it is not so bad. What is it that actually makes a general synod quite interesting? When you decide on the recommendations of the standing committees or on other matters that belong to the churches in common, you are at the end of the line, so to speak. A general synod is not the highest assembly, but it is the broadest assembly. We don't go for leadership "from the top down," but many decisions and judgments of a general synod

do have a significant impact on all the churches of the federation. They have an impact on how we worship, what we sing, who will be on our pulpits, the Bible translation we use, etc. They also give us a fascinating view of Christ's church-gathering work elsewhere.

What can make a general synod difficult sometimes? When a local conflict cannot be solved it can escalate into a lengthy appeal process, in which the general synod is the final court of appeal. The goal should always be to help solve the problem. But by the time such a case lands on the table of a general synod, that has become very hard to do. Quite often in the process through a classis and a regional synod the issue has become more convoluted because of conflicting interpretations of statements, documents, or articles of the Church Order. As a member of Synod you can get the helpless feeling that agreeing or disagreeing with a classis or a regional synod is not going to solve anything locally, where the problem is.

Conclusion

Brother Bob VanHuppelen received the envelope from the convening church with the proposed agenda for Synod. But when he saw the stack of papers of about an inch thick he was quite overwhelmed. His wife couldn't believe her eyes. "Are you supposed to read all that?" "I'm afraid so," he said. But after a while, when he got into it, he found it actually pretty interesting.

And when Bob came home after General Synod was closed, he was happy that it was over, but he was thankful that he had been able to serve the Lord and his churches in this way. He looked back on an interesting experience. He had enjoyed the fellowship and he had

General Synod Smithers, 2007: An introduction to the convening church

On May 7 and 8, twenty-four delegates to General Synod 2007 will be making their way up to a little town called Smithers located in North-western BC. It is highly recommended that you get a window seat if you make the flight from Vancouver to Smithers on a clear day, because you will get to see the North Shore mountains from up close. On the plane you can look forward to seeing glaciers, alpine lakes, rugged peaks, and deep valleys with rushing rivers, but if it's cloudy when you fly in, don't worry, you'll see the same things right from the window of the place you are staying. With mountains surrounding her, rivers rushing by her, and wildlife coming to visit her, Smithers is a town where the magnificence of God's creation and his almighty majesty are always remembered. Too bad for the delegates they are just coming for work; maybe we'll be able to sneak out on a Saturday afternoon to see some of the sights up close.

After a prayer service on Tuesday evening (May 8), General Synod will be convened on May 9 at 9:00 in the morning in the Canadian Reformed church building of Smithers. The building is located along Highway 16 as a person drives Northwest up from Houston. About a year ago, the congregation in Smithers bought the building from another church group, and after many volunteers were involved in much demolition and re-building, finishing and decorating, we have a spacious beautiful building for our congregation of just



over 400 members. At the time of writing there remains some exterior and landscaping work to be done although most of it is scheduled to be completed in time for Synod. As convening church we recognize that with the increase of delegates to General Synod there may be more committees than usual. Thankfully we have the room in our new building for that. And for those delegates who want to write home to their wives and children about the bear they saw grazing in a field, or the moose that looked at them from the side of the highway, you can do this quickly without waiting in line because the church building will have wireless internet for the duration of Synod. The kitchen staff is ready to use the newly stocked facilities for the meals which will be enjoyed in the large fellowship hall (maybe you can even see what moose or bear or deer tastes like!). Thanks to the technically advanced members of our congregation, all the material for General Synod (except for the three volumes of reports) has been converted into searchable PDF format. We hope this will prove helpful for committee work. The generous and energetic congregation of Smithers is looking forward to making this a most enjoyable time for all who come to visit. You can check out our website: www.smitherscanrc.org for more information.

As convening church, it is our prayer that the deliberations of General Synod may proceed unhindered and that the Lord will bless the delegates in their task.



