

PROVISIONAL AGENDA

For the THIRTEENTH Synod of the
UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

Convening Monday, June 17, 2024, at 8 p.m., Pacific Daylight Time

At the Escondido United Reformed Church

Ending Friday, June 21, 2024

Registration Monday, June 17, 2024, from Noon – 7:00 p.m.

Prayer Service Monday June 17, 2024, at 7:00 p.m.

Convened by Escondido United Reformed Church, Escondido, California

I. OPENING MATTERS

- A. Meeting called to order by the convening consistory, Escondido United Reformed Church, Escondido, California.
- B. Opening devotions
- C. Presentation of the credentials and roll call of delegates
- D. Preliminary report on the credentials by convening consistory
- E. Assent to the *Form of Subscription* by all the delegates
- F. Synod declared constituted

II. INITIAL BUSINESS

- A. Welcome to delegates, fraternal delegates, fraternal observers, visitors, and guests
- B. Election of officers
- C. Reception of Article 32 churches and assent by their delegates to the *Form of Subscription*
- D. Adopt the provisional agenda and advisory committee assignments
- E. Adopt the proposed time schedule:
 - Morning session: 8:00 a.m. to Noon
 - Lunch: Noon – 1:00 p.m.
 - Afternoon session: 1:00 – 5:30 p.m.
 - Supper: 5:30 – 7:00 p.m.
 - Evening session: 7:00 – 9:00 p.m. Reserved for missionary presentations.
 - 30-minute breaks at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
- F. Setting times for the special orders of the day: for fraternal delegates and observers, and for scheduled presentations or programs
- G. Newly elected officers assume their duties

III. Matters Before Synod

- A. Report of the Convening Consistory.....4
 - Appendix – Stated Clerk’s Report6
- B. Financial Matters
 - 1. Synod Niagara 2022 Financial Report.....13
 - 2. U.S. Treasurer’s Reports
 - 2022 Letter and Financial Report14

2023 Letter and Financial Report	19
3. Canadian & JVA Treasurer’s Reports	
2022 Letter and Financial Report	22
2023 Letter and Financial Report	29
C. Statistician’s Report	35
D. Overtures	
<i>Classis Central U.S.</i>	
1. Appoint Study Committee to Develop Guidelines for Vacant Church.....	51
2. Include Committee Mandates in Committee Reports to Synod.....	54
3. Amend Church Order Article 31 & Appendix 7.....	55
4. Dissolve the Appointment of the Oversight Consistory of the Website Oversight Committee.	58
5. Adopt Pastoral Advice Regarding the Relationship of Church, State, and Family	59
6. Delegates to Synod to be Chosen by Classis	63
7. Establish Synodical Travel Fund	68
<i>Classis Eastern U.S.</i>	
8. Amend Appendix 7 of the Church Order.....	71
9. Create the Position of a Home Mission Clerk	75
10. Appoint Study Committee on Building and Loan Fund	77
<i>Classis Michigan</i>	
11. Select Synodical Delegates by Classis.....	79
12. Amend CO Articles 20 & 26	83
<i>Classis Ontario-East</i>	
13. Establish Synodical Organizing Committees.....	86
14. Amend CO Art. 6.....	87
<i>Classis Pacific Northwest (none)</i>	
<i>Classis Southwestern Ontario (none)</i>	
<i>Classis Southwest U.S.</i>	
15. Amend CO Appendix 8 Regarding Erasure.....	89
16. Church Order Edits – Part 1	90
17. Church Order Edits – Part 2.....	95
<i>Classis Western Canada (none)</i>	
<i>First URC of Chino</i>	
18. Church Order Edits (not adopted by Classis SWUS)	105
E. Appeals (none)	
F. Communications (none)	
G. Committee Reports	
1. Board of Directors – United States URCNA Corporation	107
Appendix 1 – Restated Articles of Incorporation	110
Appendix 2 – Amended and Restated Bylaws.....	114
2. Board of Directors – Canadian URCNA Corporation and JVA.....	121
3. Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA).....	125
4. Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU)	158
5. Liaison Committee for the Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel (PRCC)	173

6. Oversight Consistory for the Website Oversight Committee	179
7. Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions	180
Appendix: Mission Coordinator’s Report.....	184
8. Synodical Committee on Home Missions.....	190
9. Standing Committee on Appeals	259
10. Study Committee on Digital Worship.....	260
11. Study Committee on Human Sexuality.....	280
12. <i>Trinity Psalter Hymnal</i> Joint Venture Board	309
13. Website Oversight Committee	313
Appendix: Webmaster’s Report.....	317

IV. ELECTIONS & APPOINTMENTS

- A. Stated Clerk and Alternate
- B. Webmaster
- C. Board of Directors – United States
- D. Standing Committees
- E. Others As Needed

V. CLOSING MATTERS

- A. Choosing the convening consistory, place, and date for the next synod
- B. Reading of concept minutes
- C. Acknowledgments
- D. Closing devotions
- E. Adjournment

Convening Consistory Report Synod Escondido 2024

March 1 2023: The Council of Escondido URC formed a committee to begin preparations for organizing Synod 2024.

March 14, 2023: The committee held its initial meeting and discussed some of the general needs for Synod. Sub-committees were formed to work on the different needs for the synod. Rev. Chris Gordon agreed to take on the role of Chair of the committee.

March 31, 2023: The Acts of Synod were received and re-packaged to be distributed to the various classes of the Federation.

April 11, 2023: The Synod planning committee met and discussed personnel needs. Confirmation was made that the Acts of the previous synod were sent out. URCNA webmaster contacted and new access set up. Discussed the needs for hosting the Synod at the Escondido URC. Categories discussed: finance, operations, food, facility, technology, hospitality, and registration. Pam Hessels and Rev. Pontier were consulted for guidance.

May 9, 2023: Synod planning committee met and discussed the synod schedule. We overviewed the general categories: clerical, facility, finance, food, hospitality, operations, registration, and technology. A budget was initially discussed and prepared by our finance member for review. Pam Hessels was sought for advice.

July 25, 2023: Synod planning committee met. Task list was reviewed. Each sub-committee's work was discussed and updates provided. Previous synodical committee information was reviewed. New tasks were assigned. Budget approved.

August 22, 2023: Synod planning committee met. Updates provided. Sub-committees gave a report and update of their work. The process for display tables at synod was discussed.

December 12, 2023: Synod planning committee met. All sub-committees gave a report of their work. Reviewed communications from the stated clerk. All things are in good order.

January 2024: Established approximate costs of registration for Synod delegates.

February 2024: Sent a communication to the churches via the URCNA Stated Clerk regarding registration details. Reps from both CECCA and CERCU were contacted and asked to assist in getting fraternal delegates to and from Synod.

March 7, 2024: Synod committee met and gave updates of their work.

March 13, 2024: Registration was opened, and an invitation for registering was communicated to all delegates via the Stated Clerk.

April 2, 2024: Provisional agenda was received from the stated clerk and is under review.

April 3, 2024: Correspondence received that there are no appeals that need to be addressed for the synod.

April 4, 2024: Communication received from the Foreign Missions Coordinator regarding a missions presentation that will take place on the Wednesday evening of Synod week.

On behalf of the consistory of Escondido URC, the planning committee wishes to thank the churches of the federation for the privilege and opportunity to host this year's Synod. A special thanks goes out to URCNA Stated Clerk Rev. Pontier, who was a great help to us in planning for a synod.

Respectfully submitted,

On behalf of the Consistory of Escondido United Reformed Church,
Chair of the Synod Planning Committee, Rev. Christopher Gordon

**Stated Clerk's Report
An Appendix to the Convening Consistory Report
To Synod Escondido 2024**

Esteemed Fathers and Brothers,

Following Synod Niagara, I attended to the following duties.

- 10/28/22 Sent an email to all the churches, as instructed in Art. 32.3, reminding them to send synodical askings to the American or Canadian treasurers and classical dues to the respective classical treasurers.
- 10/28/22 Edited Appendix C to add instructions regarding "Page n of x".
- 10/28/22 Edited Appendix 8.4 of the *Church Order* with "may with concurring advice". However, waiting till ratification of CO changes before posting on the website.
- 12/08/22 Received from the First Clerk of Synod the perfected *Minutes of Synod Niagara 2022* and asked the Webmaster to post them on the public side of urcna.org.
- 12/08/22 Announced to the federation and put on the urcna.org calendar, the agenda deadline for Synod Escondido 2024. The deadline is March 25, 2024.
- 12/15/22 I sent a ratification notice and ballot to all the churches for the five items requiring consistory ratification before they can take effect. (Note to future stated clerks: When you ask churches to send you something by a certain deadline, always immediately acknowledge receipt of their response so when you send out a reminder to all the churches of the approaching deadline you don't get a dozen churches asking, "Did you get my order for the Acts?" or "Did you get my ratification ballot?" or "Did you get our credential?")
- 12/15/22 With the permission of the officers of synod, I corrected Article 105 of the minutes, adding the italicized words, "That Synod authorize the next convening consistory of synod to name, upon recommendation by the Grace United Reformed Church Consistory, a successor *oversight consistory* for the Website Oversight Committee, and that this be Synod's answer to Recommendation 3: 'That Synod find a replacement for the Grace United Reformed Church Consistory as the Oversight Consistory for the Website Oversight Committee.'" Rev. Wagenmaker discovered the omission.
- 01/11/23 I sent the completed Acts of Synod in pdf to Gary Fisher to post on the website and to Carla Goslinga at Dordt University for publication in hard copy.
- 02/27/23 The printed Acts of Synod were shipped from the publisher to the Escondido URC which was charged with distributing them to all who had ordered hard copies.
- 03/31/23 The *Acts of Synod Niagara 2022* were shipped from Escondido to each church that had placed an order. Shipment took place 5 months after synod. By comparison, The *Acts of Synod Wheaton 2018* were shipped 11 months after synod and the *Acts of Synod Wyoming 2016* were shipped about 15 months after synod.

- 04/08/23 The first listing of pastoral openings was posted on the website.
- 05/5/23 I updated the Regulations for Synodical Procedure with the changes made by Synod Niagara and sent them to the webmaster to post on the website.
- 08/8/23 I discovered another change that I had not updated (4.7.4) and sent a corrected copy to the webmaster for posting on the website.
- 03/23/24 Upon instruction from CERCUC, I sent out 12 invitations, one to each of the 12 other NAPARC denominations or federations to send a fraternal delegate or observer to this synod. CECCA handles their own invitations.
- 04/02/24 I submitted the provisional agenda to the Escondido URC consistory with the recommendation that it be approved for distribution, advising them that, in my opinion, there is nothing in the agenda that is at all out of order.

Errata in the 2022 Synod Minutes:

These mistakes were discovered after the printing of the hard copy; therefore, no change has been made to the electronic copy, lest we end up with two different versions of the official minutes. Of course, synod could mandate that the changes be made to the electronic copy on the website if synod is willing to have two versions – the printed version and the electronic version.

1. In Articles 3 and 10 there is a reference to Overture 1 saying that it deals with CO Art. 47. In reality, Overture 1 deals with CO Art. 64. Synod was not confused when dealing with Overture 1 so the error is insignificant.
2. In the middle of Article 101.14 on p. 107 of the Acts it reads as follows: “In light of the above, every sending consistory should ~~is encouraged to.~~” - According to representatives of the SCFM, that is backwards. The word “should” is what ought to have been stricken through and “is encouraged to” was the adopted reading. The “should” refers to one small part of the plan for field committees making it binding. But since a subsequent motion made the whole field committee plan optional, having “should” at that one point in the plan has no real binding effect, thus the error is insignificant.

Errata in the Church Order

Since there is no official printed copy, and since the CO is often changed at every synod, these mistakes have already been corrected in the copy on the website.

1. Article 19 last line - "the above named" should be hyphenated: "above-named"
2. Appendix 3.3.b.3 - "three week" - should be “three weeks”
3. Appendix 5 second section 1. "examinees consistory" - should have an apostrophe: “examinee's consistory”

Consistory Ratification of the Decisions of Synod Niagara 2022

Of the 121 eligible churches, 118 submitted ballots by the May 1, 2023, deadline. Of the 121, 112 voted positively on all five issues, which means everything passed by at least 92.56%. Most had a higher percentage. Thus, all issues were ratified, both those requiring a simple majority (fraternal relations) and those requiring a two-thirds majority (church order changes).

The three churches that did not submit a ballot were counted as negative votes on all five items, as per a previous synodical decision on the matter (*Acts of Synod Calgary 2004*, Art. 82.B.) All ballots have been preserved in hard copy.

Hyphenated Classis Name

It was brought to my attention that the name of Classis Ontario-East has a hyphen in it. The hyphen is meant to be a “hard comma” indicating that the classis includes churches both in Ontario and east of Ontario. It is not just the east side of the province of Ontario. The name appears often without the comma in past agendas and acts. It is my judgment that those documents don’t need to be amended. However, synod may direct otherwise.

Posting of Pastoral Openings

Synod Niagara 2022 instructed the Stated Clerk (Art. 55) to post pastoral openings on the URCNA public [website](#). At first, I thought I would update the list on the website monthly but soon realized that was not necessary since we can go many months with no change. Instead, I post a new list when a new church is added to the list or a church on the list fills their vacancy (provided I am made aware of the change).

I have had requests from CRC, RCUS, OPC, and PCA churches to have their vacancies posted on our website. I have responded that I have no authority from synod to include their vacancies on the URCNA website.

Stated Clerk is a Member of CERCU *ex officio*

Synod St. Catharines 1997 (Minutes, Art. 34.C) made the Stated Clerk an *ex officio* member of the Interchurch Relations Committee. At the next synod, the committee had given itself a new name (CERCU) and proposed a mandate, for approval, that limited it to North American denominations (cf. CERCU’s report page. 49ff in the 1999 minutes). The 1999 CERCU report continued to list the Stated Clerk as a member of CERCU. It recommended a new committee for ecumenical relations with foreign denominations, which became CECCA. When CECCA was formed, no mention was made of the Stated Clerk becoming an *ex officio* member.

Not every Stated Clerk since has availed himself of being included in CERCU meetings or correspondence, some by choice and some because the matter was not remembered. I see value in the Stated Clerk being aware of what each ecumenical committee is doing beyond just reading their synodical reports. I think it would be wise to have the Stated Clerk included in the distribution of each committee’s minutes since he is usually the first point of contact that other denominations reach out to both domestically and globally. I am not authorized to make a recommendation in this regard, but I bring it to the church’s attention in case someone, or some committee, wishes, in the future, to take action on the matter. No action, in my opinion, is needed for future Stated Clerks to be involved in CERCU.

Recommendations from Synodical Appointees

In the Regulations for *Synodical Procedure* 3, reports are listed among those items that are legally before synod, both reports of committees and reports of appointees. Those reports are to indicate “*the work performed in response to a synod’s mandate and presenting one or more recommendations for action by synod*” (emphasis added). It

should be clear that any recommendations should pertain to the mandate synod has given to that committee or appointee. Committees and appointees should not bring recommendations which are not in line with their mandate. A previous synod has prescribed that the Stated Clerk may bring recommendations for amendments to the *Regulations of Synodical Procedure* to conform to *prior synodical decisions and past practices* (4.5.4.j). This is quite appropriate because his mandate includes being *familiar with synodical regulations and past actions* (4.5.4.b).

I think it would be wise to make clear in the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* that each appointee may make recommendations within the bounds of their mandate, or stipulate any restrictions on that as synod may decide.

I make this suggestion not because I now see abuse in the matter, but to guard against abuses in the future. Mission creep is a temptation always before us.

Article 32 Churches

Classis SWUS has provisionally received the Reformed Church Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, South Africa. A vote on ratification should be taken after the election of officers and before the adoption of the provisional agenda.

Term Limit

I have served three terms as Stated Clerk. There is a three-term limit for the Stated Clerk (*Regulation 4.5.2*). I have enjoyed being of service to the churches in this capacity but look forward to being released from this responsibility in June to serve the churches in new ways. I do not believe the term limit for the Stated Clerk should ever be waived since, in other denominations, it is not uncommon for stated clerks to arrogate to themselves executive power and forget that they are just clerks.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are all based on *Regulations for Synodical Procedure 4.5.4.j* which instructs the Stated Clerk to make recommendations to update the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* to conform to prior synodical decisions and past practice.

Recommendation #1 – Synod Deadlines

Amend the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure 3.1* with the addition at the end of the current regulation, “*The deadline for getting agenda materials to the Stated Clerk shall be 12 weeks prior to the opening day of the synod. The provisional agenda shall be distributed to the churches in electronic format 8 weeks prior to synod.*”

Grounds

1. The past practice for the last several synods has been that the agenda deadline was 12 weeks prior to the meeting and the agenda has been distributed 8 weeks prior to synod.
2. The *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* do not presently give a deadline for the agenda or a time for its distribution. The Stated Clerk has sometimes done it on his own authority and sometimes in consultation with the convening consistory.

3. This will eliminate any questions future clerks might have and hold them to a consistent standard.
4. Twelve weeks allows the clerk one month to assemble and format the agenda and for the convening consistory to approve it, which should be sufficient time. If the clerk is also a full-time pastor, he will need several weeks to assemble and format the agenda and still perform his pastoral duties. Two months should be sufficient time to allow the churches to study the agenda before synod.
5. If synod is held in the third week of June, twelve weeks before puts the deadline about the third week of March which gives classes time to have their spring meeting mid-March.

Recommendation #2 – Treasurer for Synod Expenses

That the words “appointment of a synodical treasurer” be stricken from the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* 1.5 under the duties of the convening consistory.

Grounds

1. Past practice was that each convening consistory for synod would appoint a treasurer from their own church for handling the expenses related to hosting a synod. However, Synod Niagara 2022 appointed the JVA treasurer as the treasurer for those expenses and for making a report on the costs related to hosting the synods.
2. Synod Niagara 2022 adopted the following in Art. 81.5, p. 76, “*that the Synod funds be held by the Joint Venture Agreement (JVA), so that the expenses of future synods will be paid (either in the form of advances to the convening consistory or as direct payments to vendors) from the JVA bank account (rather than local consistories opening bank accounts, paying for costs, and forwarding the excess to the next consistory).*” And, Art. 81.6, p. 77, “*that the JVA Treasurer be responsible for preparing the financial report for synod and ensure that any unspent money forwarded to the local consistory is returned to the JVA account.*”

Recommendation #3 – Forward Excess Funds

That *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* 1.5.2 be stricken from the regulations. This item instructs the synodical treasurer (of the convening consistory) to forward excess funds from one synod to the convening consistory of the next synod.

Grounds

1. Synod has appointed a continuing treasurer for expenses related to hosting a synod, namely the JVA treasurer, who will use any excess funds from one synod to help fund the next synod.
2. See *Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Articles. 81.5 and 81.6 quoted in Ground 2 of the previous recommendation.

Recommendation #4 – Audited Financial Statement

That *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* 4.6.4.c. be reviewed by synod in consultation with the two treasurers and their boards to see if this regulation needs to be amended particularly regarding the words “audited or independently reviewed.”

Grounds

1. Synod Wheaton 2018 (Art. 30.2) suspended the entire regulation 4.6.4.c because of the four words in question, though it did not intend to eliminate the need for the treasurers to submit an annual financial statement to their respective boards, which statements also go to synod.
2. The financial statements in the agendas for synod are usually labeled “not audited” or “unaudited.”
3. The Stated Clerk does not know what to recommend in this regard but believes clarification is needed.

Recommendation #5 – Term Limits for Treasurers

That *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* 4.6.2. be amended by striking the words “A treasurer shall serve no more than three terms consecutively.”

Grounds

1. Synod Wyoming 2018 (Art. 34.2) suspended this rule to elect the then US Treasurer to another term beyond a third term.
2. The current Canadian Treasurer, who, because of Canadian law, may not be subject to appointment by a US entity, has served faithfully and well for seven terms.
3. Continuity is an important component of effectiveness.

Recommendation #6 – Recommendations from Appointees

Add Regulation 4.7.4. to the responsibilities of the Webmaster to read, “Make recommendations within the bounds of the webmaster’s mandate.”

Add Regulation 4.8.4.e to the responsibilities of the Statistician to read, “Make recommendations within the bounds of the Statistician’s mandate.”

Add Regulation 4.5.4.m. “Make recommendations within the bounds of the Stated Clerk’s mandate.”

Grounds

1. Regulation 3.2 allows appointees to make recommendations in their reports. Thus, these additions are not necessary to establish that responsibility, but it would make clear what has not always been understood.
2. The *Regulations* already elaborate on one appointee’s responsibility to make recommendations, namely for the Stated Clerk.
3. In the past, the Webmaster has been making recommendations.
4. In her two reports the Statistician has been making suggestions (which, in the first instance, Synod Niagara acted on as recommendations – and approved).
5. This is not needed for the treasurers since they are members of their respective boards through which they can make recommendations.
6. A reminder that recommendations should be limited by synod’s mandate is always helpful.

Recommendation #7

That Regulation 4.8.4.c be enlarged by adding to the end of it, the list of information which Synod Niagara 2022 instructed the Statistician to collect, cf. Art. 69.4, page 68. It should be added as a new sentence at the end of the present 4.8.4.c, to read, “*In addition, the Statistician shall differentiate between infant and adult baptisms; differentiate between*”

exclusion of a baptized member and exclusion of professing members due to resignation; URCNA membership transfers (in / out); NAPARC membership transfers (in / out); non-NAPARC membership (release / receptions); differentiate between elders and deacons; minister's birth year; and same church membership analysis."

