

A GENERAL SYNOD

is Coming to Town

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2025 is going to be a general synod year for our Canadian Reformed churches (DV). Are you—dear reader—excited about this once-every-three-years event? That’s probably a bit too much to ask. But are you perhaps interested in what’s going to happen at this synod? Do you feel that what will be going on there is something that has to do with you or may even impact you?

In Church Order Article 29 the churches have agreed that the structure of the federation has classes, regional synods, and general synods. When Article 49 says a bit more about those general synods, it only describes the frequency of such gatherings, and who qualifies to be members. But how should such a gathering operate and what sort of matters is it supposed to deal with?

To begin with, the basic rules we agreed upon for the work of all assemblies, outlined in the Articles 30–36, also apply to a

general synod. Furthermore, throughout the Church Order several articles mention matters that must be handled by a general synod.

HOW OFTEN?

Early in the formative years of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands the need was felt to have regular general or national synods: meetings of delegates that would represent all the churches of the federation. Synod Emden 1571 set the frequency at every two years, whereas the next synod made it every three years. However, that did not work well. The churches had made themselves too dependent on the civil authorities, and political powers controlled many aspects of church life. The well-known Synod of Dort 1618/19 came twenty years after the previous one. After that, the authorities prevented another general synod from



Synod of Dort 1618 – 19

being convened for over 200 years. Only after the Secession of 1843 did general synods again become a regular part of church life every three years.

In the CanRC we faithfully maintain this schedule. It's a routine we're familiar with, but that does not mean that this is the only way it can be done. Some of our sister churches in the world have the same rhythm, whereas others have an annual general synod or assembly.

There are various pros and cons here. For instance, with an annual synod appellants would not have to wait so long before their case can be judged. It may also lead to shorter synods, and it might bring the work of a synod closer to the local church members.

The main argument against more frequent synods is the Reformed principle that the essence of ecclesiastical life is in the local churches, and not in the broader assemblies. A general synod is not "the church." It is a useful, temporary body that serves the churches in matters they cannot (or simply decide not to) do on their own. Is there a danger that a synod will take on more and more activities, and thus more power than it should have? That's always possible, but whether an annual synod poses a greater risk for this than a synod once every three years is hard to prove.

HOW MANY WILL BE GOING?

How do you become a member of a general synod? You can think of different methods, of course, but we have agreed in Article 49 that "each regional synod shall delegate to this synod six ministers and six elders." With two regional synods, this makes twenty-four delegates. That's not much compared to most general synods or assemblies of our sister churches.

Synod Emden 1571 stipulated that delegates should be sent directly by the local churches. Later it was changed to delegation by the classes, and, when there were enough regional synods, the Synod of Dort 1618/19 made the rule we have in our Church Order today. But in some of our sister churches, like the URCNA, it is still the practice to send two delegates from each church. With some 130 churches, it makes for a URC synod of about 250 members.

As such, it is not a matter of principle how often we have a general synod or how large of a gathering it should be. The question is: what is most beneficial for the churches, and—when it comes to the number of delegates—what is the size that is most effective, most workable? And that depends on the expectations.

Our synods are deliberative gatherings. Before making a decision, we expect a process of listening carefully to each other,

thoughtfully weighing the arguments, in a discussion where all members are involved. This becomes more difficult in larger groups. When a synod has 200 or more delegates, instead of twenty or forty, it changes the dynamics and the character of the meeting. Obviously this does not imply that a large meeting cannot make a good decision or that a small meeting can never make a bad decision. But how you come to your decisions is different.

WHO IS GOING?

Article 49 makes clear that the churches must delegate the same number of elders and ministers. This is crucial in our presbyterial form of church government. Reformed churches are (or should be) allergic to clericalism, or any form of ministerial hierarchy. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it took a long time to get to that point. At that time synods would usually see more ministers than elders.

And even today, whereas ministers who have been elected as delegates to synod will be given time by their consistories to prepare for and attend the assembly, it's a different matter for elders. Regional synods face the question: who is available? And that's often a limited number of retirees and men who can afford to be away from work for, let's say, two weeks.

Perhaps this could be an additional reason for thinking about ways to have general synods that are a bit larger, that are held more frequently, and that can be shorter. And an additional bonus could be that in that way the work of our general synods can indeed become a bit more alive and appreciated in our local churches.

But it is important to remember that a synod is a gathering of the churches. And thus, regardless of who sends the delegates or how many there are: when you have been delegated to a general synod, you represent not just the body that has sent you, whether it's the local church, classis, or regional synod; rather, you represent *all* the churches.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

The limits that define the matters a general synod can legitimately deal with are agreed upon in Church Order Article 30. To begin with: a synod can only deal with "ecclesiastical matters," things that pertain to the life of the church. Nothing else may come onto synod's agenda—although it may not always be immediately clear what is and what is not covered by this expression. Then Article 30 identifies two categories of entries that can be admitted and put

on the agenda of a synod: matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly and matters which belong to the churches in common. The result is that in practice a synod can be faced with roughly three groups of submissions: (1) appeals, (2) proposals or overtures, and (3) committee reports.

One question that often comes up is: what are things that belong to the churches in common and who determines that? Does a general synod have the authority to decide this on its own? No, it doesn't. Some things are already mentioned in the Church Order. For instance, matters of doctrine (Art. 26), changes in the Church Order (Art. 76), training for the ministry (Art. 19), ecumenical contacts (Art. 51), and a few regulations for worship (Arts. 52, 55, 56). Other than that, it can only be determined if it is clear that the implications of an overture will impact all the churches in the federation. The last paragraph of Article 30 describes the way to get to that point. It's often called "the ecclesiastical route."¹

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There is nothing in the Church Order as to how a general synod should operate. That does not mean that the brothers have to figure this out once they get together. Like the other assemblies, a general synod also has its own internal regulations, called "Guidelines for General Synods." You can find the latest version in the Acts of General Synod Guelph, 2022, Appendix 28.

The practice is that all the matters on the agenda are given to "advisory committees" made up of members of synod. Every member of synod is assigned to one of these committees, frequently six in total made up of four men each. They are to study the material given to them and produce a report with recommendations that can be voted on. In dealing with appeals, this is a good way of getting a handle on the—sometimes complicated—issues.

However, it does make for longer synods. Perhaps the reports of synodical committees, as well as overtures produced by churches, can present recommendations in a format that makes it possible to be discussed, perhaps amended, and then voted on directly by synod, without the detour of an advisory committee report. Who



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¹ I will not elaborate on this. Earlier this year Rev. Karlo Janssen wrote on this topic in this magazine. See *Clarion*, Vol. 73, #2, 51-53 and #3, 95-96.