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Where There's a Will There's a Way: Ecumenical Reflections on the "Seminary Question"

I read with interest, but also considerable disappointment, the "Seminary Question" article in the January 31 issue of *Christian Renewal*. As I read of the present impasse between the Canadian Reformed (CanRC) and United Reformed (URCNA) unity committees on the matter of theological education, I thought to myself: where there's a will there's a way!

So far, two wills have come to expression. The CanRC committee, reflecting the unambiguous will of their churches as expressed at Synod Neerlandia 2001, has expressed its will: there *will* be at least one federationally-governed theological school! In turn, the corresponding URCNA committee on theological education, in spite of the fact that its mandate from the churches gathered at Synod Escondido 2001 was considerably more ambiguous, has nevertheless also unambiguously expressed its will: no there will not!

The stakes are high. It has been stated both implicitly and explicitly that the potential union of the two federations hangs in the balance with regards to this very issue. And we wonder, is there not another will that should come to expression – what those before us have called *the will to ecumenism*? The will, even as the king of the church wills it, that we may be one (John 17:21). Is that our will?

Of course there is such a thing as false ecumenicity, a pretended unity that can the more easily be achieved by ignoring, refusing to deal with, or papering over matters of fundamental and principal difference. The only unity we should seek is unity in the truth (John 17:14, 17). We ought to be encouraged, then, by the desire shown in both of our respective committees to stand on principle. The brothers on the CanRC committee are to be commended for their desire to maintain what they believe to be a biblical principle based on 2 Timothy 2:2. Similarly, the URCNA brethren are to be commended for refusing to have the churches bound to a *principle* which they are not convinced clearly or necessarily derives from Scripture.

We can't both be right, can we? I humbly submit to you that yes, indeed, we can both be right. And we can both be wrong too.

Lest I begin to sound like a post-modern relativist, let me hasten to explain. I believe that we *are* both right and that we *are* both wrong – at the same time – but in different ways.

In their thoroughly argued position paper entitled *Why Do the Canadian Reformed Churches Have their Own Seminary*¹ the CanRC brethren are surely right in their contention that the *practice*² of seminary education "by the church,

for the church" is of a long and strong pedigree in the history of the Reformed churches, particularly in the line of the Secession of 1834. This commitment has generally served the churches very well. This commitment among the Secession churches was also recognized as a "principle" in the Union of the Secession and Doleantie churches that took place in 1892. This heritage also came to expression in North America with the establishment of Calvin Seminary by the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC) in the late nineteenth century and with the establishment of the Canadian Reformed Theological College in the mid twentieth century. We could even add to the weight of the historical argument the fact that some commitment to a "school of the churches" is also maintained to this day among the majority of the churches of NĀPARC.³ Obviously such a precedent ought to carry considerable weight in the discussions and, the Lord willing, with regard to any concrete plans for future federative union.

In my estimation, the CanRC go wrong, however, by confusing principle and application. Their position paper says many good and helpful things on the basis of texts like 2 Timothy 2:2 and 1 Timothy 3:15 that serve to emphasize the churches' scriptural responsibility to train future ministers. It is

certainly also true that the churches have been well served when, in commitment to that principle, federational seminaries have been established. This has been a very good *application* of the principle. But we must beware of a penchant we may be particularly susceptible to as Reformed believers who rightly seek to be very principled. It's the tendency to enjoy and appreciate the *application* of a principle so much that we become devoted to the application *as though* it were the principle itself. Even the CanRC position paper acknowledges that historical circumstances will have an impact on how the churches' principled pursuit of the education of its ministers will be worked out.

Perhaps the important distinction between principle and application could profitably be compared to the difference between root and fruit. If the biblical principle with regard to the churches' obligation to train its ministers stands at the foundation as root, then the model of seminary education the CanRC churches presently enjoy is a precious and delicate *fruit* that has been produced and preserved over several years of the Lord's providential leading and blessing. This fruit has ripened over the course of a long and noble history. Should such a precious fruit be discarded? I don't believe so. Nevertheless, I believe the present discussion has been taken "out on a limb" when fruit is confused for root, when the application of the principle becomes the principle.