Grounds

1. The decision of Synod Niagara was not worded as an amendment to the *Regulations of Synodical Procedure*, although it was adopted with a reference to the then current list of responsibilities, as if it could be an addition to that list.
2. It was clearly the intent of synod that the Statistician collect the named information regularly, not just once. Therefore, it should be added to the description of the Statistician's responsibilities, so they are not forgotten when a new Statistician is appointed.

Respectfully submitted, your servant,
Ralph A. Pontier
URCNA Stated Clerk

Synod Niagara
Budget vs Actual Comparison
Synod 2022

	Budget			Actual		Difference	
	Qty	Rate	Amount	Qty	Amount		
Revenues							
Delegates	226	672.80	152,052.80	187	125,813.60	(26,239.20)	(1)
Late fee			-	13	650.00	650.00	
Observer	5	453.60	2,268.00	26	15,888.60	13,620.60	(2)
Displayer / exhibitor	6	300.00	1,800.00	10	3,000.00	1,200.00	
Woman's Outing			-	9	95.00	95.00	
Exchange loss			-		(2,206.51)	(2,206.51)	(3)
BUDGETED REVENUES			<u>156,120.80</u>		<u>143,240.69</u>	(12,880.11)	
Expenses							
Audio visual / projectors			10,958.00		12,750.22	1,792.22	
Committee travel			1,148.00		1,124.00	(24.00)	
Fraternal delegates	16		5,424.00	8	3,596.06	(1,827.94)	
Meals			99,506.25		99,506.25	-	
Meeting rooms			10,875.00		10,875.00	-	
Insurance			275.00		275.00	-	
Office			3,500.00		71.90	(3,428.10)	
Stipend (piano)			250.00		250.00	-	
Credit card / bank charges			5,330.00		4,518.93	(811.07)	
Miscellaneous			1,267.00		479.40	(787.60)	
Website			16,825.00		20,418.75	3,593.75	(4)
Deposits lost			764.00		729.57	(34.43)	
BUDGETED EXPENSES			<u>156,122.25</u>		<u>154,595.08</u>	(1,527.17)	
Deficit			<u>(1.45)</u>		<u>(11,354.39)</u>	(11,352.94)	
Bank, Funds received for Synod 2022			22,272.87		23,772.87		(5)
Deficit			(1.45)		(11,354.39)		
Bank, Projected / Actual funds for Synod 2024			<u>22,271.42</u>		<u>12,418.48</u>		

Notes:

- (1) Total eligible delegates was 236; committee budgeted for 226 delegates to attend. Shortfall from eligible number of delegates was 49.
- (2) The number of observers represents those that attended for the entire week. The difference represents those that attended part of the week.
- (3) Committee estimated that the exchange rate would be 1.00 American for 1.30 Canadian dollar. Delegate and other fees for Canadians were recorded at the US\$ equivalent; this amount accounts for the loss incurred due to exchange rate fluctuations.
- (4) Website costs represent the cost for setting up the program for the planned Synod in 2020 and then the update for Synod 2022. More costs were incurred than expected as registration occurred and additional programmer help was required.
- (5) Additional funds that were owed to a previous Synod was collected

United Reformed Churches in North America

Robert D. Huisjen, US URCNA Treasurer
8443 Farview Dr SE, Byron Center, Michigan, 49315

February 18, 2023

To: Pastors, Elders, and Deacons of URCNA member churches
From: US URCNA Treasurer

Dear Brothers,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving the Lord as the US Treasurer from 2012 through 2022. The purpose of this letter is to provide some observations and information relative to the finances of URCNA as well as summarize the US URCNA's finances for last year.

The per family US Askings for 2023 are \$39.00 per family. Also, a new US Treasurer was appointed at Synod Niagara. His name is John Ehnis and his mailing address is 1686 Creekside Court, Wayland, MI 49348. Beginning January 1, 2023, Askings should be sent to the new treasurer. His email address is USTreasurer@URCNA.org.

As you can see on the attached financial report, total income for the year for the general fund was \$107,467 (compared to \$116,380 in 2021) and total expenses were \$144,005 (compared to \$100,668 in 2021 which resulted in expenses in excess of income in the amount of \$36,538 (compared to \$15,712 income in 2021). Note also on the 2022 report \$1,525 of the income was from 2021 askings received and reported in January of 2022 since that is when they were received. The loss for 2022 was due to intentionally reduced askings and also because of some necessary legal expenses.

OBSERVATIONS

1. According to the 2022 directory, there are currently 88 churches, 10 of which are designated as church plants.
2. Classical Dues are not the same as the Synodical "Askings". Any fees that are due to a particular classis must be paid to that Classis Treasurer. Any Synodical "Askings" must be paid to the US (or Canadian) Treasurer. These are separate amounts that are due. Classis will not forward a church's "Askings" to me.
3. Budget 2023 and 2024. Synod Niagara approve the budgets for 2023 and 2024.

STATISTICS

This below chart, very simply, indicates the historical percentage of member churches that did not provide any Askings. Organizing churches were omitted from the calculation.

Year	Church Non-Participation
2007	26%
2008	25%
2009	23%
2010	27%
2011	24%
2012	7%
2013	10%

2014	8%
2015	7%
2016	8%
2017	9%
2018	9%
2019	8%
2020	8%
2021	8%
2022	8%

US ASKINGS

URCNA "Askings" equals "Suggested Donation". For the calendar year 2023, the US Askings donation was adjusted to \$39.00 per family with the Treasurers (US and Canada) and the US Board reviewing annually the recommended Askings per family for the following year. This money is used for the ongoing activity of URCNA. Some churches choose to take a free-will offering instead of using the formula. Each member church has a responsibility to participate, in whatever way, in the overall ministry of URCNA.

It has been suggested that many member churches do not remember about the "Askings" from year to year because of the yearly changes in the council. Beginning in 2014 the treasurers started to send out reminder "statements" reminding the churches of their recommended "Askings". Please inform your deacons and have last year's treasurer remind this year's treasurer about "Askings".

A 50/50 Joint Venture agreement was put in place between the URCNA - US and the OPC. There is a fund balance being held by the OPC for future printings of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal and also for a potential digital edition. The current cash value of the URCNA- US interest in the JVA is \$89,555 as of 12/31/2022, of which \$45,000 is reserved for printing, \$5,000 for digital development, and \$25,000 for royalty reserves.

PSALTER HYMNAL FUND

Synod Niagara instructed the US Board to distribute the surplus in the Hymnal Fund among the 8 classis of our federation. Grounds were that the hymnal fund no longer needed the funds, and the money would be helpful for classical needy church funds, church planting, or other mission works supported by classes.

The following pages contain the audited End-Of-Year Report for 2022. In addition, guidelines for reimbursement are also provided. The reimbursement guidelines are intended to adhere to the guidelines defined by the U.S. Government.

CHECKS

Please make all "Askings" checks payable to "URCNA". Send US Askings to the new US treasurer: **Mr. John Ehnis, 1686 Creekside Court, Wayland, MI 49348.**

REIMBURSEMENT GUIDELINES

All reimbursement requests must be submitted to the committee chairman for approval prior to being sent to the Treasurer for reimbursement. The goal is to keep the process from being complicated while providing the chairman knowledge of what is being spent. To reduce the amount of time between submittals and reimbursement, once the committee chair has approved the expense, he should mail the reimbursement request directly to the appropriate Treasurer. Attached to this document is a copy of a Synodical Expense Reimbursement Form.

1. Receipts must be presented to the Committee Head who will approve the receipts and send them to either the Canadian or US Treasurer, depending on if the member has a Canadian or US address.
2. When possible, provide actual receipts. (Fax or scanned copies are acceptable. Just make sure the information being faxed is legible.)
3. For airline travel, provide the last portion of the ticket, which contains the entire round-trip information.

For those who get E-tickets, the cost of the ticket will not be printed. In addition to that ticket, please provide some sort of receipt from the travel agency or, as a last resort, a photocopy of the bankcard statement with the ticket charge circled. If a receipt has items that are personal, send a photocopy of the receipt and circle the reimbursable items.

4. Mileage will be reimbursed at the IRS rate, which, for 2023, has increased to **62.5** cents per mile. Gasoline is not reimbursed when mileage is submitted.
5. Meals will be reimbursed.
6. Please also submit receipts for meals.
7. If somebody pays for a group meal, that receipt must be submitted.
8. When staying at a hotel, sharing a room is not a requirement.
9. Please indicate which URCNA committee is being represented when requesting a reimbursement so that it can be properly documented.

The goal is to get a reimbursement check out as soon as possible, so if additional information is needed, it will be requested when the reimbursement check is sent. The process is working well and will continue to be modified, as needed.

Thank for your attention to these financial items.

Serving the Lord together,
Robert D. Huisjen
U.S. Treasurer, URCNA

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

Robert Huisjen, US URCNA Treasurer
 8443 Farview Dr. SE
 Byron Center, MI 49315
 Phone 616-588-4113 (Day) 616-554-0051 (Evening)
 Email Address: bob@firstcompanies.com

Financial Report for 4th Qtr Ended December 31, 2022

	Avg. Annual Budge - US	Avg. Annual <u>Budget</u> - US	4th Qtr Actual	YTD Actual
BEGINNING CASH BALANCE - 1/1/22 (General Fund)				\$118,293.65
INCOME				
Contributions/ Askings			\$35,245.07	\$105,086.03
Contributions /Askings (2021)			\$0.00	\$1,525.00
Interest			<u>\$219.68</u>	<u>\$856.02</u>
Total Income			<u>\$35,464.75</u>	<u>\$107,467.05</u>
EXPENSES				
	<u>2021</u>	<u>2022</u>		
Accounting/ Government Filing	\$50.00	\$20.00	\$201.75	\$221.75
Bank Fees	\$35.00	\$42.00	\$11.96	\$12.96
Appeals				
CECCA(1)	\$8,125.00	\$10,400.00	\$8,050.82	\$9,505.85
CERCU (2)	\$8,125.00	\$10,400.00	\$1,499.74	\$3,749.52
Clerk	\$3,250.00	\$3,250.00	\$812.50	\$3,250.00
Dues				
NAPARC	\$650.00	\$650.00	\$0.00	\$650.00
ICRC	\$1,430.00	\$1,430.00	\$0.00	\$1,418.63
PRCC/MNA(dues) (3) (5)	\$650.00	\$650.00	\$877.50	\$877.50
Missions Coordinator (8)	\$81,173.00	\$83,000.00	\$19,281.44	\$75,507.92
Mission Committee	\$12,350.00	\$13,650.00	\$4,201.97	\$4,579.83
PRCC Liason	\$325.00	\$325.00		
Postage / Supplies				
Treasurer	\$50.00	\$88.00	\$36.00	\$69.38
Stated Clerk	\$325.00	\$325.00		
Acts of Synod plus shipping				
Directors and Liability Insurance	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00		\$993.00
Accounting Review (3rd party)		\$250.00		
Legal (9)			\$11,235.50	\$26,235.50
Websites				
Prayers/forms website	\$195.00			
Threeforms.org	\$195.00			
Synod (Functionaries to attend) (4)			\$2,713.36	\$3,386.16
Treasurer - US (6)	\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00	\$1,250.00	\$5,000.00
Treasurer - Joint Venture (6)	\$4,095.00	\$3,250.00	\$1,004.81	\$4,100.82
Statistician Honorarium (8)	\$1,638.00	\$1,615.00	\$391.46	\$1,196.20
Webmaster Honorarium (6) (8)	\$3 250.00	\$3,250.00	\$812.50	\$3 250.00
Total Expenses	<u>\$131,911.00</u>	<u>\$138,595.00</u>	<u>\$52,381.31</u>	<u>\$144,005.02</u>
TOTAL INCOME OVER (UNDER) EXPENSES			<u>(\$16,916.56)</u>	<u>(\$36,537.97)</u>
ENDING CASH BALANCE - 12/31/22 (General Fund)				<u><u>\$81,755.68</u></u>
Advance to URCNA - Joint Venture				.. <u><u>\$10,000.00</u></u>

	4th Qtr Actual	YTD Actual
BEGINNING CASH BALANCE - 1/1/22 (Hymnal Fund)		\$305,328.74
Reimbursement from Songbook sale	\$50,000.00	\$50,000.00
Distribution to 8 Classis	\$305,000.00	\$305,000.00
Interest		\$0.00
ENDING CASH BALANCE - 12/31/22 (Hymnal Fund)		<u>\$50,328.74</u>
BEGINNING CASH BALANCE - 1/1/22 (Web Fund)		\$3,880.81
Contributions / Askings	\$100.00	\$650.00
Web Maintenance	\$930.14	\$2,074.94
Interest		
ENDING CASH BALANCE - 12/31/22 (Web Fund)		<u>\$2,455.87</u>
TOTAL CASH BALANCE -12/31/22 (All Funds)		<u>\$134,540.29</u>
Cash Value of Interest in Trinity Psalter Hymnal JVA	12/31/2022	<u>\$89,554.92</u> (7)

General Fund Notes

1. CECCA = Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
2. CERCU = Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
3. PRJC = Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel
4. URCNA General Fund pays expenses for Synodical Functionaries as approved by convening council.
5. MNA is the Dues paid, set by the number of URCNA Chaplains, as part of PRJC
6. Synod London established Honorariums for the Treasurers and the Web Master. US and Canadian treasurer's are paid fully by their respective countries and the JVA Treasurer and Web Master are paid jointly based on the 65/35 split.
7. The Trinity Psalter JVA is a separate entity from the URCNA that we maintain a 50% stake in. \$75,000 of these funds are currently being held in anticipation of a future printing of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal, digital development, and royalties reserve.
8. The Missions coordinator, JVA Treasurer, and Statistician are paid in Canadian Dollars. Budget for 2021/22 was established using an exchange rate of 1.27. Actual expenses may vary from budget depending on the exchange rate at the time of payment.
9. Legal expenses were for retainer agreements for 2 legal matters

United Reformed Churches in North America

John M. Ehnis, US URCNA Treasurer
1686 Creek Side Court, Wayland, Michigan 49348

February 10, 2024

To: Pastors, Elders, and Deacons of URCNA member churches
From: US URCNA Treasurer

Dear Brothers,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please find below the 2023 4th quarter Treasurer's report for the United States churches of the United Reformed Churches of North America.

OBSERVATIONS

General Fund. Total income for Q4 was \$30,078 (compared to \$35,465 in Q4 2022) and total expenses were \$48,040 (compared to \$52,381 in Q4 2022) which resulted in expenses more than income in the amount of \$17,963 (compared to a \$16,917 loss in Q4 2022). The loss for Q4 was primarily due to a combination of lower-than-expected Askings receipts and unplanned expenses related to ongoing legal matters. The negative amount shown for the Acts of Synod expense line relates to reimbursement payments received during the quarter. The cash balance as of December 31, 2023, is \$27,239 (compared to \$81,756 as of December 31, 2022).

Hymnal Fund. The fund received a \$50,000 partner distribution from the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal JVA* during the quarter. The cash balance as of December 31, 2023, is \$100,329.

Trinity Psalter Hymnal JVA. A 50/50 Joint Venture agreement was instituted between the URCNA - US and the OPC. There is a fund balance being held by the OPC for future printings of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal and for a potential digital edition. The current cash value of the URCNA US interest in the JVA is \$92,874 as of December 31, 2023, of which \$45,000 is reserved for printing, \$5,000 for digital development, and \$25,000 for royalty reserves.

ASKINGS

As of December 31, 2023, 55 out of 79 US-based churches (total excludes church plants), or 70%, have made 2023 earmarked donations.

URCNA "Askings" equals "Suggested Donation". **For the calendar year 2024, the Askings donation is \$43.00 per family.** The dollar amount per family is determined by dividing the 2024 US-apportioned budget by the number of families in US-based congregations (less families in church plants) listed in the 2023 Archival Directory. The increase of \$4/family in 2024 is more of a function of a decrease in the number of families (a drop of 229 families from 2021) than an increase in the budget (increase of about \$4,400). This money in the URCNA-US general fund is used for the ongoing activity of URCNA. Some churches choose to take a free-will offering instead of using the formula. Each member church has a responsibility to participate, in whatever way, in the overall ministry of URCNA. Please make all "Askings" checks payable to "URCNA" and mail them to the address above.

Respectfully submitted,

John M. Ehnis
U.S. Treasurer, URCNA
USTreasurer@URCNA.org

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

John Ehnis, US URCNA Treasurer
 1686 Creek Side Court, Wayland, MI 49348
 Phone 517-980-1935
 Email Address: USTreasurer@URCNA.org

Financial Report for 4th Qtr Ended December 31, 2023

	<u>Avg. Annual Budget - US</u>	<u>Avg. Annual Budget - US</u>	<u>4th Qtr Actual</u>	<u>YTD Actual</u>
BEGINNING CASH BALANCE - 1/1/23 (General Fund)				\$81,755.68
INCOME				
Contributions / Askings			\$28,924.00	\$105,904.17
Contributions / Askings (2022)				\$3,325.00
Interest			\$1,153.50	\$1,232.96
Total Income			<u>\$30,077.50</u>	<u>\$110,462.13</u>
EXPENSES				
	<u>2022</u>	<u>2023</u>		
Acts of Synod			(\$707.52)	(\$20.68)
Bank Fees	\$42.00	\$32.00	\$16.67	\$66.16
CECCA Benevolence		4,875.00	\$1,218.75	\$3,656.25
Committee Expenses				
CECCA (1)	\$10,400.00	\$9,750.00	\$1,206.82	\$4,190.20
CERCU (2)	\$10,400.00	\$8,125.00	\$5,299.69	\$5,299.69
Missions Committees (Home & Foreign)	\$13,650.00	\$15,600.00	\$4,471.69	\$12,826.61
PRCC Liaison	\$325.00	\$845.00		
Sexuality Committee		\$3,250.00		
Virtual Worship Committee		\$3,250.00	\$2,476.66	\$2,476.66
Directors and Liability Insurance	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00		\$1,022.00
Dues				
NAPARC	\$650.00	\$650.00	\$650.00	\$650.00
ICRC	\$1,430.00	\$1,430.00		\$2,106.12
PRJCC/MNA (dues) (3) (5)	\$650.00	\$1,300.00	\$1,300.00	\$1,300.00
Government Filing	\$20.00	\$20.00		\$20.00
Honorariums				
Clerk	\$3,250.00	\$3,900.00	\$1,950.00	\$3,900.00
Statistician (8)	\$1,615.00	\$2,250.00	\$592.52	\$2,343.39
Treasurer - Joint Venture (6) (8)	\$3,250.00	\$5,570.00	\$1,523.76	\$6,053.54
Treasurer - US (6)	\$5,000.00	\$6,000.00	\$1,500.00	\$6,000.00
Webmaster (6) (10)	\$3,250.00	\$4,550.00	\$1,950.00	\$4,550.00
Missions Coordinator (8)	\$83,000.00	\$80,000.00	\$15,861.79	\$70,044.81
Postage / Supplies				
Treasurer	\$88.00	\$88.00	(\$18.48)	\$132.33
Stated Clerk	\$325.00	\$325.00		\$32.24
Professional fees				
Accounting Review (3rd party)	\$250.00	\$250.00		
Legal (9)			\$6,857.25	\$28,481.50
Synod (Functionaries to attend) (4)				
Websites				
Maintenance		\$1,950.00	\$915.85	\$2,157.90
Redevelopment		\$6,500.00	\$975.00	\$975.00
Total Expenses	<u>\$138,595.00</u>	<u>\$161,510.00</u>	<u>\$48,040.45</u>	<u>\$158,263.72</u>
TOTAL INCOME OVER (UNDER) EXPENSES			<u>(\$17,962.95)</u>	<u>(\$47,801.59)</u>
OTHER CASH TRANSACTIONS				
Transfer out to URCNA - Joint Venture (11)				(\$10,000.00)
Transfer in from Web Fund (12)				\$2,455.87
Deposit for Cross Cultrual Missions Training (13)			\$829.45	\$829.45
ENDING CASH BALANCE - 12/31/23 (General Fund)				<u>\$27,239.41</u>
			Advance to URCNA - Joint Venture	<u>\$20,000.00</u> (11)

	4th Qtr Actual	YTD Actual
BEGINNING CASH BALANCE - 1/1/23 (Hymnal Fund)		\$50,328.74
Reimbursement from Songbook sale	\$50,000.00	\$50,000.00
Expenses	\$0.00	\$0.00
Interest		\$0.00
ENDING CASH BALANCE - 12/31/23 (Hymnal Fund)		<u>\$100,328.74</u>
TOTAL CASH BALANCE - 12/31/23 (All Funds)		<u>\$127,568.15</u>
Cash Value of Interest in Trinity Psalter Hymnal JVA	12/31/2023	<u>\$92,874.48</u> (7)

General Fund Notes

1. CECCA = Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
2. CERCU = Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
3. PRJCC = Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel
4. URCNA General Fund pays expenses for Synodical Functionaries as approved by convening council. An amount was budgeted for 2024 only.
5. MNA is the Dues paid, set by the number of URCNA Chaplains, as part of PRJCC
6. Synod London established Honorariums for the Treasurers and the Web Master. US and Canadian treasurer's are paid fully by their respective countries and the JVA Treasurer and Web Master are paid jointly based on the 65/35 split.
7. The Trinity Psalter JVA is a separate entity in which the URCNA maintains a 50% stake. \$75,000 of these funds are currently being held in anticipation of a future printing of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal, digital development, and royalties reserve.
8. The Missions coordinator, JVA Treasurer, and Statistician are paid in Canadian Dollars. Budget for 2023/24 was established using an exchange rate of 1.40. Actual exchange may vary from budget depending on the exchange rate at the time of payment.
9. Legal expenses are related to ongoing legal matters.
10. The Webmaster was given an extra \$1,000 stipend to cover time related to 2022 Synod website work. Amount was paid in full in Q1 2023.
11. The URCNA US forwarded \$10,000 to JVA to allow bills to be paid in a reasonable time. This increases URCNA US's advance on deposit to \$20,000.
12. The Web Fund was absorbed into the General Fund in 2023 per decision of Synod Niagara. The URCNA board subsequently decided to transfer the cash balance in the General Fund effective June 30, 2023.
13. Received a check for Cross Cultural Missions Training. Treasurer awaiting further direction on how to account or where to apply this contribution.