My evaluation of the rights and the wrongs of the approach taken by the URCNA theological education unity committee thus far can be more brief, not because the matters are any less crucial, but simply because they correspond to the points already developed above. I believe the URCNA brothers have been right insofar as they have not confused principle and application. I believe they have been wrong, however, in their

categorical unwillingness to entertain any consideration of at least one federational seminary.

I believe the discussion needs to come down from "out on the limb" and be built up again from the roots. As I understand it, many helpful things have been agreed upon already at the committee level. We could start with what we confess together in the Heidelberg Catechism in reference to the fourth commandment, that our first obligation in the life of thankful service with regard to Sabbath is "that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained." If we can agree *that* it has to be done, we can spend whatever time it takes working out the details together of *how* it might best be accomplished.

It would seem to me that were the committees to be able to set before the respective federations a strong presentation of where we do agree in principle, the roots would be established for fruitful accommodation of one another's historical experiences, concerns, and commitments. It is my hope that the way forward could be found through our acknowledging together that there is a difference between *compromising on principle* on the one hand, and *accommodating one another with regards to precedent* on the other. Out of faithfulness to the Lord and to one another we may not do the former. Out of love to the Lord and for one another, we must do the latter.

As united as we believe we already are, spiritually, biblically, and confessionally, we will need to take the time to appreciate together that, with regard to theological education, our recent experiences have differed. We will need to be patient with each other, humble enough to learn from one another, and gracious enough to look for principled ways to accommodate one another.

The experience of many of us in the URCNA with our recent secession from the CRC is such that we have witnessed what happens

when a denominational seminary loses its moorings. We count ourselves richly blessed through the ministry of confessionally grounded institutions like Mid-America and Westminster seminaries. Especially, however, we are grateful for the rekindled consciousness in our midst of the consistorial and classical responsibility for the oversight of theological education. We had sometimes succumbed to the danger of simply "letting the seminary take care of it." We wouldn't want that to happen again.

At the same time, it would obviously be neither wise nor gracious for our barely ten-year-old federation of United Reformed churches to take the position that the CanRC commitment to the (at least) 150 year-old historic Reformed practice of federational theological education must now be abandoned in order for any hopes of church union to materialize.

And that brings us back to the sticky business of working out the details practically. No one should be under any delusions that such will be easy. But with a shared principled commitment among the churches to work towards ensuring ministerial training that is properly accountable to the churches, and with a loving commitment to count the other better than oneself, I am convinced that much more will be possible than we would have ever asked or imagined.

It will take time and effort. We need to take our time. We also need to make the effort. Where there's a will there's a way.

¹ Available here: <http://www.canrc.org/college/CanRCSemReasonsRev.pdf>

² I purposely use the word *practice* here, acknowledging that in the Canadian Reformed presentation as well as in the historical developments in the days of the Secession movement and Union of 1892, the word "*principle*" is used.

³ Each of the following bodies either presently maintain their own

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Dealing with Disagreements in the Church (Part 2 of 2)

I continue the discussion of the troubles in the Dutch sister churches. In the previous instalment my focus was on the activities of what I called the opposition – a sizable and vocal minority which for some years already has voiced complaints about developments in their church community. I gave special attention to one of their websites, namely eeninwaarheid.nl, which is among the more influential sources of information on the Dutch troubles for Canadian readers. I raised questions about the tone and contents of that site and about the method itself, lamented the one-sidedness of the site's approach, and wrote that in a second instalment I would try to restore the balance somewhat by giving attention to the perspective of the accused.

This, then, is the goal of the present article. Because of limitations of space I have decided to deal with only one controversy, namely that concerning the changes in worship style and liturgy. Of course there are other "burning issues," such as the new approach to hermeneutics, the matter of the relationship between Sabbath and Sunday, and the synodical decision about divorce and remarriage. These controversies have been dealt with, however, in some detail in earlier issues of this magazine. Rather than repeating what has been said

before, I refer readers to these earlier articles.¹ The matter of changes in worship style has, as far as I know, not been dealt with in any detail in these pages and will therefore get our attention now.