URCNA - Canada

Pam Hessels, Canadian URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2022 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited)

March 1, 2023

Dear Brothers,

Greetings in the name of the Lord. Please find the Fourth Quarter Treasurer's report for the Canadian churches of the United Reformed Churches in North America attached. From a participation perspective, I have received 2022 askings from 42 (2021 – 42) of the Canadian churches. In addition, all three Canadian classes (2021 – 3) have provided money for the web fund.

Askings:

Overall, 2022 was a positive year with 100% of churches participating and remitting askings.

We can report that the results for 2022 was a surplus of \$23,677. This profit is the result of the following factors:

1. The askings for \$43.40 per family was determined using 2,321 families as the budget base; askings were received for 2,324 families.
2. COVID restrictions continued to hamper travel related to various committees, as well as the work of the Missions Coordinator:
 - a. Of the \$23,781 budgeted for committee meetings, only \$12,632 was spent.
 - b. Of the \$8,890 budget for travel for the Missions Coordinator, only \$5,219 was spent.
3. Professional fees are over budget due to the legal fees incurred, which is an unbudgeted expense.
4. The sale of the liturgical forms and creeds and confessions books generated a profit of \$6,937; this is an unbudgeted revenue.

Please note that on the Canadian financial report, payments made by the JVA are reflected separately under joint venture advances. Only the Canadian portion (translated from US to Canadian dollars) is reported.

Website:

Significant expenses were incurred again to maintain the website in 2022 which has significantly decreased the website funds. At Synod 2022, it was approved that the website expenses will be funded via askings starting in 2023. Therefore, this is the last time that the website expenses will be shown separately. The bank deficit will be funded using general funds.

Legal Fees:

The URCNA corporation has been named in a lawsuit resulting from a charge against a Canadian federation church. The corporation has paid a deposit with the law firm to cover the legal fees. The deposit is expected to be returned at the end of the lawsuit. Legal fees paid have been reflected in professional fees on the Canadian report. At this time the amount of costs to be incurred is not known.

Synod 2022:

The report for Synod 2022 is attached. We can report that the loss was not as great as anticipated and that no surplus funds were needed to fund the deficit. The number of observers that attended

Synod was significantly higher than planned (26 attended; 5 budgeted) which helped offset the lower than planned attendance from delegates (226 planned; 187 attended). Also, the hotels waived the penalties (approximately \$15K) for not meeting the 80% occupancy on the rooms reserved; this was waived due to the US border remaining closed. There is approximately \$12,400 remaining for the next Synod.

URCNA – Joint (JVA) Report:

Attached is the joint venture report for the period of January to December, 2022. Please note that this report is in US dollars. Effective January 1, 2014, all committee expenses, dues and stipends are paid directly by the joint venture as recommended by the finance committee and approved at Synod 2012. Committee chairmen should use this report to evaluate their spending room for their committee.

Askings:

The asking amount calculated on the budget at Synod is only an estimate. US churches, please contact the US Treasurer for the US 2023 asking amount.

The askings for 2023 have been set at \$43.00 per family (a slight decrease from \$43.40 per family set in 2022). Statements were emailed at the end of January 2023 to clerks / treasurers to show what has been budgeted to be received from their church.

Committee Expenses:

In the beginning of 2023, the US Treasurer and Canadian Treasurer revised the expense reimbursement form to reflect the current mileage reimbursement rate. Committee members are asked to contact either the US or Canadian Treasurer for a copy of the reimbursement form, if they do not already have a copy.

The URCNA corporation is a federally incorporated charity. The Not-for-Profit Corporations Act requires that all non-profit organizations be audited (or reviewed if they fall below a specified threshold) by a public accountant, yearly. The 2022 financial statements have been sent to the accountant. At the time of this report the draft financial statements have not been completed. If you would like to obtain a complete copy of the reviewed financial statements, please contact the Canadian treasurer and a copy will be forwarded to you.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Serving the Lord together.

Pam Hessels, Treasurer, URCNA
Home: 905-386-0492
E-Mail: CdnURCNA@gmail.com

URCNA - Canada

Pam Hessels, Canadian URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2022 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited) - In Cdn\$

General Fund

	Jan - Sep	Oct - Dec	YTD TOTAL	Yrly Budget
Income				
Askings	95,296.00	5,728.80	101,024.80	100,723.00
Total Income	95,296.00	5,728.80	101,024.80	100,723.00
Expenses				
Joint Venture Advances				
Bank charges	4.05	5.05	9.10	22.00
Committee expenses				
CECCA (note 1)	2,248.06	1,606.89	3,854.95	7,112.00
CERCU (note 2)	1,469.01	4,007.57	5,476.58	7,112.00
Missions	2,677.73	623.09	3,300.82	9,335.00
PRCC	-	-	-	222.00
Dues				
ICRC	996.65	-	996.65	978.00
MNA	-	626.94	626.94	445.00
NAPARC	470.66	-	470.66	445.00
Honorariums (note 3)	6,492.52	2,164.94	8,657.46	8,364.00
Missions co-ordinator	38,548.92	11,682.38	50,231.30	57,388.00
Supplies	23.65	144.14	167.79	244.00
Synod attendance	91.00	1,040.05	1,131.05	-
Website (note 4)	274.82	-	274.82	266.00
Bank charges	-	-	-	20.00
Board expenses	-	142.53	142.53	-
Director's & officers insurance	-	831.00	831.00	1,000.00
Government filing fee	-	12.00	12.00	20.00
Postage and supplies	31.13	14.45	45.58	50.00
Professional fees	2,857.84	-	2,857.84	2,700.00
Treasurer	3,897.75	1,299.25	5,197.00	5,000.00
Total Expenses	60,083.79	24,200.28	84,284.07	100,723.00
	35,212.21	(18,471.48)	16,740.73	-
Liturgical Forms Book & Creeds/Confessions Booklet				
Sales (note 6)	17,254.54	6,692.64	23,947.18	
Cost of sales	13,450.77	5,183.31	18,634.08	
Exchange loss (gain)	(1,371.22)	(252.21)	(1,623.43)	
	5,174.99	1,761.54	6,936.53	-
Net Total	40,387.20	(16,709.94)	23,677.26	-

Balance Sheet

Bank	83,161.97
Accounts receivable (note 5)	7,131.66
Advance to JVA (note 6)	13,032.17
Inventory - LFB + CCB (note 7)	31,311.30
Prepays	5,037.85
Accounts payable	7,783.15
General fund balance	131,891.80
	-

NOTES

- (1) CECCA - Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
- (2) CERCU - Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
- (3) Represents the Canadian portion of the webmaster, clerk, and JV treasurer honorariums. These honorariums are paid via the "joint venture" since they are paid to individuals outside of Canada
- (4) Website expenses represent the cost for the prayers/forms website and threeforms.org website
- (5) Represents the refundable portion of GST/HST to be received from Canada Revenue Agency as well as amount owing from the JVA for committee expenses paid to Canadian committee members (payment is made quarterly).
- (6) The liturgical forms book and creeds/confessions booklet (CCB) sales are received in US funds. The funds received on the sale of the LFB and CCB had been deposited into the JVA account. Funds were used to pay for the creeds and confessions booklet. Funds continue to be deposited into the JVA account for future replenishment of inventory. The "advance to JVA" and LFB sales have been presented in Canadian dollars for this report. The exchange gain represents the impact of exchange rate fluctuations.
- (7) Represents value of unsold copies of liturgical forms book (LFB) and creeds and confessions booklet (CCB)

Web Fund

	Jan - Sep	Oct - Dec	YTD TOTAL
Income			
Classis	250.00	125.00	375.00
Total Income	<u>250.00</u>	<u>125.00</u>	<u>375.00</u>
Expenses	536.83	663.06	1,199.89
Total Expenses	<u>536.83</u>	<u>663.06</u>	<u>1,199.89</u>
Net Total	<u>(286.83)</u>	<u>(538.06)</u>	<u>(824.89)</u>

Balance Sheet

Bank		(824.89)
Accounts payable		-
Web fund balance (note 1)		(824.89)
		-

NOTES

- (1) Since Synod has addressed the funding formula for the Web Fund, this will be the last year that the deficits to the web fund will be covered by General Fund. On January 1, 2022, \$355.46 was transferred to the website fund to cover the deficit. The fund began with a zero balance on January 1, 2022. Beginning January 2023, the website expenses will become part of askings.

URCNA - Joint (JVA)

Pam Hessels, Joint URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2022 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited) - In USD

General Fund

	Jan - Sep	Oct - Dec	YTD TOTAL	YTD Budget
Income				
URCNA - Canada	41,451.55	17,033.29	58,484.84	71,851.16
URCNA - US	76,981.44	31,633.26	108,614.70	133,437.84
Interest	10.92	2.81	13.73	-
Sundry - presentations / speeches	1,388.86	1,758.80	3,147.66	-
Total Income	119,832.77	50,428.16	170,260.93	205,289.00
Expenses				
Bank charges	19.80	13.71	33.51	50.00
Committee expenses				
CECCA (note 1)	4,825.29	3,468.13	8,293.42	16,000.00
CERCU (note 2)	3,207.80	8,638.27	11,846.07	16,000.00
Missions	5,702.51	1,343.38	7,045.89	21,000.00
Dues				
ICRC	2,182.50	-	2,182.50	2,200.00
MNA	-	1,350.00	1,350.00	1,000.00
NAPARC	1,000.00	-	1,000.00	1,000.00
Missions co-ordinator				
Office supplies / telephone	1,605.09	1,574.87	3,179.96	4,500.00
Salary and benefits	75,222.84	24,014.39	99,237.23	100,192.00
Travel and mileage	9,939.41	1,391.22	11,330.63	23,000.00
PRCC	-	-	-	500.00
Honorariums (note 3)				
Clerk	3,750.00	1,250.00	5,000.00	5,000.00
Statistician	1,858.49	602.24	2,460.73	2,485.00
Treasurer	4,763.10	1,545.86	6,308.96	6,212.00
Webmaster	3,750.00	1,250.00	5,000.00	5,000.00
Supplies				
Clerk	-	310.38	310.38	500.00
Treasurer	51.36	-	51.36	50.00
Synod attendance	193.34	2,244.72	2,438.06	-
Website (note 4)	1,761.24	1,430.99	3,192.23	600.00
Total Expenses	119,832.77	50,428.16	170,260.93	205,289.00
Net Total	-	-	-	-

Balance Sheet

Bank (note 5)	7,589.85
Accounts receivable (note 6)	7,721.57
Prepays	4,310.68
Accounts payable (note 7)	-
Advance from URCNA - US (note 8)	10,000.00
Advance from URCNA - Canada (note 9)	9,622.10
General fund balance	-

NOTES

- (1) CECCA - Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
- (2) CERCU - Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
- (3) Represents the webmaster, clerk, and JV treasurer stipends. The stipends paid to the Canadian and US Treasurers are represented on the financial report from the Canadian and US operations.
- (4) Website expenses represent the cost for the prayers/forms website and threeforms.org website as well as the federation website.
- (5) The bank balance is provided for information purposes.
- (6) Represents the amount owing from the Canadian and US treasurers to the JVA for committee expenses.
- (7) Represents the amount owing to the US committee members for travel expenses as well as amounts owing to the Canadian URCNA for expenses incurred by Canadian committee members.
- (8) URCNA - US has advanced money to the JVA to ensure that expenses can be paid in a more timely manner.
- (9) Represents the funds received on the sale of the LFB and CCB that have been deposited into the US\$ account. Funds were used to pay for the printing of the creeds and confessions booklet and will be used for future inventory replenishment.

Synod

Balance Sheet

Bank (note 1)	12,380.58
Prepays (note 2)	37.90
Accounts payable	-
Synod funds	12,418.48
	-

NOTE:

- (1) Represents the funds available for Synod 2024.
- (2) Represents banking fees incurred after Synod 2022; these costs will be incorporated in the expenses for Synod 2024.

URCNA - Canada

Pam Hessels, Canadian URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2023 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited)

February 12, 2024

Dear Brothers,

Greetings in the name of the Lord. Please find the Fourth Quarter Treasurer's report for the Canadian churches of the United Reformed Churches in North America attached. From a participation perspective, I have received contributions for the 2023 Budget from 44 (2022 – 42) of the Canadian churches.

Funds:

Overall, 2023 was a positive year with 100% of churches participating and remitting their support.

We can report that the results for 2023 was a deficit of \$3,906. This deficit is the result of the following factors:

1. The suggested donation for 2023 was intentionally set at an amount to result in a deficit. The intention for 2023 was to "return" some of the accumulated surplus to the churches.
2. Many of the travel budgets were not spent in 2023:
 - a. Of the \$29,655 budgeted for committee meetings, only \$16,965 was spent.
 - b. Of the \$9,450 budget for travel for the Missions Coordinator, only \$7,443 was spent.
3. Professional fees are over budget due to the legal fees incurred, which is an unbudgeted expense.
4. The sale of the liturgical forms and creeds and confessions books generated a profit of \$4,057; this is an unbudgeted revenue.

Please note that on the Canadian financial report, payments made by the JVA are reflected separately under joint venture advances. Only the Canadian portion (translated from US to Canadian dollars) is reported.

Legal Fees:

The URCNA corporation has been named in a lawsuit resulting from a charge against a Canadian federation church. The corporation has paid a deposit with the law firm to cover the legal fees. The deposit is expected to be returned at the end of the lawsuit. Legal fees paid have been reflected in professional fees on the Canadian report. At this time the amount of costs to be incurred is not known.

URCNA – Joint (JVA) Report:

Attached is the joint venture report for the period of January to December, 2023. Please note that this report is in US dollars. Effective January 1, 2014, all committee expenses, dues and stipends are paid directly by the joint venture as recommended by the finance committee and approved at Synod 2012. Committee chairmen should use this report to evaluate their spending room for their committee.

2024 Budget:

The amount calculated on the budget at Synod is only an estimate. US churches, please contact the US Treasurer for the US 2023 amount.

The suggested donation for 2024 has been set at \$43.00 per family (no change from the amount set in 2023). Statements were emailed at the middle of February to clerks / treasurers to show what has been budgeted to be received from their church.

Committee Expenses:

In the beginning of 2024, the US Treasurer and Canadian Treasurer revised the expense reimbursement form to reflect the current mileage reimbursement rate. Committee members are asked to contact either the US or Canadian Treasurer for a copy of the reimbursement form if they do not already have a copy.

The URCNA corporation is a federally incorporated charity. The Not-for-Profit Corporations Act requires that all non-profit organizations be audited (or reviewed if they fall below a specified threshold) by a public accountant, yearly. The 2023 financial statements have been sent to the accountant. At the time of this report the draft financial statements have not been completed. If you would like to obtain a complete copy of the reviewed financial statements, please contact the Canadian treasurer and a copy will be forwarded to you.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Serving the Lord together.

Pam Hessels, Treasurer, URCNA
Home: 905-386-0492
E-Mail: CdnURCNA@gmail.com

URCNA - Canada

Pam Hessels, Canadian URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2023 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited)

General Fund

	Jan - Sep	Oct - Dec	YTD TOTAL	Yrly Budget
Income				
Contributions	98,900.00	3,569.00	102,469.00	102,469.00
Donations	-	-	-	-
Total Income	98,900.00	3,569.00	102,469.00	102,469.00
Expenses				
Joint Venture Advances				
Acts of Synod	11.50	-	11.50	-
Bank charges	48.41	18.77	67.18	24.00
CECCA Benevolence	2,671.33	864.84	3,536.17	3,545.00
Committee expenses				
CECCA (note 1)	2,195.80	1,765.74	3,961.54	7,090.00
CERCU (note 2)	-	3,827.01	3,827.01	5,900.00
Foreign Missions	3,588.87	590.26	4,179.13	5,190.00
Home Missions	2,684.91	538.12	3,223.03	6,140.00
PRCC	-	-	-	615.00
Sexuality Committee	-	-	-	2,360.00
Worship & Digital Media	-	1,773.87	1,773.87	2,360.00
Dues				
ICRC	1,544.72	-	1,544.72	1,040.00
MNA	-	931.11	931.11	945.00
NAPARC	-	465.55	465.55	475.00
Honorariums (note 3)	9,299.96	2,913.02	12,212.98	12,037.50
Missions co-ordinator	41,531.82	14,066.51	55,598.33	59,785.00
Supplies	23.65	179.73	203.38	259.00
Synod attendance	-	-	-	-
Website (note 4)	911.18	5,274.89	6,186.07	6,140.00
Board expenses	-	188.19	188.19	-
Director's & officers insurance	-	850.44	850.44	1,000.00
Government filing fee	-	12.00	12.00	20.00
Postage and supplies	74.08	10.00	84.08	50.00
Professional fees	3,261.00	-	3,261.00	2,850.00
Treasurer	6,236.40	2,078.80	8,315.20	8,000.00
Total Expenses	74,083.63	36,348.85	110,432.48	125,825.50
	24,816.37	(32,779.85)	(7,963.48)	(23,356.50)

Liturgical Forms Book & Creeds/Confessions Booklet				
Sales (note 6)	15,390.41	3,354.12	18,744.53	
Cost of sales	11,623.51	2,573.28	14,196.79	
Exchange loss (gain)	(186.27)	676.69	490.42	
	<u>3,953.17</u>	<u>104.15</u>	<u>4,057.32</u>	<u>-</u>
Net Total	<u>28,769.54</u>	<u>(32,675.70)</u>	<u>(3,906.16)</u>	<u>(23,356.50)</u>

Balance Sheet

Bank	81,357.99
Accounts receivable (note 5)	4,983.33
Advance to JVA (note 6)	30,441.89
Inventory - LFB + CCB (note 7)	20,672.82
Prepays	5,571.99
Accounts payable (note 8)	15,867.27
General fund balance	127,160.75
	-

NOTES

- (1) CECCA - Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
- (2) CERCU - Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
- (3) Represents the Canadian portion of the webmaster, clerk, and JV treasurer honorariums. These honorariums are paid via the "joint venture" since they are paid to individuals outside of Canada
- (4) Website expenses represent the cost for all websites maintained by the URCNA. Effective 2023, there is no separate web fund; all expenses are paid from the Budget.
- (5) Represents the refundable portion of GST/HST to be received from Canada Revenue Agency, the receivable from GCP for the sale of books, as well as amount owing from the JVA for committee expenses paid to Canadian committee members (payment is made quarterly).
- (6) The liturgical forms book and creeds/confessions booklet (CCB) sales are received in US funds. The funds received on the sale of the LFB and CCB had been deposited into the JVA account. Funds were used to pay for the creeds and confessions booklet. Funds continue to be deposited into the JVA account for future replenishment of inventory. The "advance to JVA" and LFB sales have been presented in Canadian dollars for this report. The exchange gain represents the impact of exchange rate fluctuations.
- (7) Represents value of unsold copies of liturgical forms book (LFB) and creeds and confessions booklet (CCB)
- (8) Large payable due to large amount owing to the JVA for expenses as well as payroll remittances paid quarterly.

URCNA - Joint

Pam Hessels, Joint URCNA Treasurer
74025 Wellandport Road, Wellandport, ON, L0R 2J0

2023 Fourth Quarter Report (not audited) - In USD

General Fund

	Jan - Sep	Oct - Dec	YTD TOTAL	YTD Budget
Income				
URCNA - Canada	48,078.03	25,015.64	73,093.67	84,430.00
URCNA - US	88,654.72	46,457.61	135,112.33	156,798.00
Interest	14.92	9.47	24.39	-
Sundry - presentations / speeches	980.38	508.69	1,489.07	-
Total Income	137,728.05	71,991.41	209,719.46	241,228.00
Expenses				
Acts of Synod	24.19	-	24.19	-
Bank charges	116.70	50.15	166.85	50.00
CECCA Benevolence (note 1)	5,625.00	1,875.00	7,500.00	7,500.00
Committee expenses				
CECCA (note 2)	4,589.81	3,810.84	8,400.65	15,000.00
CERCU (note 3)	-	8,221.00	8,221.00	12,500.00
Foreign Missions	7,554.99	1,268.92	8,823.91	11,000.00
Home Missions	5,648.20	1,155.89	6,804.09	13,000.00
PRCC	-	-	-	1,300.00
Sexuality Committee	-	-	-	5,000.00
Worship & Digital Media	-	3,810.25	3,810.25	5,000.00
Dues				
ICRC	3,240.19	-	3,240.19	2,200.00
MNA	-	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00
NAPARC	-	1,000.00	1,000.00	1,000.00
Honorariums (note 4)				
Clerk	4,500.00	1,500.00	6,000.00	6,000.00
Statistician	2,713.73	911.57	3,625.30	3,592.00
Treasurer	6,968.89	2,344.25	9,313.14	9,000.00
Webmaster	5,500.00	1,500.00	7,000.00	7,000.00
Missions co-ordinator				
Office supplies / telephone	1,252.99	734.19	1,987.18	4,500.00
Salary and benefits	77,081.37	25,120.64	102,202.01	102,036.00
Travel and mileage	10,951.54	4,890.05	15,841.59	20,000.00
Supplies				
Clerk	-	389.66	389.66	500.00
Treasurer	49.60	-	49.60	50.00
Website (note 5)	1,910.85	1,409.00	3,319.85	3,000.00
Website redevelopment (note 6)	-	10,000.00	10,000.00	10,000.00
Total Expenses	137,728.05	71,991.41	209,719.46	241,228.00
Net Total	-	-	-	-

Balance Sheet

Bank (note 7)	47,060.84
Accounts receivable (note 8)	12,383.55
Prepays (note 9)	1,082.88
Accounts payable (note 10)	1,510.57
Advance from URCNA - US (note 11)	20,000.00
Advance from URCNA - Canada (note 12)	23,016.70
CECCA benevolence (note 1)	7,500.00
Website redevelopment (note 6)	8,500.00
General fund balance	-

NOTES

- (1) The budgeted amount for CECCA benevolence is being collected quarterly and accumulated on the balance sheet. Use of these funds will be shown as a decrease to the balance sheet amount.
- (2) CECCA - Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
- (3) CERCU - Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
- (4) Represents the webmaster, clerk, and JV treasurer honorariums. The honorariums paid to the Canadian and US Treasurers are represented on the financial report from the Canadian and US operations.
- (5) Website expenses represent the cost for all websites maintained by the URCNA. Effective 2023, there is no separate web fund; all expenses are paid from Budget.
- (6) The unspent budgeted amount for the website development has been collected from the URCNA US and Canada and has been set aside on the balance sheet. Use of these funds will be shown as a decrease to the balance sheet amount.
- (7) The bank balance is provided for information purposes.
- (8) Represents the amount owing from the Canadian and US treasurers to the JVA for committee expenses.
- (9) Represents reimbursement for committee expenses for meetings to occur in 2024.
- (10) Represents the amount owing to the US committee members for travel expenses as well as amounts owing to the Canadian URCNA for expenses incurred by Canadian committee members.
- (11) URCNA - US has advanced money to the JVA to ensure that expenses can be paid in a more timely manner. The amount advanced has increased due to the higher number of expenses being incurred each quarter.
- (12) Represents the funds received on the sale of the LFB and CCB that have been deposited into the US\$ account. Funds were used to pay for the printing of the creeds and confessions booklet and will be used for future inventory replenishment.

Synod

Balance Sheet

Bank (note 1)	12,321.18
Prepays (note 2)	102.25
Accounts payable (note 2)	4.95
Synod balance	12,418.48
	-

NOTE:

- (1) Represents the funds available for Synod 2024.
- (2) Represents banking fees incurred after Synod 2022; these costs will be incorporated in the expenses for Synod 2024.

Statistics and Directory Report for Synod Escondido 2024

Role and Responsibilities: The role of Statistics and Directory Editor was created at Synod Wheaton 2018. According to the Regulations for Synodical Procedure 4.8.4, the general responsibilities of the Statistician are to:

- a) Collect and compile statistical reports of the churches for the calendar year ending December 31.
- b) Review the information submitted by the churches to ensure its accuracy.
- c) Prepare an annual directory for digital download, which shall consist of a listing of: synodical and classical functionaries, synodical and classical standing committees, classical statistics; churches by province/state, including profiles of each church in the federation; alphabetical directories of all ministers of the United Reformed Churches, including those emerited, deceased, released, and deposed from office, as well as licensed exhorters and candidates for the ministry.
- d) Prepare and present a report to synod with an explanation and analysis of the statistical reports for a meaningful understanding of them by synod.

Time Commitment: This task is year-long with a lighter workload during the summer months and more labour-intensive activity in December, January and February. January requires two weeks of nearly full-time hours in the close examination and review of the statistical and directory information and the compilation of the annual archival directory. The statistical analysis completed for the synodical report requires a variable amount of time in February/March depending on the depth of the analysis as there is much potential for data observation and analysis, and some analyses require considerably more work with the data than others. Throughout the year, submissions need to be approved, emails answered, and specific data requests granted. These, along with projects to improve the directory require about 4-6 hours each week.

Submissions and the Annual Archival Directory: The submission of directory information (the contact information for churches and ministers/exhorters, not the statistical numbers) occurs throughout the year and is often initiated by the statistician reaching out to the churches and communicating the need for specific changes to be made. For the greatest accuracy, the churches are encouraged to update their files as changes occur or to at least make good use of the Ministerial News so that the statistician is aware of the need for change and can reach out with a reminder. The statistician appreciates the addition of the field “month in which new office bearers are installed” as it allows for an email to be sent to specific churches to update their current council members. The response rate for these reminders isn’t always ideal. The churches are encouraged to add stats@URCNA.org to their safe senders list and we ask that those who are responsible for this data entry attempt to answer these requests in a timely manner.

When a change is made to a church’s files on the URCNA website, the statistician is informed via email and is expected to review the changes and approve the submission. Often email

correspondence is necessary to clarify/correct a submission for content. When style and formatting issues arise, the statistician can correct these errors and there is no need to contact the local church, however, the time involved for the statistician to make these corrections is often significant. It is the hope of the statistician that the new website can be created with style and formatting built into the data entry fields thus eliminating the need for correction. Some work has been done in conjunction with the Web Oversight Committee since last synod to determine the precise requirements for the new website as it pertains to statistical and directory information. This project is ongoing.

In January, a draft of the archival directory is sent to the clerks of each classis and the synod clerk to proofread and provide feedback. It became obvious this year that perhaps the draft directory should be sent out to classical treasurers as well as there were some statistical inconsistencies (particularly family counts) noted in the clerk feedback but also after the publication of the directory. This is likely due to the new statistical form as last year's membership totals were not pre-populated in the form (these are often used for reference) and it wasn't quite as simple to compare last year's data with the numbers being entered for 2023. An additional error noted after publication is the sum of total families in Western Canada which should be 4293 rather than the 3890 which was mistakenly calculated.

Typically, the archival directory has followed the format of previous years with minor alterations in content. It was noted in reviewing the general responsibilities of the statistician (4.8.4c above) that the archival directory is to contain 'alphabetical directories of all ministers of the United Reformed Churches, including those emerited, deceased, released, and deposed from office'. It has been the practice to include the ministers who are emerited and deceased but not released and deposed men. The statistician would like clarification on this requirement and the best way for the information to be presented. Below is an example of a potential format. A list of transferred (to NAPARC churches), released (to non-NAPARC churches), and deposed ministers has been created by the statistician by cross referencing the archival directories back to 1997 but some of the technical details are still outstanding. It is the hope of the statistician that this project can be accurately completed and published in the 2024 archival directory. Whether to continue with the current "Remembering Those Who Served" pages or whether to add the ministers who are no longer living to a more general section entitled "Former URCNA Ministers" as outlined below, has yet to be determined and the statistician would like advice on the most appropriate format.

Former URCNA Ministers

Last Name, First Name, URC: 20XX-20XX; M.Div., Somewhere Seminary, 20XX; *Ordained 20XX*.
Onetown URC, ZZ, 20XX-20XX; Another town, ZZ, 20XX-20XX. Deposited 20XX.

Last Name, First Name, URC: 20XX-20XX; M.Div., Somewhere Seminary, 20XX; *Ordained 20XX*.
Onetown URC, ZZ, 20XX-20XX; Another town, ZZ, 20XX-20XX. Transferred to OPC, 20XX.

Last Name, First Name, URC: 20XX-20XX; M.Div., Somewhere Seminary, 20XX; *Ordained 20XX*.
Onetown URC, ZZ, 20XX-20XX; Another town, ZZ, 20XX-20XX. Released to Pentecostal Community Church, City, 20XX.

Last Name, First Name, URC: 20XX-20XX; M.Div., Somewhere Seminary, 20XX; *Ordained 20XX*.
Onetown URC, ZZ, 20XX-20XX; Another town, ZZ, 20XX-20XX. Withdrawn, 20XX.

Last Name, First Name, URC: 19XX-20XX; M.Div., Somewhere Seminary, 20XX; *Ordained 19XX*.
Onetown XRC, ZZ, 19XX-20XX; URC, ZZ, 20XX-20XX; Another town, ZZ, 20XX-20XX. Emerited 20XX,
Deceased 20XX.

The archival directory has been completed and sent out for publication by the first week of February at the latest since the position of Statistician has been filled. Many thanks go out to the churches for your cooperation in the updating of your statistics and directory forms. I am thankful to God that I may use my skills and abilities to serve Him as in this role.

Statistical Data Collection and Analysis: In 2023, the response rate for statistical data was 94%. The submission of statistical information (not contact info, just numbers) is completed by most churches at the end of the calendar year, although some (albeit few) churches are diligent to update their stats as baptisms, professions and membership transfers occur within their congregation. The numbers are briefly reviewed by the statistician when they are submitted, and churches are contacted if the numbers seem grossly inconsistent with themselves or with numbers from recent records. Tables are created and published in the archival directory and can be found [here](#). In 2023, the addition of the column entitled “Changes in 2023 as % of 2022” offered some idea of the rate of change in total members from one year to the next. Currently, aside from this new column, statistical analysis is not present in the archival directory but rather saved for this report.

At Synod Niagara 2022, it was decided that the collection of statistical information should be more comprehensive. The statistician was directed to collect the following information and make it available for requested reports:

- a. Differentiate between Infant / Adult baptisms
- b. Differentiate between exclusion of a baptized member and exclusion of professing members due to resignation

- c. URCNA Membership Transfers (in / out)
- d. NAPARC Membership Transfers (in / out)
- e. Non-NAPARC Membership Release / Receptions
- f. Differentiate between elders and deacons
- g. Minister's birth year
- h. Same church membership analysis

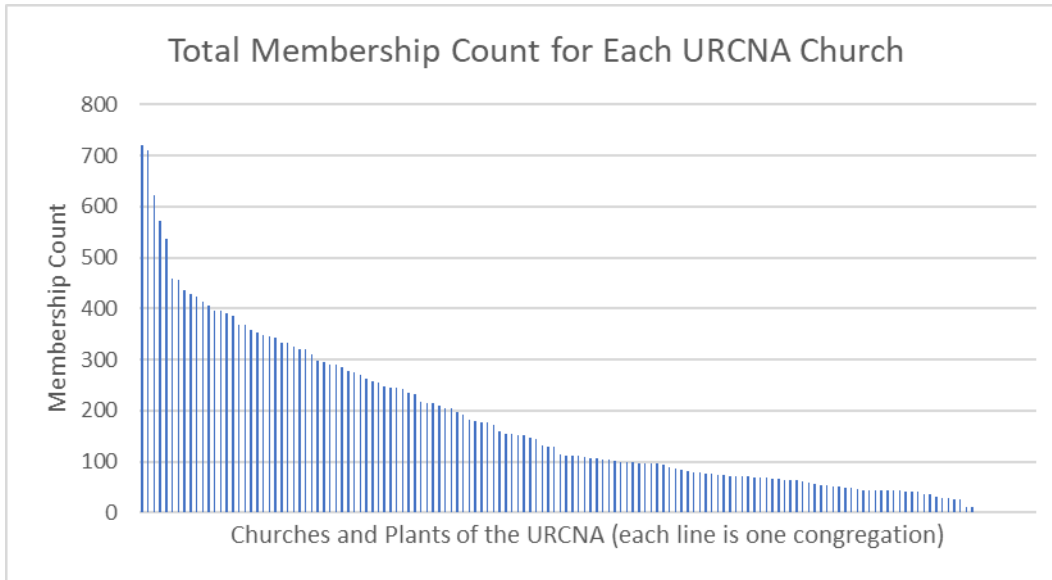
The form changes necessary for this data collection were not able to be completed for the year ending 2022 (as agreed upon at Synod 2022) but were put into place early in the year 2023. Points a-f as outlined above were able to be incorporated into a newly created statistical form, but the current ministerial info form could not be changed to require the new 'birthyear' field to be entered by the minister through the website and also kept private (not posted online). To accommodate this, each minister was contacted by the statistician by email or phone for their birthyear. This information will be used for statistical purposes only. Same church analysis (a comparison of individual churches with themselves) will be done on data collected in the last 5-6 years and further expanded upon later in this report.

In the gathering of statistical data, the definition of family is still a difficult concept for many, and it is suggested that the number of singles in a church also be collected. This will reduce confusion as well as allow the requested differentiation of elders & deacons to be more helpful as it can be used to determine the number of visits needed. Knowing the number of singles in a church will also allow for a more accurate snapshot of the demographics of a congregation.

There are many different aspects of the collected statistics that can be analysed. For this report, the focus will be on the data collected as of December 31, 2023, as well as the changes over the years, if this information is available.

1) Churches

The total church count at the end of 2023 including church plants was 140. The average size of our congregations is 181 members, but we are a federation with many different congregational sizes. Below is a chart showing the total membership count of each church which illustrates that 44% of our churches have 100 members or less. This can be encouraging to the smaller church to realize that they are not an anomaly.

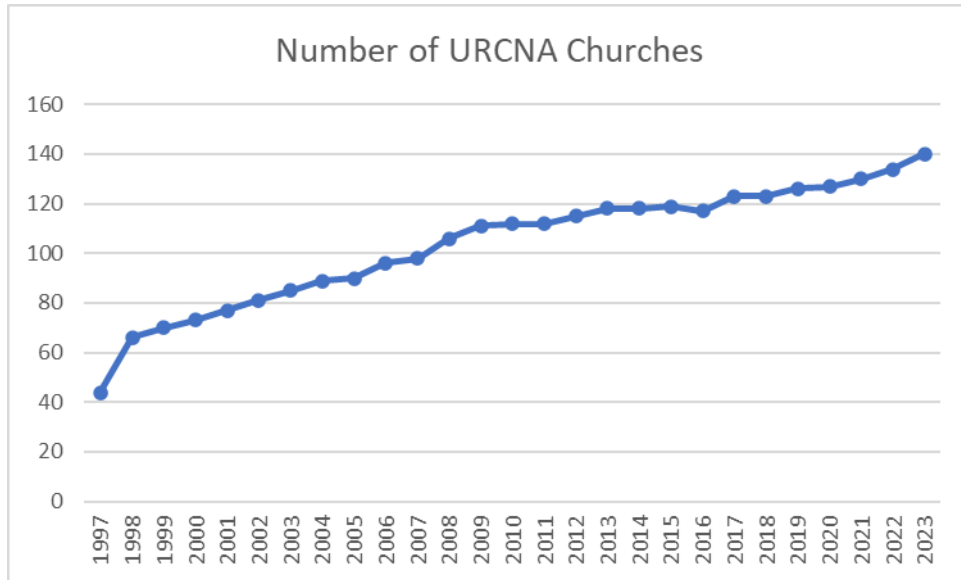


Changes to Churches Since Last Synod: In 2022, we welcomed Redeemer United Reformed Church of Anchorage, AK, Taber United Reformed Church of Taber, AB, Christ the Redeemer Reformed Church of Eureka, CA and Redemption Reformed Church of Chilliwack, BC. We were also informed of two church plants that had formed (Christ United Reformed Church, Norfolk, VA and Santa Clarita United Reformed Church, CA) and one church plant that had closed (El Pacto de Gracia of Chicago Heights, IL). The Iglesia Reformada Unidade of Ontario, CA was redefined as a Spanish Language Ministry in 2022 and ceased to be a plant.

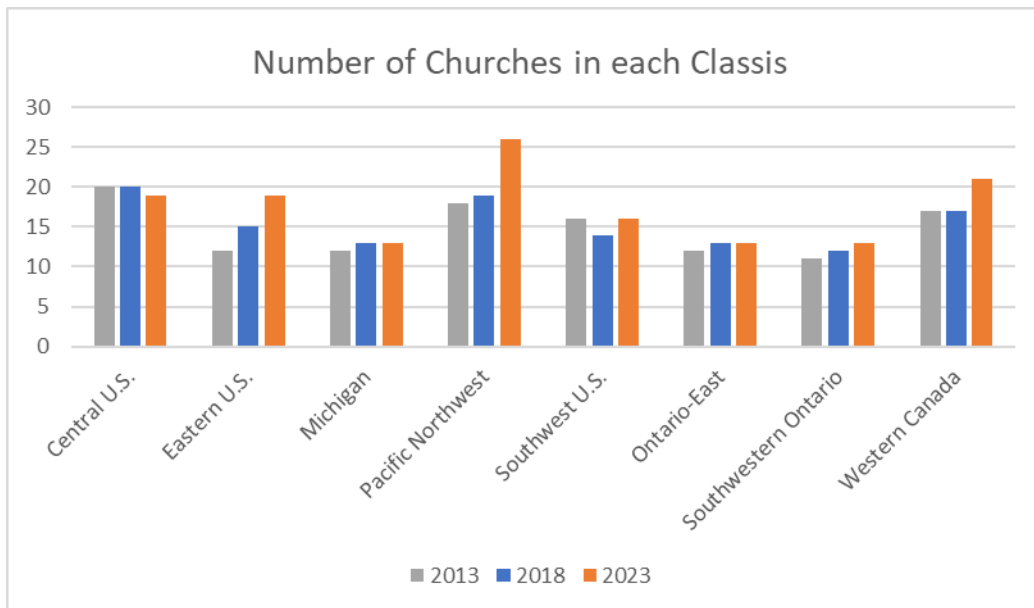
In 2023, we saw the withdrawal of Zion United Reformed Church of Ripon, the organization of Grace Reformed Church of Jersey City, Pocono Reformed Bible Church and Gig Harbor United Reformed Church and the acceptance of the Reformed Church Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, South Africa. We were informed of five new plants that had begun in Meridian ID, Armstrong BC, Birmingham AB, Mitchell ON and Ripon CA and three plants that became organized congregations as listed above.

	Dec 31, 2021	Dec 31, 2022	Dec 31, 2023
Local Organized Churches	116	120	124
Church Plants	14	14	16
Total Number of Churches	130	134	140

Changes Since the Beginning of the URCNA: We give thanks to God for His faithfulness to the URCNA as you can see in the graph below. In the First Edition of the URCNA directory (Feb 1997), there were 44 congregations represented and a total of 9,299 souls. Fast forward to the present and we have 140 churches and 25,317 souls in the United Reformed Churches. Praise the Lord and may He continue to bless us with both spiritual and numerical growth!



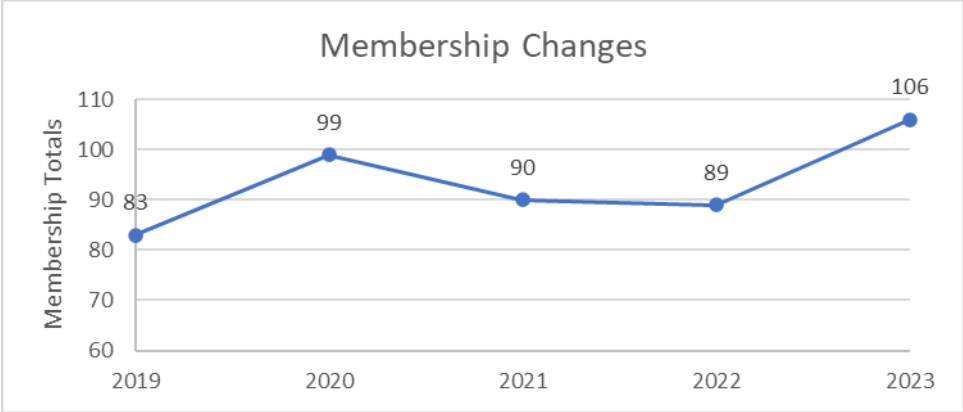
Classical Changes: Since 2013, when Classis Southern Ontario split into Classis Southwestern Ontario and Ontario-East, the URCNA has had 8 classes. Below is a graph showing the number of churches in each classis currently and the number of churches both five and ten years previous.



Classical Membership Changes: Of interest are the membership changes in each classis as seen in the graph below. There has been a growth rate in the classes ranging from 95% to 111% in the last five years. The release of Zion URC of Ripon in Pacific Northwest helps to explain the dramatic decrease in their membership in 2023.