Worship style

Some aspects of the controversy have already been mentioned. Because of an increasing concern for evangelism, there are congregations in Holland which organize low-threshold services in order to accommodate visitors. In such services the sermon is adapted, insider terminology as much as possible avoided, and the liturgy explained and perhaps simplified. There is also the practice of giving more attention to the children, who may be addressed separately during the service and involved in other ways. Yet another area of change is the liturgy. Especially the younger generation is unhappy with what it calls a frozen liturgy and asks for more contemporary music, the use of other instruments in addition to or instead of the organ, the use of a projector, and so on. Consistories and synods are kept busy discussing the extent to which contemporary music and other adaptations can be allowed. Meanwhile those who demand change become impatient, while other church members, especially older ones, object to the innovations and feel no longer at

home in their church. For many, the changes are yet another proof of apostasy and deformation. Not surprisingly, much of the blame is placed on synods, consistories, and pastors for giving in to the unreasonable demands of the younger generations.

Is this accusation justified? Are the demands for change indeed unreasonable? To find answers to these and similar questions, it helps to look at the context wherein all this happens. Unlike their elders, who grew up under modernism, members of the younger generation were born and raised in the postmodern era. The differences between modernism and postmodernism are profound and the younger members of the church live in a culture that is unlike that of their parents and grandparents. They have different views on practically every aspect of life, including the areas of faith, spirituality, and worship. Whereas modernism tended to be intellectualistic, focusing on the head, postmodernism stresses experience, the emotions, spirituality, all of them matters of the heart.

This should make clear that there is no question here of a turning away from doctrine. Young people who ask for liturgical changes do not reject the Bible or the confessions, nor do they oppose the centrality of the preaching in the worship services. What they do

ask for is a less intellectualistic approach and sermons and a liturgy that address their and their contemporaries' spiritual needs. Yet another difference with the older generation is that young people are less "pillarized" and more desirous of unity with other Reformed churches. The liturgy, they feel, should not become a stumbling block to such unity. They are also more aware of the needs of the rest of the world and of their responsibility with respect to it. It took members of the younger generation in the Dutch churches (and also in our own) not only to remind the church of its evangelism mandate but to initiate urgently needed breakthroughs in this area. This commitment goes a long way in explaining their demand for a lowering of church walls and thresholds.

The need

When I take this context into account, the demand for change becomes understandable to me, as does the attitude of synods and pastors in heeding it. To allow changes is risky, for there is much opposition, and the danger of disorder and of "going overboard" always exists. Most of us have heard rumours about innovations that are incompatible with the dignity that should characterize worship. To ignore legitimate demands, however, is also risky. To give an idea of the dilemma, I quote from an article by the Rev. B. Luiten, a pastor in Zwolle.²

Luiten begins by mentioning the difficulties pastors encounter when they allow, for example, low-threshold services. Although the command to proclaim the gospel to outsiders is admitted, conservative members frequently complain when adaptations are made for the sake of these outsiders and may

even register their protest by refusing to participate in the liturgy. The temptation to avoid controversies, Luiten writes, is always there for the preacher. But he then quotes disturbing news about the number of young people who leave the church. Although the rate is highest in more liberal churches, the trend is strong in the Reformed church as well.

As long as it does not become an idol, tradition is valuable and reminds us that we belong to a church that spans the ages

At age nineteen, statistics show, only fifty-two out of every 100 Reformed young people are still involved in the church. Luiten continues:

Every year in September I meet many young people from all over the country, who come and do their studies here. They frankly talk to me about what they have learnt in their home churches. Some do so with enthusiasm, as they have been brought close to God. Others, however, are desperate, frustrated and confused about all the contradictions of hearing about God, but never experiencing Him in church life; of being expected to do all sorts of things, but not finding any love, so that they do not have an idea of what believing in God really means. . . .