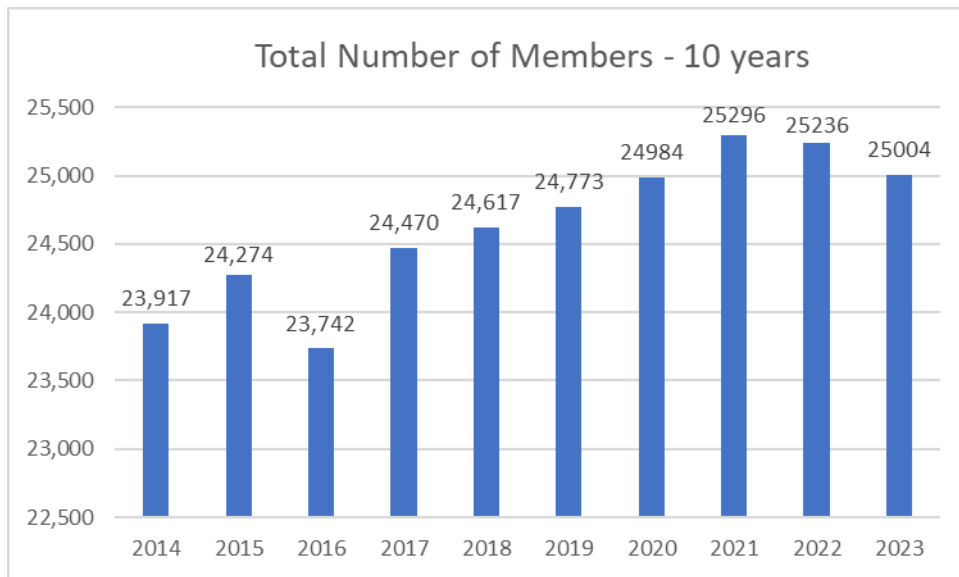


Same Church Analysis: This analysis looks at individual churches and compares them with themselves. Of our 140 churches, same church analysis can be calculated on the 122 churches that have been with the URCNA for more than 5 years. There was an average growth of 102% in these churches when comparing membership totals from year-end 2019 to year-end 2023. For the sake of space in this report, individual graphs of each church will not be presented but if a church would like to see the data specific to their congregation, they may contact the statistician. Going forward, this data can also be displayed on each church’s page in the archival directory (example below) if this is deemed appropriate.

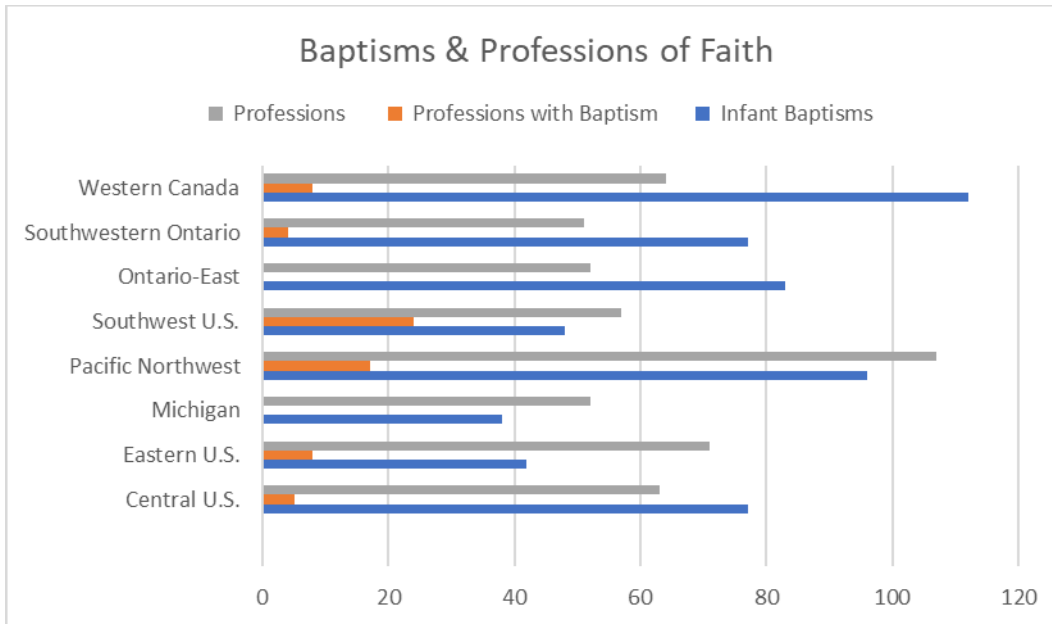


2) Members

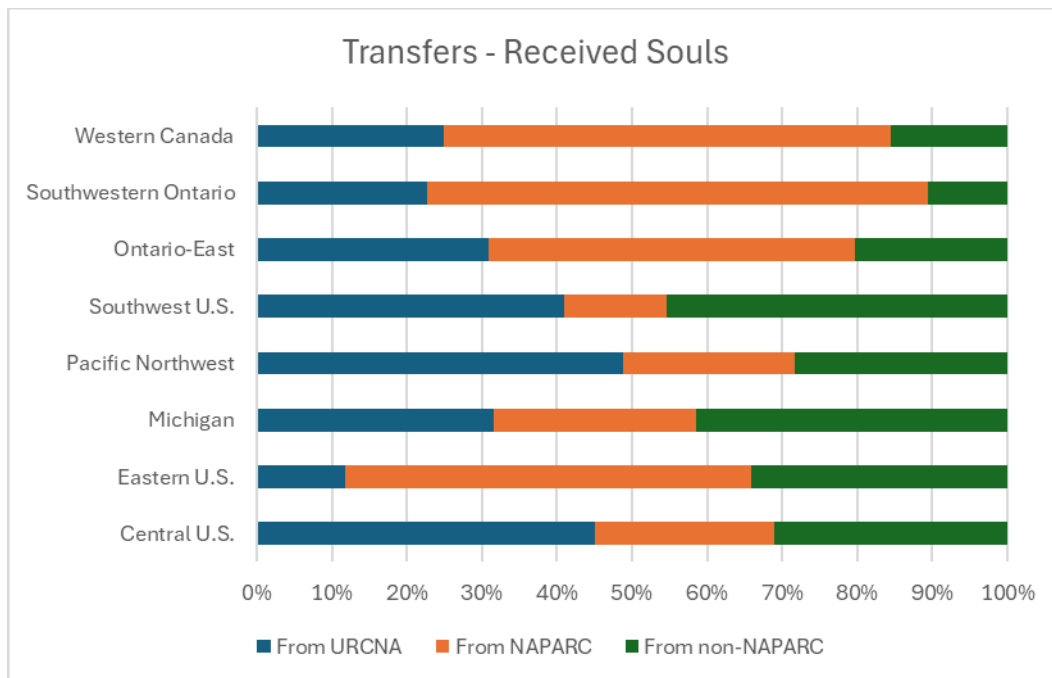
The total number of souls at the end of 2023 was 25,004. This was a decrease of 232 members from the total at the end of 2022 (25,236). The year previous also showed a slight decrease (25,296 total members at the end of 2021). Of the total souls in the URCNA at the end of 2023, 65% were professing members and 35% were baptized members. This ratio has remained very consistent for the past 5 years (within 1% percent). Data presented in the graph below is only as good as the participation of each church in reporting their statistical numbers each year.

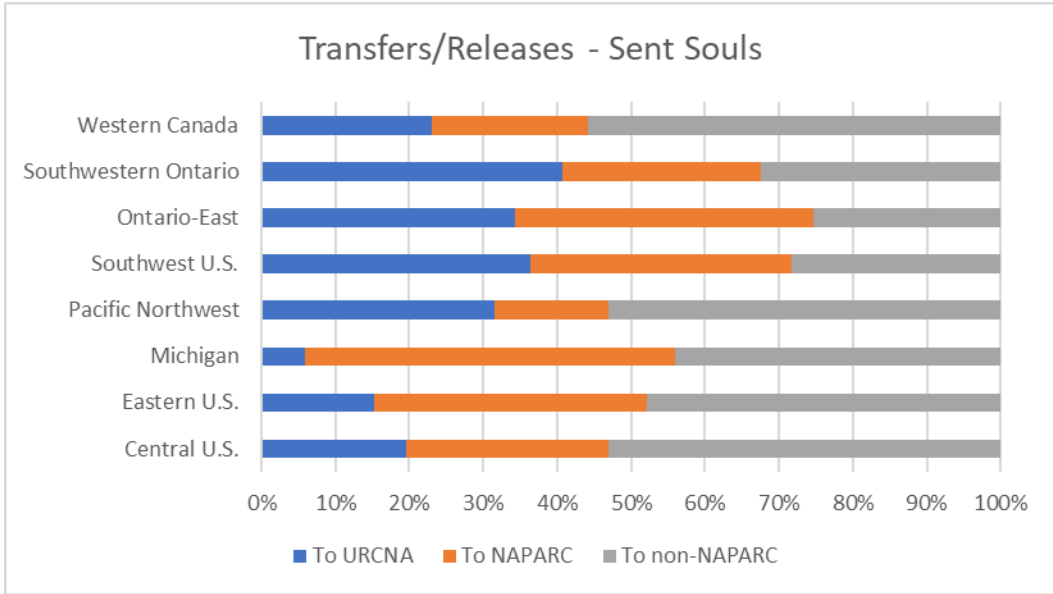


Infant vs. Adult Baptism: In the year 2023, there were 639 baptisms, 66 of which were adults and 573 were infant/covenantal. In total, there were 583 professions of faith in 2023 with 66 of them (11.3%) being a profession of faith with an adult baptism. Praise be to God for his work within his covenant people and his work in bringing in the lost!



Transfers: In the year 2023, we received 1310 total members and sent 1316 members to other congregations. Of these transfers, 977 were received from other URCNA or NAPARC congregations. This is 75% of the receiving transfers. The sending transfers to URCNA and NAPARC congregations was 758 members which is 56% of the total. This means that 44% of our members that are leaving our churches are being released to non-NAPARC churches. Below are charts showing the transfers within each classis:





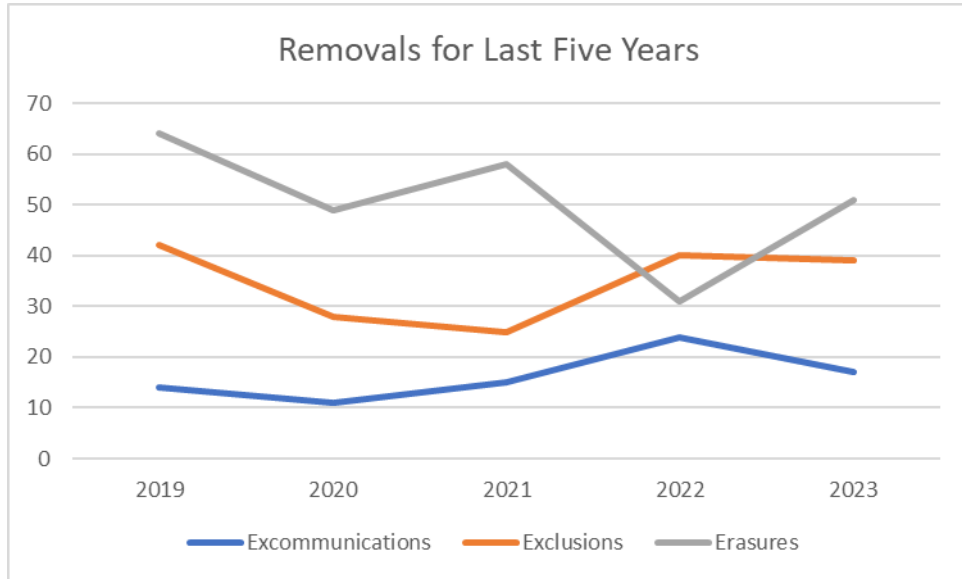
This is the first year in which the type of transfers was more specifically documented so there is no other data for comparison but in future years this will be an interesting statistic to observe.

In the graph below, a comparison is made of the total membership transfers (professing and baptized souls) in the last five years.



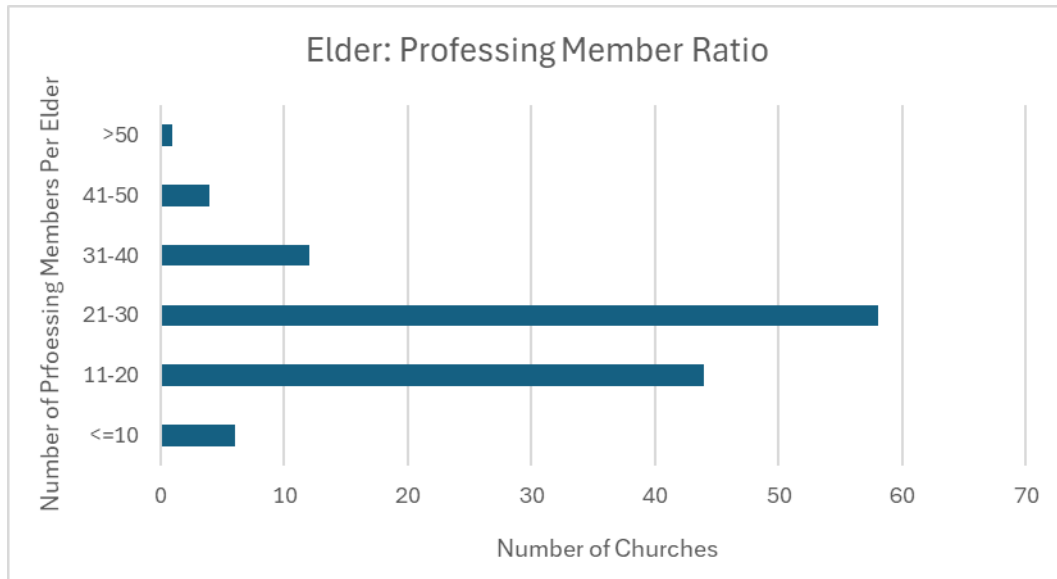
Membership Removals: This category includes Excommunications, Exclusions and Erasures. In 2023, the Exclusions data was more specifically collected to differentiate between Exclusion of Baptized Members and the Exclusion of Professing Members by Resignation. There were 39 exclusions in the year 2023, 27 (69%) of which were professing members by resignation and 12

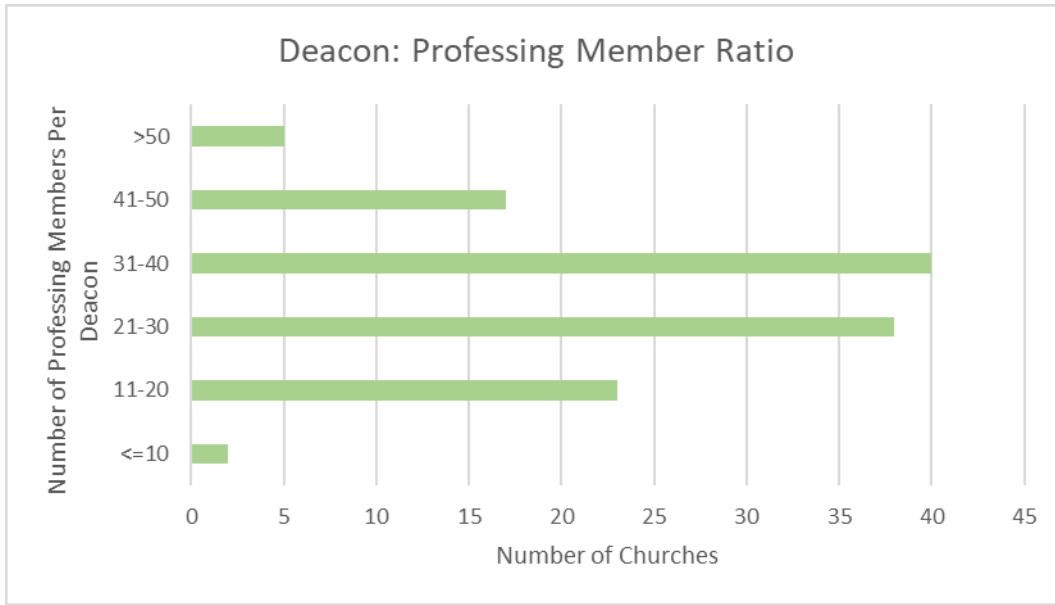
(31%) of which were baptized members. In the graph below, the trends of membership removals can be seen over the last five years.



3) Elders and Deacons

In years past, the total number of elders and deacons was gathered and documented. At Synod Niagara 2022, a decision was made to collect the numbers of elders and deacons separately. This allows for the ratio of elders and deacons to professing members in each of the churches to be calculated. This ratio is not without complication however as some churches choose not to give a ward to the clerk and others give the pastor of the church a ward as well as the elders. The simple ratio at 2023 year end is 23 professing members per elder and 31 per deacon (based on 125 churches reporting). There are definitely outliers in the raw data as can be seen in the chart below but the majority of the reporting churches have between 20-30 professing members for each elder (55.2%) and between 25 and 40 professing members (52%) for each deacon in council. Although more helpful than having elders and deacons clumped together, it is suggested that the counting of singles rather than just families would be advantageous as it would allow for the number of elder visits to be calculated more accurately.





4) Ministers

At the end of 2023, there were 207 ministers in the URCNA. The chart below shows the changes in ministerial status in the past five years. We can see that many of the categories are increasing in value with a few (chaplains and theological education) on the decline.

<i>Ministerial Totals as of December 31</i>	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Ministers of Local Congregations	107	116	114	118	123
Missions Coordinator	1	1	1	1	1
Domestic/Foreign Missionaries	20	21	23	24	25
Theological Education (MINTS & DHRBS)	7	7	7	6	5
Seminary Professors	8	9	9	8	10
Chaplains	6	6	6	3	3
Emeritus	31	36	36	38	38
Other	4	4	2	3	2
Total URCNA Ministers	184	200	198	201	207
Candidates	9	4	5	5	6
Licensed Exhorters	20	17	24	21	30

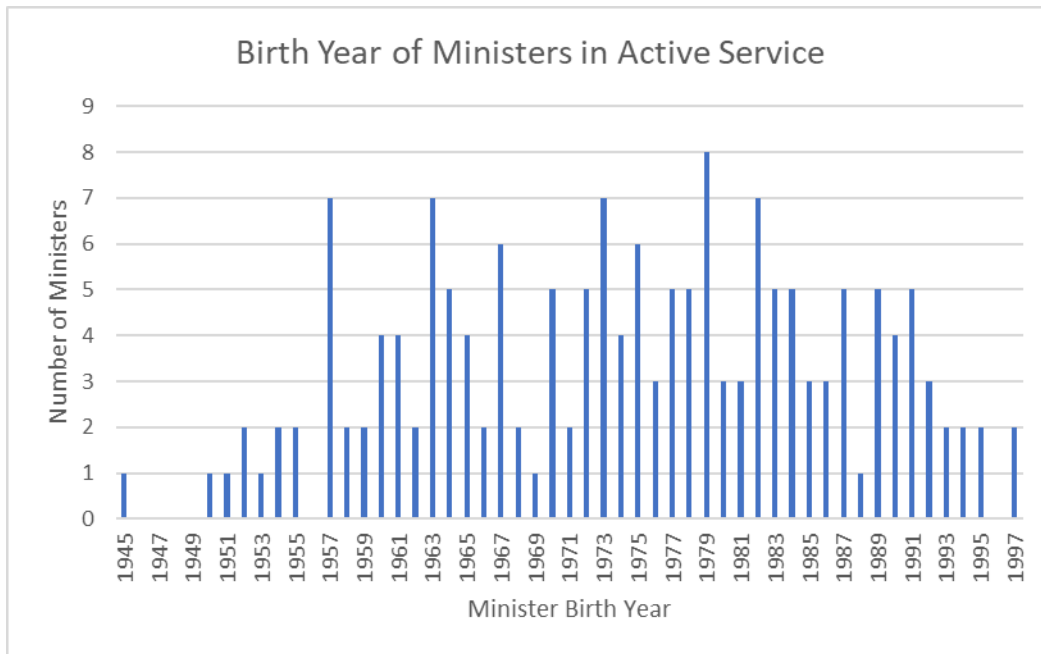
Of interest is the breakdown of ministers in the URCNA as of December 31, 2023. Of our total ministerial count, 169 are in active ministry (Total Count minus Emeritus). At the close of last year, there were 19 vacant churches and plants but only 6 candidates. Should each of the available men be called to a vacant church, there was still a deficit of 13 pastors for the churches of the URCNA as of December 31, 2023. This does not take into consideration the churches that

desire a second pastor to share the ministry. With 30 licensed exhorters who are in various stages of seminary study, there is the possibility that, in time, all the pulpits would be filled however urging young men to consider the ministry is strongly encouraged.

Yearly changes are interesting for observation and historical purposes and are laid out in the chart below:

<i>Ministerial Changes</i>	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Ordinations	5	14	4	7	7
Received (Colloquium Doctum etc)	4	5	3	1	4
Emeritations	6	4	3	2	1
Deaths	3	2	3	0	1
Calls Accepted Outside URCNA	1	1	3	5	3
Depositions	1	0	2	0	1
Leave of Absence	0	0	1	0	0
Withdrawal	0	0	0	0	1

The gathering of the birthyear of each minister allows for more specific calculations. The average age of our ministers at ordination is 33 years old. Of those currently in active service, the average age is 49 years. The chart below shows the birthyear of each of our currently serving ministers:



Perhaps better displayed in the table below, we can see that within the next 10 years, we can anticipate the potential emeritation of more than 30 of our currently serving pastors. While some of these statistics may cause concern, we are reminded of the faithfulness of our great God and look to Him for wisdom and guidance.