Will these young people invite their friends to church? I do not think so. They do not know why. They feel ashamed of all the difficult language, the ancient and rigid customs, and

especially the aloofness in it all. Do you see the domino effect of this? It is not only that our own teenagers leave church, but also their non-believing peers will not be reached. Meanwhile, synods convene in order to decide whether singing choruses is allowed in the service. Choruses that are understood, loved and sung by the vast majority of our young people! While we are discussing the legitimacy of choruses, young people are dropping out of the church. What should a true prophet say about this? If you say nothing at all, in order to please the traditionalists among us, how close has false prophecy come?

The quotation speaks for itself. At the very least, it should caution us not to condemn the developments in this area rashly. We should also not forget that the difference between Canada and The Netherlands is far from absolute. It is true, we do not face the same challenges the Dutch churches face, but demands for changes in worship style and liturgy and for a lowering of thresholds are heard also among us. And do we not have to consider the possibility that we too may experience the type of "exodus" of members that occurs elsewhere? We will be wise to ask ourselves what we can learn from The Netherlands.

Tradition and traditionalism

In the first instalment I wrote that suspicion plays a role in the Dutch troubles and that often this suspicion is based on fear of change. That fear is understandable. We are all creatures of habit and cherish our time-honoured traditions. It can happen, however, that we equate

these traditions with biblical truths and fall into the trap of traditionalism. The controversy over changes in worship is a case in point. Whatever we think of praise songs, different musical instruments, choirs, projectors, and screens in the worship service, it will be hard to prove that the Bible forbids them. It certainly cannot be argued that matters such as a desire for unity with fellow-believers, a concern for evangelism, a welcoming of outsiders, and a lowering of thresholds are signs of deformation. And as for involving the children in the worship service, did not the Lord himself welcome them, against the protests of the disciples (Luke 18:16)?

In our day more and more attention is given to the danger of traditionalism in the church – also by Christians outside our own circles. When I was in the process of writing this instalment, an acquaintance alerted me to articles on the topic by Dr. John M. Frame, formerly professor of systematic theology and philosophy at Westminster Theological Seminary, now at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Frame's analysis is to the point and I will list some of his arguments. Frame distinguishes between tradition and traditionalism. Adherence to tradition, he writes, is praiseworthy, for God wants us to learn from the wisdom of the past. Reformed Christians are therefore wise not to discard traditions lightly. At the same time, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* teaches them to follow the Reformers in testing all human traditions by the Word of God. The opposite of a proper honouring of tradition, namely traditionalism, occurs "where *sola Scriptura* is violated, either by adding to or subtracting from God's Word

(Deut. 4:2)." The standard of judgment then becomes history and custom, without a searching of Scripture.

Frame detects this type of traditionalism in Reformed and Presbyterian circles. It is one in which "not only the Confessions, but also the extra-confessional practices of the Reformed tradition, in areas such as worship, evangelism, pastoral care, are placed beyond question," creating an atmosphere which leaves no room for further reform and makes it impossible to come to a theological evaluation of new practices that address present-day needs. This, he adds, "is ironic, because one of the most basic convictions of the Reformed tradition itself is *sola Scriptura* which mandates continuing reformation, *semper reformanda*. At this point, Reformed traditionalism is profoundly anti-traditional."

By way of example, Frame refers to the argument that contemporary music is always and entirely unfit for use in worship services and asks: "But where does Scripture say this? What biblical principle implies it? How does this scruple stand up against Paul's willingness to 'become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Cor 9:22)?" He adds, "The movement toward contemporary worship music is essentially an attempt to speak the musical language that many people are speaking today. The traditionalist would forbid this and require us to use antiquarian music. But has he considered adequately Paul's emphasis on intelligible communication in worship (1 Cor 14)?"

Agreement is possible

I want to emphasize that the purpose of my article is not to

promote a drastic overhaul of worship style and liturgy. As long as it does not become an idol, tradition is valuable and reminds us that we belong to a church that spans the ages. The psalms, for example, have enduring value as songs of the covenant. Singing them in the services connects us with the church of the past, beginning in the Old Testament. A similar argument can be made for the use of the Genevan tunes, which connect us with the Reformation. At the same time we should keep in mind that these tunes – as well as some other elements in the services – belong to what Luther called *adiaphora*, "indifferent things." Their position of near-hegemony may have to be reconsidered if they become an obstacle to the church's task with respect to its own members and with respect to the world.

For the rest, and whatever the present difficulties, I hope it has become clear that the demand for change does not *have* to cause division. The Dutch churches do not face an either-or situation here, nor do our own churches. Those who ask for changes do not demand a break with the principle of *sola Scriptura* but simply want the church to keep in mind the needs and opportunities of the present. This is a legitimate demand, which deserves the attention of the older generation. The fact that in The Netherlands it receives this attention is in my opinion to be welcomed, rather than condemned.

¹ The series on hermeneutics can be found in the *Clarion* issues of August 27 to November 5, 2004, the articles on the Sunday in the issue of April 28, 2006, and the one on divorce and remarriage in that of July 7, 2006.

² The article appears in English translation in *Lux Mundi*, September 2006.





Ray of Sunshine

By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

“When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust: I will not be afraid. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”

Psalm 56:3, 4a, 13

God’s great mercy, providence and grace surely shine forth when we read Psalm 56! As we delve into the text above, we will see how we can face fearful situations in our life. At times we may have to face death, or being mocked or laughed at for being a Christian; yet God in his grace will be merciful and carry us through our difficulties.

In this Psalm, David was being chased by the murderous intentions of Saul. David had to flee and hide and was going through a fearful time in his life. We may also have to face fear, anxiety, worry, and stress. How will we deal with this? Let us open our Bibles and see what Jesus teaches us in Philippians 4:6, 7. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Going back to Psalm 56 we can see how David has done this. He prayed to the Lord in his fear and thus reflected on God’s faithful help, love, and care. For when all seems dark, one truth still shines bright; when God is for us, those against us will never succeed. God will quiet our hearts and give us the confidence to go on.

When we worry or are afraid, we do not trust our heavenly Father. That means we do not know Him well enough. Take heart, for we can learn to grow in Him when we study the Word of God. The Bible teaches us who He really is and how He has supplied for the needs of his people in the past. That will build confidence for the future. Study and learn from God’s Word everyday, by reading or letting it be read to you, so that God will fill your mind. Otherwise, Satan may take opportunity to move in and tempt you to worry or be afraid of something. Instead, let what God has recorded in Scripture and in your own life assure you that worrying and being afraid is needless because of God’s bounty and promises.

Realize that God gives you strength one day at a time. He gives you what you need when you need it. Know that all of life’s difficulties are within God’s purpose and thank Him for his available power and promises. Believe the promise of Isaiah 40:31, “Those

who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

As we begin each day anew with humble prayer we can face any earthly circumstance with this confident assurance: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

Trust in Him! For all glory belongs to Him alone!

*Will anxious care or bitter sighing
At any time give true relief?
And what avails us our decrying
Each morning’s evil, trouble, grief?
We only add to grief and stress
By discontent and bitterness.*

*Be still! What God in His good pleasure
To you in wisdom may impart
Is given you in perfect measure;
Thus be content within your heart.
To Him who chose us for His own
Our needs and wants are surely known.*

Hymn 48:2, 3

Birthdays in May:

- 1 **CLARENCE ZWIEP will be 53**
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8
- 4 **DEBBIE VEENSTRA will be 33**
RR 1, Sherkston, ON L0S 1R0
- 10 **ROB DE HAAN will be 42**
Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, RR 2, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2
- 30 **BERNIE DE VOS will be 32**
40 Kerman Avenue, Grimsby, ON L3M 3W5

Congratulations to all of you who are celebrating your birthday this month. May you have an enjoyable day together with your family and friends and above all may you have God’s rich blessings for this new year.

Till next month,

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