Age as of Dec 31, 2023	Number of URCNA Ministers in Active Service
<30 years	8
31-40 years	39
41-50 years	51
51-60 years	39
61-70 years	26
>70 years	5

There are so many interesting and useful statistics that can be analysed with the data that we have for the churches, members and ministers of the URCNA. One thing to routinely count is the blessings we have from God in the Word which is faithfully preached, the men who joyfully serve and the congregations which can freely gather. We are not called to rely on the size of our “army” or the strength of our weapons but to fully trust in the awesome God that we serve. May His name be praised and glorified!

In His Service,
 Jody Luth, Statistics and Directory Editor, URCNA.

Suggestions Made:

- 1) Count singles in each congregation to reduce confusion over the definition of family and allow for elder visit ratios to be calculated. Knowing the number of singles in a church will also allow for a more accurate snapshot of the demographics of a congregation.

Advice/Assistance Requested:

- 1) Re: the listing of deposed and released ministers in the archival directory as required in the general responsibilities of the statistician (Procedures 4.8.4c). Advice requested for format and presentation of said data.
- 2) Re: same church analysis and its place in reports and documentation. Advice requested as to whether it should only be available upon request or whether it is useful in the archival directory on each church’s profile page.
- 3) Copies of the archival directories dating back to the beginning of the URCNA have been collected by the statistician with only two years yet to be located. These printed copies have proven to be quite helpful. If you own a copy of the 5th (February 2001) and/or 7th (February 2003) editions of the URCNA directory that you would be willing to gift, please contact the statistician at stats@urcna.org Thanks!

Overture 1

Appoint Study Committee to Develop Guidelines for Vacant Church

Background

In the past there have been all too many times when a consistory's pastoral search and calling of a new minister for their congregation has not gone well. Some of these searches have been conducted inappropriately, and even outside of our church order. For example:

- some churches in our midst, in their interest in pursuing a man still in seminary, have voted to issue him an official call to serve their church even before he graduates from seminary; thereby ignoring Article 6 of our Church Order.
- Other churches have issued what they refer to as a "provisional call" to a man who has graduated from seminary, but has yet to pass his candidacy exam; thereby hoping to "reserve" the man for themselves once he does pass his needed exam(s).
- Another of our churches even pursued a man who was a seminary graduate yet was a member of a congregation that was not even part of NAPARC.
- We also have churches in our federation who have been without an official minister for years, and who seem satisfied with simply retaining regular pulpit supply from ministers who may be either within our federation or outside of it.

We acknowledge that every congregation is unique and has a story of its own so that its consistory feels justified in doing what they do. We also admit, out of charity for all those who hold the office of elder, that the mishandling of some situations by certain consistories may not have been entirely their own fault. After all, in their time of service as an elder, many men never even faced a pastoral vacancy, and so they are not familiar with how best to handle such a situation when one finally does occur under their watch.

Yet, it is also true that there is no clear path set forth in either our own Church Order or in our Synodical or Classical Rules of Procedure which congregations and consistories can rely upon to guide them through these uncharted waters of being without a minister.

This overture seeks to answer this need.

Overture

Classis Central U.S. overtures the synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America to form a study committee to report to the following synod as to how our churches who face a pastoral vacancy should best proceed in their calling process.

While the following list is not exhaustive, we would recommend that such a study include its findings on:

- The use of "provisional calls" by our churches to retain men who have not yet met the requirements found in Article 6 of our Church Order.
- The use of "internships" by our churches to evaluate a man before they decide whether they even want to extend a call to him.
- The purpose and use of questionnaires by our churches to help them evaluate a possible future minister.
- The responsibility of the consistory toward a member of their church who has graduated from seminary and has passed his candidacy exam, and yet has not received a call to serve a church even though he has been available for years. How can such a candidate

best be helped by us? Does the Classis who examined this candidate have a responsibility to this man?

- Can we, or even should we, promote a candidate to our churches, especially in light of what Article 31 of our Belgic Confession states:
 - So everyone must be careful not to push himself forward improperly, but he must wait for God's call, so that he may be assured of his calling and be certain and sure that he is chosen by the Lord.
- How long does one's candidacy for the ministry last?
- When is it appropriate to call a man into the United Reformed Churches whose ministerial credentials reside in another federation or denomination? For example, the progression of our Church Order Articles 6, 7, and 8 seem to at least suggest that the normal place for a vacant church to begin their search for a new minister would be with the candidates within our own federation (Article 6), then proceed in their search to the ordained ministers within our federation (Article 7), and only after these avenues have failed may they then look for a man outside of our federation (Article 8).
 - So, is this a fair understanding of our church order?
 - When may or should a consistory begin considering a man who is outside of our federation in order to fill their vacancy?
 - Should our Classes ask consistories who make a request for a colloquium doctum for such a man outside our federation to prove that they in fact have worked diligently at trying to find a man within our federation, yet could not find one?
- Historically, our churches made use of trios and duos in the calling process. Now single names are most often put forth to the congregation (monos). Is there a preferred path to follow in this? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- Also historically, when a church became vacant the classis assigned a neighboring minister to that consistory in order to help guide them through the calling process. Is that something that we would encourage our classes to do?
- At what point should our elders gently encourage their minister that his service to God's church would better be utilized in another congregation? Or is this service entirely up to the minister? In other words, are calls to churches unending and permanent, applying only to that set church? Or does a minister's calling pertain to the broader ministry of all the federation's churches, so that he would normally be expected to serve more than just one church in his life of service to the Lord?

Grounds

1. As King of the Church our Lord never fails to sovereignly provide ministers for His churches, and He uses the calling process as His means of doing this. We will better enable our churches to glorify God by providing them with a clear and well laid out process for calling a minister.
2. The churches of our federation will benefit from knowing that there are set guidelines to follow when they find themselves in need of a new minister.
3. Consistories of vacant churches will be well served by having clear expectations before them to which all of our churches will be expected to adhere in this calling process.
4. The elders would not be so fearful of a pastoral vacancy if they understood in advance what their role is in a search for the next man whom God has chosen for them.

5. The Church's Christ-like witness to the world will go forth more boldly when the calling of their next minister proceeds smoothly and unhindered.

Classis Central US

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier, Stated Clerk

Overture 2

Include Committee Mandates in Committee Reports to Synod

Background

In the last synodical agenda, there were 11 committee reports. Of those, four committees began their reports with a full quotation of their synodically given mandate, one committee summarized its mandate, one interspersed its report with occasional references to parts of its mandate, and one (CECCA) cited material that functions as its mandate. Four committees made no mention of their mandate. CECCA reported that it has no formal mandate and proposed one (in an appendix), but it did not include it in its recommendations, so synod took no action on it. Synods have sometimes given additional mandates to existing committees. Some additional mandates have been temporary. Keeping track of it all is not easy. Reporting to synod in 2024, there should be 11 synodical standing committees and two newly appointed study committees.

Citing the mandate at the beginning of a report is recognized among us as a beneficial practice but it is not practiced by all. This overture seeks to establish the practice among all our standing, study, and ad hoc committees.

Overture

Classis Central US overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to add to the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* a regulation under heading 5 *Committees* as follows:

5.1.4. Every committee, in its report to each synod, shall begin its report with a verbatim copy of its synodical mandate.

If any committee does not presently have a mandate, we overture Synod Escondido to instruct that committee(s) to draft its own mandate and recommend it to the next synod for approval.

Grounds

1. It is very likely that there will always be new ministers and new elders at each synod who have no knowledge of the history of all the committees. Beginning each report with a copy of its mandate will enable all readers, new or not, to readily understand the purpose of the committee and measure the rest of the report in light of it.
2. A review of its mandate with each report will help discipline each committee to stay within its mandate and avoid mission creep.
3. This is presently done by some committees and has proved helpful, but it is not being done by all the committees.
4. Synod, on occasion, has tweaked committee mandates or added to them. Reminding readers of those changes in the next agenda for synod will help keep all readers up to date.
5. There is no federation archive where all committee mandates can be found and even if there were, it would not be as helpful as having the report and the mandate together in the agenda for synod.

Classis Central US
Rev. Ralph Pontier, Stated Clerk

Overture 3

Amend Church Order Article 31 & Appendix 7

Background

Synod Niagara 2022 had 2 appeals on its agenda.

Appeal #1 was an appeal filed by 2 **individuals** against a decision made by Classis Eastern U.S. regarding their revised procedure for candidacy exams. Classis Eastern U.S. ruled the individuals' appeal "out of order" on their belief that Church Order Article 31 does not allow an individual to directly initiate an appeal against the decision of a classis, but rather that such individual appeal must first proceed to that individual's consistory.

Appeal #2 was an appeal filed by a **consistory** challenging Classis Eastern U.S.'s ruling Appeal #1 out of order. The appellant consistory argued that Appendix 7 provides the right of an individual to appeal against any assembly and requires such appeal proceed first to the assembly that rendered the decision.

Synod sustained Appeal #2 on the grounds that Appendix 7 provides an individual such right of appeal against any assembly and that such appeal must be filed with the assembly that rendered the challenged decision. Synod directed Classis Eastern U.S. to reverse their decision ruling Appeal #1 out of order. Synod then tabled indefinitely Appeal #1 on the ground that Classis Eastern U.S. must first adjudicate that appeal on its merits.

However, the deliberation on the appeals revealed some perceived conflicts or confusion between the language of Church Order Article 31 and Appendix 7, particularly the meaning of the language in CO Article 31 requiring an appeal to proceed first to the consistory.

Additionally, a question arose within the Advisory Committee handling the appeal as to whether Guideline 7(e) required a separate vote on sustaining the appeal if the specification of error had been sustained.

It should be noted that the appeals at Synod Niagara were the first appeals ever presented to Synod using the recently adopted Appendix 7 appeals procedures, so it is understandable that some confusion could arise in applying the Appendix in light of the Church Order.

This overture seeks amendments to **both** Article 31 and Appendix 7 to bring consistency in language and remove any perceived conflicts. The overture is divided in 4 parts so the assembly can assess each part separately while at the same time see how all 4 parts remove any perceived conflicts or confusion in a way that is consistent with the decision of Synod Niagara on the appeal before it.

Overture Part A: Church Order Article 31 with requested deletions and additions:
Amend Church Order Article 31 as follows (delete ~~strike through~~, add underlined *italics*)

Article 31 – Appeals by Church Members

If any church member complains that he has been wronged by the decision of an ~~narrower~~ assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. An individual's appeal must proceed first to ~~Consistory and only then, if necessary, to a broader assembly~~ the *assembly whose decision is being appealed*. Until a decision is made upon such appeal, the church member shall conform to the determination and judgment already passed.

Grounds

1. The words "*narrower assembly*" are unnecessary and potentially confusing since a

- member has the right of appeal against **any** assembly (*see* Appendix 7, Guideline 1).
2. The proposed amendment would help remove any potential misunderstanding that exists between the Church Order Article 31 and Appendix 7, Guidelines 1 & 2 concerning where the appeal must first be filed or made.

Overture Part B: Appendix 7, Guideline 1 with requested deletions and additions:

Amend Guideline 1 as follows (delete ~~strike through~~, add underlined *italics*)

Guideline 1

1. Appellant: An appeal may be made by ~~a consistory~~ *an assembly* or an individual who is a member of a church within the federation. The appeal may be submitted by the appellant himself or by a representative. Any ~~consistory~~ *assembly* or church member may appeal against a decision of any assembly of the federation.

Ground:

1. This change brings the definition of "appellant" in conformity with Church Order Article 29 which refers to the right of **any assembly** to appeal, not just a consistory.

Overture Part C: Appendix 7, Guideline 4(c) with requested deletions and additions:

Guideline 4.c:

- c. If a member objects to a decision of classis or synod regarding a matter pertaining to the churches in common, he ~~should bring the matter first to~~ shall first seek the advice of his consistory, ~~urging it giving opportunity for the consistory to~~ appeal the decision of classis or synod.

Grounds:

1. Adding "classis" brings clarity since an individual has the right of appeal against **any** assembly, which includes both classis and synod. (*see* Appendix 7, Guideline 1).
2. The words "*bring the matter*" could potentially be misunderstood to mean that an individual's appeal against a classis or synod must first be filed or "made" with the consistory, which would be contrary to Guideline 2, requiring the appeal "...*first be made to the assembly whose decision is being appealed...*".
3. While preserving the individual right to appeal, requiring an individual to "*first seek the advice*" of his consistory would allow the individual to receive advice from his consistory on the wisdom of pursuing the individual appeal and for the consistory to consider whether to bring its own appeal.
4. The words "*urging it*" are unnecessary as the individual may decide he does not wish to urge the consistory to appeal after receiving the advice of his consistory.

Overture Part D: Guideline 7(e) with requested addition:

Amend Guideline 7(e) as follows (delete ~~strike through~~, add underlined *italics*)

Guideline 7.e:

- e If the adjudicating assembly sustains any of the specified errors, it shall determine if the error is of such importance as to sustain the appeal and require a re-adjudication, modification, or reversal of the judgment of the narrower adjudicating assembly.

Grounds:

1. The current language of Guideline 7(e) caused a question within the Advisory Committee assigned to an appeal at Synod Niagara as to whether a separate determination on sustaining the appeal was necessary if the specification of error was sustained.
2. The Advisory Committee recommended, and Synod Niagara approved, separate votes on sustaining the specification of error and sustaining the appeal.
3. The added language to Guideline 7(e) would make this procedure clear for future advisory committees and Synods.

Classis Central US

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier, Stated Clerk

Overture 4

Dissolve the Appointment of an Oversight Consistory of the Website Oversight Committee

Background

At Synod Schererville (See Acts of Synod Schererville 2007, Article 51, Recommendation 2), Grace United Reformed Church in Waupun was appointed as the Oversight Consistory of the Website Oversight Committee (OCWOC). The mandate included the call to act “as a legal entity when such is requested by the Website Oversight Committee” and to act “as the responsible ecclesiastical assembly, in the time between synods, when such is requested by the Website Oversight Committee...” (See Acts of Synod London 2010, Article 57, Recommendation 14).

At Synod Niagara Grace United Reformed Church in Waupun sought to have relief from this labor. This request was granted, and the consistory at Grace was tasked with recommending their own successor (See Acts of Synod Niagara, Article 105, Recommendation 3). After sending a letter to interested churches, when no single consistory responded that they would take this appointment, the consistory at Grace began to pass over some of their volunteer duties directly to the Website Oversight Committee (WOC). Those duties, which already fit within the mandate of the WOC, were graciously received by the committee. As the duties we previously performed have now been transferred in full to the WOC, we believe it is no longer necessary for any consistory to fill this appointment.

Overture

Classis Central U.S. overtures the Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America to:

1. Dissolve the appointment of an Oversight Consistory of the Website Oversight Committee (OCWOC).

Grounds

- a. With one exception (see “2” below), the Website Oversight Committee (WOC) is currently able to complete all of their mandated duties without an appointed Oversight Consistory (OCWOC).
 - i. Some of the previously mandated actions, to be done “with the approval of an appointed consistory” have already been accomplished (See Acts of Synod Schererville, 2007, Article 51, Recommendations 6 and 7).
 - ii. The most recent mandate to the WOC, “to entirely redevelop the urcna.org website” has already been adopted without reference to any direct approval from the OCWOC (See Acts of Synod Niagara, Article 51, Recommendation 1).
 - b. A committee with various appointed members is best suited to handle the technical labors related to our federation’s website.
2. Grant the Website Oversight Committee authority to establish and maintain the duties of the webmaster.

Ground

This would allow the Website Oversight Committee to continue this ongoing mandate, while removing the language of “with the approval of the Oversight Consistory” as this mandate was originally given (See Acts of Synod London, 2010, article 57, recommendation 2).

Classis Central US

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier, Stated Clerk

Overture 5

Adopt Pastoral Advice Regarding the Relationship of Church, State, & Family

Background

We inhabit an era of serious – even potentially catastrophic – moral and cultural decline. Both in Canada and in the United States, society is renouncing, both in law and in socio-cultural life, its historic Christian heritage in pursuit of liberty without the Gospel, justice without God’s law, truth without the Scriptures, life without obedience, atonement without the cross, love without faithfulness, peace without repentance, salvation without Christ, and a world without creational norms. Given the danger and the folly of this trend, it is incumbent upon a faithful church to set forth, to all powers and authorities, and for the edification and strengthening of the church, the claims of Christ and the freedoms possessed by His Kingdom people, the church (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 3:10; Col. 2:15; 1 Tim. 1:9-11, 17; 3:15; 1 Pt. 2:16-17; 5:11).

In a cultural context in which ultimate sovereignty is being seized by – or readily surrendered to – the state, imperiling inherited liberties and exposing our civil government to divine judgment, we must be mindful that freedoms not defended are soon forfeited.

Furthermore, these developments have sown confusion among the churches regarding the relationship of church and state, the proper submission due to governing authorities, and the boundaries belonging to the family, the church, and the state. The need to apply Scripture and our Confessions to our contemporary context is important for the unity of the churches on these significant matters.

This overture was brought to Synod Niagara 2022. The advisory committee assigned to the overture thought it was unclear whether the overture was intended to address the State or the churches, that it could be viewed as “reactionary to a global pandemic”, and that a comprehensive theological exposition could be done on the matter. Synod did not adopt the advisory committee’s recommendation not to accede to the overture, but rather tabled the matter indefinitely (*Acts of Synod 2022, Article 89, p. 88*). Thus, no deliberation or action was taken on the overture itself.

In terms of the length of treatment of an issue, we need to be reminded that past URC Synods have not hesitated to provide concise, biblical, and confessional statements on issues that affect the churches without requiring comprehensive, treatise length treatment of a matter:

1. Synod Escondido 2001: adopted a concise statement on six-day creation. (*Acts of Synod 2001, Article XLIII, pp. 21,22*);
2. Synod Schererville 2007: approved an amendment to the Church Order to include a biblical definition marriage to protect against potential legal persecution of the church; adopted a nine-point statement on justification. (*Acts of Synod 2007, Article 21, p. 15; Articles 67 & 72, pp. 36, 37, and 38*);
3. Synod London 2010: approved sending a letter to the U.S. Armed Forces urging them to maintain a policy prohibiting homosexuals from openly serving in the armed services because repealing that policy would have a deleterious impact on our chaplains. (*Acts of Synod 2010, Article 128 & 132, pp.80-82*);
4. Synod Wheaton 2018: approved concise Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage in response to the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision creating a “right” to homosexual “marriage”. (*Acts of Synod 2018, Article 90, pp. 79-90*);
5. Synod Niagara 2022: in response to the rise of cultural confusion over sexuality, erected a committee to study the issue of human sexuality with a mandate that the committee

provide a concise “*statement of affirmations and denials serviceable for legal protection for the churches.*”. (*Acts of Synod 2022, Article 37, p. 37*).

In terms of intended audience, it is good to be reminded that “*Pastoral Advice is Synod’s application of the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches. Pastoral Advice expresses the collective wisdom of Synod to guide the churches in their pastoral care*”. (*Regulations for Synodical Procedure, Appendix D*). Thus, by definition, this overture’s pastoral advice is directed for the edification and benefit of the church. Of course, a local church may in its discretion use these affirmations as a witness to those outside the church if the occasion arises.

The following overture contains nine (9) Affirmations of Scriptural and Confessional truth concerning Christ, His church, the family, and the state. These affirmations can guide the churches on any number of issues that currently or may in the future press upon the church, *e.g.*, government overreach of the kind witnessed during the pandemic, threatened passage of “hate crimes” legislation intended to silence the church’s message, forced indoctrination of children on sexuality, *etc.* The affirmations are not limited to any of these specific issues but address the overarching and recurring matter of church/state/family relations that is increasingly acute in our time. It is our prayer that the church will be mindful of these Biblical findings in all their decisions and actions concerning the relationship of church, state, and family, passionately defending these truths when they are assaulted.

Overture

Therefore, Classis Central U.S. overture Synod 2024 to adopt the following Affirmations as **Pastoral Advice**, in accordance with the Regulations for Synodical Procedure, Appendix D.

Affirmations Governing the Relationship of Church, State, and Family

1. Jesus Christ claims total authority over the nations as the Creator and Ruler of the kings, judges, and governors of the earth (Ps. 2:7-12; Ps. 110; Luke 23:3; John 19:11; Acts 17:7; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:15-17; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 1:5).
2. The one, holy, catholic (i.e. universal), and apostolic church has been founded by our Lord Jesus Christ long before our contemporary temporal authorities came into existence (Matt. 16:18; Mark 3:13-19; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:7-13; Col. 1:18; Belgic Confession Art. 27).
3. The church of Jesus Christ does not have her position in the nation assigned to her by the permission of civil government, but *jure divino* – she has her own organization, and she possesses her own office-bearers (Matt. 10:1-15; 18:15-20; 28:18-20; Acts 14:23; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 6:1-7; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:9-13; Belgic Confession Arts. 30 & 31; URCNA Foundational Principles 3, 6, and 12).
4. The authority of the state and the authority of the church exist side by side, instituted by God according to the purpose and means assigned by God and in service to God, as recognized in the Scriptures. The magistrate is instituted by God and is endowed with power, in order that it, on its part and within the limits set for its authority, may promote the maintenance of human life and its development as a society pleasing to God in agreement with the moral law of God (Mark 12:13-17; Acts 5:29-32; Rom. 13:1, 4; 1 Cor. 6:1-7; 2 Cor. 10:3-6; Eph. 1:22; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; Belgic Confession Art. 36).

5. The church shall recognize and honor the magistrate in its God-given power and service by faithfully proclaiming the full demands of God's Law and Gospel, both for the office and life of the magistrate and for that of its subjects; and by being mindful of the apostolic injunction to make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving for all men, including kings and those in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; see also Ezra 6:10; Jer. 29:7; 1 Pet. 2:17; Belgic Confession Art. 36; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 140.).
6. The magistrate, under penalty of forsaking its God-given office and falling into tyranny, should forbear assuming the right and power of the only King of the church, Jesus Christ, who from heaven rules and protects and completely saves His church. The church with its officers, in all that has been given and entrusted to it, owes absolute allegiance and responsibility to Christ alone, and shall for the coming of His kingdom and the overthrow of the kingdoms of antichrist have its expectation fixed alone upon the power of His Spirit and the revelation of His glory. (Ps. 2:7-9; Dan. 2:44; Rev. 2:4-5; Rev. 11:15; Rev. 20:7-10; Belgic Confession Arts. 27 & 36).
7. The churches shall remain free to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ peacefully, proselytize, establish churches, and disciple those who wish to follow Christ, without any form of censorship or penalties imposed by temporal civil authorities. We reject all false doctrine asserting that the church must surrender the content or form of its message to the prevailing ideological and political convictions of our day. The Christian church is in all things to acknowledge and declare the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose Word upholds all things. The civil magistrate is called to protect the preaching of the Gospel and all the holy service of God with all the means given to it by God, in order that freedom of conscience to serve God according to His Word be guaranteed and every anti-Christian power which would threaten the church in the exercise of its holy ministrations be resisted and prevented (Psalm 82; Matt. 28:18-20; Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Belgic Confession Art. 36; Canons of Dort Head 2, Art. 5).
8. The churches and their members shall remain free to meet in person for religious worship, prayer, the study of the Bible, or any moral or benevolent purpose without disturbance or interruption from any persons. The sacred duties to assemble for worship and engage in Christian ministry are divine obligations laid down in Holy Scripture and should be recognized and protected by civil authorities. Christians have the obligation to join with the assembly of Christ's church wherever God has established it, even if civil decrees forbid it and death and physical punishment result (Ps. 92:1-2; Psalm 100; Heb. 10:19-25; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 38; Belgic Confession Art. 28).
9. Parents in Christian churches are to remain free to disciple, educate, and catechize their children in the faith and confession of the church concerning all of God's revelation about creation, the fall of man, and salvation in Christ. They are free to do so without fear of persecution, reprisal, or the seizure of their children by the state. We reject the false ideology that beyond its God-ordained and limited sphere as a ministry of public justice, the state or any other institution should become sovereign over human life and so presume to fulfil the vocations of the family and the church (Eccl. 2:24-26; Eccl 3:12-14; Daniel 1; *Heidelberg Catechism* Lord's Days 1 & 13; *Belgic Confession* Art. 36).

Grounds

- a. Serious cultural errors and a broad moral decline presently are infecting and marginalizing the church and family, such that our civil society is renouncing, both in law and in socio-cultural life, our historic Christian heritage.
- b. Increasingly the state is imperiling our God-given liberties and exposing our civil government to divine judgment.
- c. These developments have sown confusion among the churches regarding the relationship between church and state, the proper submission due to governing authorities, and the boundaries belonging to the family, the church, and the state. The need to apply Scripture and our Confessions to our contemporary context is important for the unity of the churches on these significant matters.

Classis Central US

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier, Stated Clerk

Overture 6

Amend Church Order Article 28 with Reference to Delegates to Synod Chosen by Classis

Background

At Synod Niagara 2022 an overture was considered that sought to establish regional synods and to have the classes, not churches, send delegates to the general synod. The idea of regional synods did not gain much support but in the deliberation several delegates expressed interest in a delegated synod where a limited number of delegates for synod would be chosen by the classes – each classis would be represented but not each congregation. Because the overture was not easily divided and because it was not considered until the last day with the deadline for closing fast approaching, Synod Niagara did not attempt to take any action on a plan for delegated synods. But this overture seeks to put forward that idea.

The idea of the classes choosing delegates for synods is not new. Classically delegated synods were prescribed in the Church Order created by the National Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) and have a long history in the Reformed tradition. They have helped the synods to accomplish their work in an efficient manner.

As our federation grows, a synod with every consistory represented will become more of a convention than a deliberative assembly. Already we have the prospect of a synod with well over two-hundred delegates meeting for only five days, which does not allow for the majority of delegates to enter into debate. Time limits on debate are becoming necessary. Increasingly, the heart of synod’s deliberative work will be done in smaller advisory committees with the plenary sessions limited to voting up or down the recommendations of the committees. Our trajectory is toward only 20 people (in advisory committee) getting to carefully deliberate any issue with the rest only able to agree or disagree with their conclusion. We are not there yet, but we are headed in that direction.

As the following chart indicates, the Lord has blessed our federation of churches with substantial growth over the last 25 years. We currently have 121 churches and at least 12 church plants. Some, of those church plants may well be organized churches before our next synod. We are getting better at planting churches as the years progress. We are also seeing interest in existing churches wanting to join us.

Synod	Number of churches eligible to send delegates	Number of delegates present	Churches with one or no delegates	Total Expenses	Venue
1996	36	82*	4	Not available	church
1997	60	106	11	Not available	church
1999	69	109	10	Not available	church
2001	73	128	12	Not available	church
2004	80	140	12	Not	church

				available	
2007	91	160	10	Not available	Trinity College
2010	102	179	16	Not available	Western Ontario University
2012	103	195	12	Not available	Nyack College
2014	107	199	13	Not available	church
2016	111	198	19	\$ 49,244.41	church
2018	114	201	16	\$ 103,102.86	Wheaton College with OPC
2022	115	187**	37**	\$ 154,595.08	convention center
2024	121	(242 possible)			church

*In 1996 churches were allowed to send a minister and two elders. Some churches still only sent one delegate but enough sent three that the delegate total was more than double the number of churches.

**In 2022, if all churches had two representatives the number would have been 226 delegates. Pandemic travel restrictions in 2022 were responsible for the greater than average number of under-represented churches. In 2022, 25 churches had only one delegate and 12 churches had no delegates.

Our Reformed church order tradition from Dordrecht has long employed the practice of classes choosing the delegates for synod. The URCNA rejected that idea at its inception for a few reasons. The primary reason was that those who came out of the CRC thought the conservatives had lost control of the CRC because they had been underrepresented at the synods, that is, if every church had been represented, the conservative cause could have won the day. But that reasoning ignores the fact that since the early 1950's, most CRC ministers had imbibed deeply of liberalism at Calvin Seminary and, when at synod, in the presence of their professors and encouraged by their peers, often voted more liberally than they dared to preach at home. It is also the case that when women elders and ministers were approved based on a hermeneutic that contradicted the confessions, only about 10% of the CRC membership left. Liberal leanings and institutional loyalty, among both clergy and laity, were far more pervasive in the CRC than confessional integrity. The demise of orthodoxy in the CRC in the 1990's was inevitable regardless of whether all the churches had been represented at synod. Those who wanted to uphold the confessions were far fewer in number than they knew at the time.

We also rejected the idea of limiting the number of delegates to synod because we were small and came from all over the US and Canada. We needed time to get to know each other. We were dealing with foundational issues (e.g., a new church order) where input from everyone was vital. Now, our foundations have been laid and we are no longer small. We have established lines of communication by which we are able to keep in contact with one another so that a general synod meeting with every church represented is no longer essential for that purpose.

We also encouraged all the churches to be represented because the numbers allowed the logistics and cost to be reasonable. Many of our churches were able to host without undue difficulty.

Overture

Classis Central U.S. overtures Synod to amend the following articles of the *Church Order* and the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* as indicated below with the understanding that the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* shall only be changed if the *Church Order* change is ratified. [~~Strike through~~ indicates what is to be removed. *Italics* indicates what is to be added.]

1. Article 28 –Synod

The churches shall meet as a synod at least once every three years. ~~Each Consistory shall delegate two of its members to this meeting.~~ *Each classis shall delegate six of its ministers and six of its elders to this meeting before the synodical agenda deadline.* Each synod shall determine a time and place for the subsequent synod and shall authorize a consistory to convene that synod. If a majority of the classes deem it necessary that a synod meet earlier than the regular time determined, the consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur.

2. *Regulations for Synodical Procedure*, the following amendments are here proposed (to take effect only if the *Church Order* change is ratified):

1.3 ~~Each consistory-classis shall delegate two of its members~~ *six of its ministers and six of its elders to synod before the synodical agenda deadline. The agenda deadline is 12 weeks prior to the start of the synod.* ~~Consistories~~ Classes which cannot send ~~two~~ *the prescribed number of delegates* shall be required to submit an explanation *in writing* to synod.

3.1 Add to the existing *Regulation 3.1*, at the end, *Communications from consistories submitted to the Stated Clerk responding to the provisional agenda may be permitted up to one week before the opening of synod upon recommendation from the convening consistory.*

Grounds

1. Six ministers and six elders from eight classes will result in 96 delegates. By contrast, if every church is fully represented at this synod there would be 242 delegates. If present trends continue, we can expect the 2026 synod to have over 250 delegates.
2. In the CRC, the rule was two ministers and two elders from each classis. This overture suggests six ministers and six elders to balance broad representation with manageable numbers. However, the number could be changed in the future. The 1934 Church Order had three ministers and three elders from each classis.
3. Deeper levels of fellowship will be enhanced with fewer people in attendance.
4. Not all office-bearers are equally gifted. Some are content not to be involved in the broader assemblies. This gives classes the opportunity to send those especially gifted for this aspect of the church's life. Granted, all ministers enjoy a week away fellowshiping with colleagues, but the same benefits could be obtained at less expense to the churches

and greater spiritual benefit for all if churches would assist their pastor in attending ministers' conferences of which there are no lack.

5. Reducing the number of ministers and elders at synod will make it easier to obtain delegates. At nearly every synod there have been some churches that have sent no delegates or only one delegate because of the unavailability of delegates from that church. Many elders must sacrifice family vacation time or take unpaid leave to come to a synod. This results in several churches sending no elder delegate.
6. This will promote equity between the offices since it will end the practice of churches sending two ministers or only a minister, resulting in ministers outnumbering the elders as has been the case at almost all our synods.
7. Each classis may, if they wish, adopt some kind of rotation system appropriate to its own circumstances to allow priority in sending delegates from those churches that have not sent delegates to recent synods or to prevent one or a few churches from providing the majority of delegates. Nothing in the proposed change to the Church Order would prevent each classis from adopting a method of electing delegates which they believe is equitable for their circumstances.
8. The reduced size of synod will promote the deliberative aspect of synods. There will be greater opportunity for delegates to speak and exchange ideas. This will make our synods more effective and productive.
9. As the chart in the Background section indicates, the number of delegates has been growing every synod except for the drop in 2022 because of pandemic travel restrictions. Had the US border been open to the unvaccinated, the number of delegates would have continued to grow.
10. By reducing the number of delegates by more than half, many of our churches will be able to host a synod. If past growth trends continue, it will not be too many synods hence that none of our churches, even the largest, will be adequate to host a synod. Hosting a synod now involves more than an auditorium that can seat 300 people and a place to feed them. It also involves having 12 advisory committee rooms that can each accommodate about 20 people.
11. Beginning in 2018, financial reports were provided for the previous year's synod. Although the data is limited, it is obvious (as one might expect) that holding the synod in a church facility is far more stewardly than renting a college or convention center.
12. Allowing communications from consistories responding to the agenda to be added to the agenda allows every consistory to still have a voice at synod.
13. Sister churches such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches function well without all their churches represented at their general assembly or general synod.
14. The URC departure from the 400-year-old Dort church order tradition of classes choosing the synodical delegates was a reaction against corruptions within the CRC and based on the false supposition that if all the churches had been represented, the CRC would not have gone liberal. But the fact that only about 20,000 of 200,000 seceded from the CRC in the mid 1990's indicates that the battle for confessional integrity had been lost in the CRC for many years prior and most of the office-bearers had been liberal for some time. Even if all the churches had been represented at the CRC synods, the departures from the confessions would have won the day regardless.

15. In our 25-year history, there have been some issues that have been controversial among us, but our unity has never been threatened by an issue regarding confessional integrity. We have grown to respect one another and trust one another even when we disagree about the logistics of the best way forward. We should not be driven by fear and mistrust to structure our synods in such a way that they become less effective and less stewardly because of their cumbersome size.

Classis Central U.S.

Rev. Greg Lubbers, Stated Clerk

Overture 7

Establish Synodical Travel Fund

Background

A separate overture is being submitted asking synod to change the *Church Order* to have each classis elect six elders and six ministers as delegates to future synods. If that should pass, such delegates would be representing more than just their local church and fairness dictates that all the churches share in the expense. Each classis could arrange the support of their own delegates but since the delegates serve all the churches of the federation, and because the classes are of different sizes and will be at different distances from the various venues, a more equitable arrangement would be to divide the cost of the expenses among all the churches based on the size of each congregation, using the family count as a reliable method of measuring size. This overture seeks to establish a fund for travel reimbursement (travel, food, and lodging) and establish rules for reimbursement so that the fund is not abused.

If the overture regarding classical representation at synod fails, synod may still wish to consider this overture to assist small churches to be better represented at synod. The rules proposed would apply as well to a synod made up of delegates from all the churches. Only some of the grounds for this overture would have to be modified.

Overture

Classis Central U.S. overtures Synod to establish a synodical Travel Expense Fund, to be administered by the synodical treasurer in conjunction with a Travel Reimbursement Committee appointed by each synod at the recommendation of the convening consistory. The duties regarding this fund shall be added to the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* in two new sections 1.5.3 and 1.5.4 described below.

- 1.5.3 The synodical treasurer shall establish and administer a Synodical Travel Assistance Fund, funded by Askings, to be used to reimburse synodical delegates' expenses incurred in attending synods, which may include travel, food, and lodging. Delegates shall submit their expenses to the synodical treasurer with receipts in a timely manner using a standardized form supplied. The synodical treasure shall submit all disputed or questionable requests to the next convening consistory.
- 1.5.4 In addition to recommending advisory committees to the synod, the convening consistory, with assistance from the stated clerk, shall recommend a Travel Reimbursement Committee composed of five delegates, which shall make recommendations to synod regarding reimbursement of travel expenses for those delegates not present for all the business sessions of synod. At the conclusion of synod, the Travel Reimbursement Committee shall give a list of all the delegates to the synodical treasurer with the percentage of travel compensation to which each is entitled.
 - a. Ordinarily, travel compensation shall not be given to delegates to the synod unless (1) they attend every business session of the assembly (advisory and plenary), or (2) they submit written requests to be excused from a portion of the business sessions of the synod necessitated by circumstances beyond their control. Such excuses shall be submitted in writing to the stated clerk upon their arrival at synod or earlier if

possible. The excuses shall be forwarded to the Travel Reimbursement Committee. The Travel Reimbursement Committee shall present its recommendations regarding excuses to a plenary session of the assembly as soon as they are able to do so.

- b. Delegates who request permission to leave after the synod has commenced, or to be excused from any portion of the assembly's business, shall receive not more than half the amount they would otherwise be entitled to, except those who are excused because of unforeseen emergency or circumstances beyond their control. The Travel Reimbursement Committee shall make a recommendation to the synod regarding each instance as soon as possible.
- c. If a delegate is replaced by an alternate because of an unforeseen emergency that arises after the synod commences, both the delegate and the alternate shall receive full travel compensation provided they also meet the conditions described above. Delegates who plan, in advance of synod, to be replaced by an alternate, and that alternate, shall each receive travel compensation at the rate of 20% for each day that they are present provided they also observe the other rules.

Grounds

1. Because the delegates represent more than their own congregation and serve all the congregations of the federation, all the churches of the federation should share in their expenses.
2. By using Askings to fund the Travel Expense Fund, the costs associated with the fund will be distributed equitably across the entire federation since Askings are based on the relative size of each church using the family count as a reliable means of measuring size.
3. The budget for the fund shall be estimated by each synod in advance of anticipated needs. This synod should survey its members to determine how much the delegates have spent on travel, food, and lodging, so that the fund can be built up, through Askings, between now and the first synod that is populated by classically elected delegates.
4. The rules for reimbursement are meant to encourage classes to only choose delegates and alternates who anticipate being able to be present for all the business sessions. Experience shows that more than a few delegates have planned to be absent for most, or all, of the last day. This practice needs to be discouraged. It is discouraged by a financial penalty.
5. If a delegate skips sessions or leaves early for any reason other than an unforeseen emergency or circumstances beyond his control, he gets only a maximum of 50% reimbursement. The phrase "not more than half the amount" in item "b" allows the Travel Reimbursement Committee to recommend to synod less than 50% where there is censurable neglect of duty. Hopefully that will never happen.
6. The planned use of alternates for part of the synod is permissible but should be discouraged since synod's business is best accomplished by delegates who are fully engaged for the entire duration. If a delegate, after being elected by his classis, discovers he no longer can be present for the whole synod, he should defer to one of the alternates of his classis for the entire synod. If a delegate and his alternate choose in advance to share the time, it should not cost synod double unless the delegate and/or all the available alternates were so constrained by circumstances beyond their control. If synod, at the recommendation of the Travel Reimbursement Committee, should judge there was no

such constraint, each will receive only 20% for each day they are present provided they also observe the other rules.

7. The word “ordinarily” at the beginning of the rules for reimbursement allows synod to temper justice with mercy in situations we cannot now foresee where these rules may not be adequate.

Classis Central U.S.

Rev. Greg Lubbers, Stated Clerk

Overture 8

Amend Appendix 7 of the Church Order

Background

Synod Wheaton 2018 adopted Appendix 7 “Guidelines for Appeals” as an appendix to the Church Order. Since that time, the practice of our churches has revealed areas in which these guidelines could use further refinement. As our churches have expressed it: “The appeal process is worth taking time to improve and strengthen, as it is closely related to upholding righteousness and justice among the churches of Christ represented within our federation, and as our decisions as a church reflect our only Head, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts of Synod 2016, Article 70, pp. 73–74).

Appendix 7 first needs refinement concerning appeals filed by a classis. Church Order, Article 29 allows “any assembly” to appeal “to the broader assemblies.” However, our guidelines make no provision for how a classis would appeal the decision of another assembly. This overture seeks to amend our guidelines to provide direction for appeals from a classis.

A second issue pertains to appeals by individual members. This overture seeks to clarify our Church Order’s teaching that individual members only have the right to appeal from a wrong of a “narrower assembly” (i.e., their own Consistory) to a broader assembly (i.e., their own Classis) via their own Consistory (*Church Order*, Article 31). This is in keeping with the common view of our tradition found in the single article on appeals found in the *Church Order of Dordt* (1619) (cf. *The Church Order Commentary, 3rd Edition*, Van Dellen and Monsma, chapter on Article 31). If a member alleges error in a decision addressing a matter common to the churches in another Consistory or a broader assembly, the recourse is to urge his or her own consistory to appeal this decision, as spelled out in the amendment to Appendix 7, Guideline 4.c.

One final issue pertains to the adjudication of the appeal and the participation of those delegates who previously adjudicated the appeal (Guideline 7.b.ii.). While there are good reasons for not allowing those who have previously adjudicated the appeal to make motions or vote on them, the Synod ought to have flexibility on this matter in the interests of justice. This overture seeks to modify this portion of the guidelines to offer an alternative course of action to the synod.

Overture

Classis Eastern U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to amend Church Order, Appendix 7 “Guidelines for Appeals” as follows:

- A. To amend Guideline 1. by adding the following words (the proposed additions are underlined):
 1. Appellant: An appeal may be made by a consistory; a classis; or an individual who is a member of a church within the federation. The appeal may be submitted by the appellant himself or by a representative. An individual member may only appeal a decision of his own consistory. However, any consistory or classis may appeal against a decision of any assembly of the federation.

Grounds:

- a. These additions will explicitly make provision for the appeal of a classis pursuant to the provisions of Church Order, Article 29.

- b. These additions will clarify the right of an individual to appeal a decision of his own narrower assembly that has wronged him.
- B. To amend Guideline 2. by adding the following headings and words (the proposed additions are underlined):

2. Origination:

- a. An appeal must first be made to the assembly whose decision is being appealed before appealing to broader assemblies. The assembly whose decision is being appealed is the respondent to the appeal.
- b. If a classis appeals the decision of an assembly, the appeal of classis must originate from a consistory by way of overture.

Grounds:

- a. This addition specifically enumerates how an appeal should originate from a classis.
 - b. Requiring an appeal to originate with an overture from a consistory preserves the idea that matters for the broader assemblies should “originate with a Consistory” (Church Order, Article 25).
- C. To amend Guideline 4.a. by adding the following headings and words (the proposed additions are underlined):

4. Timeliness of an Appeal:

- a. Notification of an Appeal:
 - i. Notice of intent to appeal by a consistory or an individual must be filed with the clerk of the adjudicating assembly within 60 days of the announcement of the decision. This applies each time the appeal advances to the next broader assembly. For appeals advancing from one synod to the next synod, the notice shall be filed with the clerk of the convening consistory of the next synod.
 - ii. A classis must appeal a decision at its first possible opportunity to do so. Notice of intent to appeal by a classis must be filed by the clerk of classis with the clerk of the adjudicating assembly within 30 days of the adjournment of that classis meeting.

Grounds:

- a. The additional language under 4.a.i. would explicitly keep the same requirements of timeliness for a consistory or an individual.
- b. Since a classis might not convene within 60 days of a decision of another assembly, the current timeliness requirement is insufficient for a classis.
- c. The additional language under 4.a.ii. would ensure that the classis acts in as timely a manner as possible by filing its appeal at its first opportunity to do so.
- d. Since a consistory would need to overture the classis to appeal, it is conceivable that the decision being appealed may have occurred *before* the next classis meeting but *after* the deadline for submitting agenda items. The language “at its

first possible opportunity” allows more flexibility for such a situation than simply saying something like, “at the next classis meeting.” If the deadline for classis agenda items has already passed, the “first possible opportunity” would be a subsequent classis meeting.

- e. A shorter time frame of 30 days would be sufficient for a clerk of classis to file a notice of intent to appeal on behalf of the classis.

- D. To amend Guideline 4.c. by adding and deleting the following words (the proposed additions are underlined; the proposed deletions are struck-through):

- c. If an individual member ~~objects to~~ alleges error(s) in a decision of a consistory, classis, or synod regarding a matter pertaining to the churches in common, he shall bring the matter to his consistory, urging it to appeal the decision of ~~synod~~ the assembly in question.

Grounds:

- a. These changes reflect the idea that it is not just the decisions of synod that may pertain to matters of the churches in common, but also the decisions of a consistory or classis may pertain to the churches in common.
- b. Issues that pertain to the churches in common ought to come to the broader assemblies from consistories (Church Order, Art. 25). It seems to make good sense for this standard to apply not only in matters of appeal regarding synodical decisions but also for appeals concerning the decisions of all the assemblies of the churches.
- c. Individual members may provide a helpful source of accountability for the decisions of broader assemblies which pertain to the churches in common, but their allegations should be weighed first in their own Consistory by the officers directly charged with safeguarding the work of the churches in common.
- d. Vetting of individual allegations ensures that only sufficiently weighty decisions will be appealed and that these appeals will come in form most conducive to healthy consideration and redress.
- e. Vetting of allegations doesn’t empower a Consistory to unduly silence individual concerns, for the individual always has the right to appeal the Consistory’s decision to a broader assembly.
- f. The word “objects” does not appear elsewhere in our Church Order or in the Guidelines, whereas the language of “alleged error(s)” does appear (See Guideline 5.b.iii.).

- E. To amend Guideline 7.b. by adding the following words to section 7.b.ii. as follows (the proposed additions are underlined):

- b. For delegates who have been previously involved in the adjudication of the appeal:
 - i. These delegates may not be assigned to any advisory committee dealing with the appeal.

- ii. In the plenary session dealing with the appeal, these delegates may not make motions or vote on them. If the appeal is from the decision of a classis, this shall apply to the delegates from that classis. In the interests of justice, a synod may suspend this particular rule (Guideline 7.b.ii), either in part or in full, by a two-thirds majority of the delegates. Any delegate from the churches may make a motion to suspend this rule and all delegates may vote on it.

Grounds:

- a. Synodical rules of procedure may be suspended, but the provisions of the Church Order and its Appendices may not be suspended.
- b. While some rules cannot be suspended “no matter how large the vote in favor of doing so or how inconvenient the rule in question may be,” they may be suspended if “the particular rule provides for its own suspension” (Robert’s Rules of Order (11th ed.), Chapter X, Section 25). Changing this rule to provide for its own suspension would allow the delegates of synod to determine whether it would be in the best interests of justice to do so.
- c. The ability to suspend this rule is especially important as the rule has the potential to disallow delegates from an entire classis to make motions or vote on them.
- d. Specifying that the rule may be suspended “in part or in full” allows the synod flexibility to tailor how the rule ought to be suspended in each specific context.
- e. The requirement of a two-thirds majority is an appropriate standard among us for weighty matters, and certainly the adjudications of appeals are weighty matters.
- f. Specifying that any member may make this motion and that all may vote on it provides a remedy for those delegates who would otherwise be excluded from making motions or voting on the adjudication of an appeal.

Classis Eastern US
Rev. Dr. Daniel Ragusa, Stated Clerk

Overture 9

Create the Position of a Home Mission Clerk

Background

As a classis we agreed with a proposal being presented to another classis to create a position of the Home Mission Clerk for the URCNA. It would advance our federation's missional labors to offload administrative duties to a gifted individual who serves beyond what our pastors and elders can manage.

The position relieves some of the Foreign Mission Coordinator duties, as he collates and communicates home missions prayer requests, compiles, arranges and edits our church planter submissions for the Trumpet, maintains the Home Missions website and social media, updates prayer maps, forwards newsletters and requests for advice, and organizes synod's mission nights.

Much as a diligent clerk is an asset to the consistory, having a Home Mission Clerk will fill a few gaps the committee has noted since dividing at Synod Niagara. Furthermore, regularly laying out ideas and opportunities before our churches is a helpful way to get more accomplished. Finally, the position grants pastors and elders serving the committee time to devote to Word and prayer.

Overture

Classis Eastern U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to create the position of a Home Mission Clerk, adding a sub point to the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* section 4.5 Functionaries after the Stated Clerk. (see www.urncna.org/file_retrieve/44839)

4.6 Home Mission Clerk

- 4.6.1 Qualifications:** The Home Mission Clerk shall be a current member who has served in office of one of the United Reformed Churches and must possess:
- a. Ability to write clearly and succinctly.
 - b. Administrative and organizational ability.
 - c. Proficiency in communications technology.
 - d. Freedom to travel once per year to an annual meeting.
- 4.6.2 Term:** The Home Mission Clerk shall be appointed by synod upon nomination from the Synodical Home Missions Committee with opportunity for nominations from the floor of synod. The term of the appointment shall be to the end of the next synod, with no term limits. Synod shall stipulate the remuneration in the currency of the country of his respective country.
- 4.6.3 Supervision:** The Home Mission Clerk shall work under the supervision of the Synodical Home Missions Committee, which is ultimately accountable to synod.
- 4.6.4 General Responsibilities:**
- a. Assist the Home Missions Committee in publicity (Website/Social media).
 - b. Assist the Home Missions Committee in updating the Missions Prayer Map.
 - c. Assist the Home Missions Committee in arranging visits to seminaries, to facilitate networking with students who may serve in the URCNA.
 - d. Maintain a current spreadsheet of internship opportunities in the URCNA.
 - e. Compile, arrange and edit church planter submissions to the Trumpet.
 - f. Collate and communicate prayer requests for all the Home Missionaries.
 - g. Collate and communicate year end financials of church plants with shortfalls.

- h. Forward newsletters and requests for advice to the appropriate persons
- i. Assist Foreign Mission Coordinator in organizing Synodical Mission nights.
- j. Participate in all the meetings of the Synodical Home Missions Committee, serving as secretary for the four annual meetings (one face to face).

The contract will be funded by synodical askings. A US \$12,500 annual budget offers double the funds required at base projection of US \$25/hr, 5 hrs/wk, 48 wks/yr. The budgeting cushion is necessary, as actual hours required are unknown. Minimum benefits required by law will be given. Hours per month and expenses incurred will be copied to the Synodical Home Missions Committee chairman and submitted to the URCNA treasurer in his respective country. The travel expense line of the Synodical Home Missions Committee budget also increases by 12.5%.

Grounds

1. The churches are stimulated with growth, cohesion and harmony by a position created to share information and ideas more broadly, consistently, and professionally.
2. The administrative burden on the Synodical Home Missions Committee is relieved.
3. The administrative burden on the Foreign Mission Coordinator is likewise relieved.

Classis Eastern US

Rev. Dr. Daniel Ragusa, Stated Clerk

Overture 10

Appoint Study Committee on a Building Loan Fund

Background

Securing reliable and appropriate space for worship has always been one of the most challenging aspects of church planting, as well as for those churches in our federation who don't own property. This challenge is becoming more severe as our culture grows increasingly hostile toward historic Christianity, and many legacy church properties are torn down or converted to other uses. In this environment, it is wise for us to support one another in the acquisition of church properties, which insulates us against the opposition of the culture and roots us in local communities.

One mechanism for facilitating the purchase or construction of worship space are church loan funds. Such funds are commonplace among a number of Protestant denominations and address the banking community's hesitancy to loan to small church bodies. Investors, ordinarily members of the denomination or church bodies, contribute to the fund and are provided a rate of return (e.g., CRCNA members receive notes between 3 and 4%, depending on the length of their investment, while LCMS donors currently receive 6.25% for a 2.5 year loan). At present, our own members do not have any such opportunity and neither do the churches of our federation have access to such funds. We are left to internal capital campaigns and private loans. While this approach has worked in some contexts, the approach has been insufficient in other contexts and does not offer a long-term plan of action.

Overture

Classis Eastern U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to appoint a study committee to investigate the establishment of a building loan fund and bring recommendations to the next meeting of Synod. Their investigations should include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. The matter of Canadian and American law and whether separate funds would need to be established for those churches that are on either side of the border;
2. The OPC Loan Fund as a possible model and the willingness of their board to assist us in the process;
3. Funds that are already in use among fellow NAPARC denominations;
4. What application and reporting procedures are employed to the giving of these funds;
5. How such a fund might be overseen in a manner that is consistent with our polity;
6. How investment funds might be raised in order to make the fund viable for church use.
7. What functionaries or other personnel might need to be appointed, hired, or tasked by synod to manage the logistics of the loan fund [vs. spiritual oversight].

Grounds

1. As our culture becomes increasingly hostile toward historic Christianity, it is wise for us to support one another in the acquisition of church properties. We cannot rely on the world to do this. Lending institutions are already wary of churches.
2. Our church planting works, even those that are organized, are rarely in a position of financial strength so that they could purchase a building in cash. A building loan fund would help such churches become brick and mortar institutions and continue to expand their ministry of the gospel.

3. Exploring investment opportunities for this fund could produce interest within our own federation for many of our church members, especially those who are uncomfortable with such investment options like the stock market.
4. The board of the OPC Loan Fund has offered us their assistance in establishing a fund.
5. Over its 40+ years, the OPC Loan Fund has never had a congregation miss a single payment. At the very least, this suggests that church buildings are a net benefit when loans are extended in wisdom.
6. This approach keeps church funds within the Church. As Reformed Christians, we are encouraged to support one-another.
7. A central fund does not require centralized authority. Synod could determine that objective criteria be met before a church is eligible to receive funds, e.g., the concurring advice of one's classis.

Classis Eastern US
Rev. Dr. Daniel Ragusa, Stated Clerk

Overture 11

Select Synodical Delegates by Classis

Background

At Synod Niagara 2022, an overture was considered that sought to establish regional synods and to have the classes, not churches, send delegates to the general synod. The idea of regional synods did not gain much support, but in the deliberation several delegates expressed interest in a delegated synod where a limited number of delegates for synod would be chosen by the classes – each classis being represented but not each congregation. Because the overture was not easily divided, and because it was not considered until the last day with the deadline for closing fast approaching, Synod Niagara did not attempt to take any action on a plan for delegated synods. But this overture seeks to put forward that idea.

The idea of the classes choosing delegates for synods is not new. Classically delegated synods were prescribed in the Church Order created by the National Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) and have a long history in the Reformed tradition. They have helped to the synods accomplish their work in an efficient manner.

As our federation grows, a synod with every consistory represented will become more of a convention than a deliberative assembly. Already we have the prospect of a synod with well over two-hundred delegates meeting for only five days, which does not allow for the majority of delegates to enter into debate. Time limits on debate are becoming necessary. Increasingly, the heart of synod’s deliberative work will be done in smaller advisory committees, with the plenary sessions limited to voting up or down the recommendations of the committees. Our trajectory is toward only 20 people (in advisory committee) getting to carefully deliberate any issue, with the rest only able to agree or disagree with their conclusion. We are not there yet, but we are headed in that direction.

As the following chart indicates, the Lord has blessed our federation of churches with substantial growth over the last 25 years. We currently have 121 churches and at least 12 church plants. Some of those church plants may well be organized churches before our next synod. We are getting better at planting churches as the years progress. We also are seeing interest in existing churches wanting to join us.

Synod Year	Churches eligible to send delegates	Number of delegates present	Churches with one or no delegates	Total Expenses	Venue
1996	36	82*	4	Not available	church
1997	60	106	11	Not available	church
1999	69	109	10	Not available	church
2001	73	128	12	Not available	church
2004	80	140	12	Not available	church

2007	91	160	10	Not available	Trinity College
2010	102	179	16	Not available	Western Ontario University
2012	103	195	12	Not available	Nyack College
2014	107	199	13	Not available	church
2016	111	198	19	\$49,244.41	church
2018	114	201	16	\$103,102.86	Wheaton College with OPC
2022	115	187**	37**	\$ 154,595.08	convention center
2024	121	(242 possible)			church

*In 1996 churches were allowed to send a minister and two elders. Some churches still only sent one delegate but enough sent three that the delegate total was more than double the number of churches.

**In 2022, if all churches had two representatives the number would have been 226 delegates. Pandemic travel restrictions in 2022 were responsible for the greater than average number of under-represented churches. In 2022, 25 churches had only one delegate and 12 churches had no delegates.

Our Reformed church order tradition from Dordrecht has long employed the practice of classes choosing the delegates for synod. The URCNA rejected that idea at its inception for a few reasons. The primary reason was that those who came out of the CRC thought the conservatives had lost control of the CRC because they had been underrepresented at the synods, contending that the conservative cause could have won the day if every church had been represented. But that reasoning ignores the fact that since the early 1950s, most CRC ministers had imbibed deeply of liberalism at Calvin Seminary and, when at synod (in the presence of their professors and encouraged by their peers), often voted more liberally than they dared to preach at home. It also is the case that when women elders and ministers were approved based on a hermeneutic that contradicted the confessions, only about ten percent of the CRC membership left. Liberal leanings and institutional loyalty, among clergy and laity alike, were far more pervasive in the CRC than confessional integrity. The demise of orthodoxy in the CRC in the 1990s was inevitable regardless of whether all the churches had been represented at synod. Those who wanted to uphold the confessions were far fewer in number than they knew at the time.

We also rejected the idea of limiting the number of delegates to synod because we were small and came from all over the U.S. and Canada. We needed time to get to know each other. We were dealing with foundational issues (e.g., a new church order) where input from everyone was vital. Now, our foundations have been laid, and we are no longer small. We have established lines of communication by which we are able to keep in contact with one another so that a general synod meeting with every church represented is no longer essential for that purpose.

We also encouraged all the churches to be represented because the numbers allowed the logistics and cost to be reasonable. Many of our churches were able to host without undue difficulty. This is no longer the case.

Overture

Classis Michigan overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to amend the following articles of the *Church Order* and the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure*, as indicated below, with the understanding that the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* shall only be changed if the *Church Order* change is ratified. [~~Strike through~~ indicates what is to be removed. ***Bold and italics*** indicates what is to be added.]

1. Article 28 –Synod

The churches shall meet as a synod at least once every three years. ~~Each Consistory shall delegate two of its members to this meeting.~~ ***Each classis shall delegate six ministers and six elders from consistories in the classis to this meeting before the synodical agenda deadline. Each classis shall ensure that all churches are regularly represented.*** Each synod shall determine a time and place for the subsequent synod and shall authorize a Consistory to convene that synod. If a majority of the classes deem it necessary that a synod meet earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur.

2. *Regulations for Synodical Procedure*, the following amendments are here proposed (to take effect only if the *Church Order* change is ratified):

1.3 ~~Each consistory-classis shall delegate two of its members~~ ***six ministers and six elders from consistories in the classis*** to synod ***before the synodical agenda deadline. The agenda deadline is 12 weeks prior to the start of the synod.*** ~~Consistories~~ ***Classes*** which cannot send ~~two~~ ***the prescribed number of*** delegates shall be required to submit an explanation ***in writing*** to synod.

3.1 Add to the existing *Regulation 3.1*, at the end: ***Communications from consistories responding to the provisional agenda may be submitted to the stated clerk. These communications shall be received for consideration by the synod up to one week before the opening of synod.***

Grounds

1. Six ministers and six elders from eight classes will result in 96 delegates. By contrast, if every church is fully represented at this synod there would be 242 delegates. If present trends continue, we can expect the 2026 synod to have more than 250 delegates.
2. Deeper levels of fellowship will be enhanced with fewer people in attendance.
3. Reducing the number of ministers and elders at synod will make it easier to obtain delegates. At nearly every synod there have been some churches that have sent no delegates or only one delegate because of the unavailability of delegates from that church. Many elders must sacrifice family vacation time or take unpaid leave to come to a synod. This results in several churches sending no elder delegate.

4. This will promote equity between the offices since it will end the practice of churches sending two ministers or only a minister, resulting in ministers outnumbering the elders – as has been the case at almost all of our synods.
5. The reduced size of synod will promote the deliberative aspect of synods. There will be greater opportunity for delegates to speak and exchange ideas. This will make our synods more effective and productive.
6. As the chart in the Background section indicates, the number of delegates has grown with every synod, excepting the drop in 2022 because of pandemic travel restrictions. Had the U.S. border been open to the unvaccinated, the number of delegates would have continued to grow.
7. By reducing the number of delegates by more than half, many of our churches will be able to host a synod. If past growth trends continue, it will not be long before none of our churches, even the largest, will be adequate to host a synod. Hosting a synod now involves more than an auditorium that can seat 300 people and a place to feed them. It also involves having 12 advisory committee rooms that can each accommodate about 20 people.
8. Beginning in 2018, financial reports were provided for the previous synod. Although the data is limited, it is obvious (as one might expect) that holding the synod in a church facility is far more stewardly than renting a college or convention center.
9. Allowing communications from consistories written in response to the agenda can allow every consistory to have a voice at synod.
10. Sister churches such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches function well without all their churches being represented at their general assembly or general synod.
11. In our 25-year history, there have been some issues that have been controversial among us, but our unity has never been threatened by an issue regarding confessional integrity. We have grown to respect one another and trust one another even when we disagree about the logistics of the best way forward. We should not be driven by fear and mistrust to structure our synods in such a way that they become less effective and less stewardly because of their cumbersome size.

Classis Michigan
Rev. Douglas Barnes, Stated Clerk

Overture 12

Amend Church Order Articles 20 & 26

Background

The eight classes of the United Reformed Churches each have distinct ways of operating that reflect their needs, preferences, and culture – a diversity that we happily accept. However, our Church Order calls all of our assemblies to fulfill certain specified duties and responsibilities which we recognize as being necessary for the well-being of the federation as a whole.

In recent years, it has come to our attention that fully half the classes of our federation engage in a practice that we believe has the effect of limiting accountability, trust, and mutual prayer: namely, the keeping of a separate set of minutes for matters decided in “executive session.”

Executive session, of course, is a practice which allows an assembly to close its deliberations by removing all observers, generally with the exception of fraternal delegates and URC elders and ministers in good standing. Typically, executive session is employed to allow frank discussion of sensitive matters, particularly those which could harm an individual’s reputation.

While the use of executive session can serve to protect the reputation of an individual alleged (but not yet proven) to have done wrong, or to promote open discussion of examinees without the fear of giving offense, this comes at the cost of shielding our deliberations from the eyes of church members, thereby threatening to breed distrust of our assemblies. To combat this, it is helpful to ensure that all official actions flowing from such private deliberations are made public.

Half of our classes, however, keep even the formal decisions arising from executive session discussions hidden from public view. We believe that this has the effect of eroding confidence in the work of the broader assemblies and of making mutual accountability impossible. While we are sensitive to the desire to protect the reputations of individuals involved in the decisions made, we believe those reputations can be safeguarded easily by omitting names and identifying descriptions from the record.

This overture aims to standardize the practice of our broader assemblies by specifying that the record of broader assembly decisions is to be public. While recognizing the legitimacy of holding private *deliberations* in exceptional situations, this would ensure that all of the actual *decisions* of our broader assemblies will be openly displayed, thereby ensuring accountability and promoting trustworthiness among the churches.

Overture – Part 1

Classis Michigan overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to amend Article 20 of the *Church Order*, as indicated. [*Italics with underline* indicates the words to be added to the present form of the article.]

Article 20 – The Duties and Supervision of Clerks

In every assembly there shall be a clerk whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of the proceedings. *A clerk serving a broader assembly shall keep a record of all decisions of the assembly, which shall be released publicly in a timely manner.* In the broader assemblies the clerk shall serve for a term to be specified by the body. Between broader

assembly meetings, the clerk shall perform his duties under the supervision of the next convening Consistory.

Grounds

1. This amendment will promote unity among the churches by ensuring that all of the decisions of our classes can be known by members of all of our churches.
2. This amendment will deepen confidence in the broader assemblies of our federation by demonstrating openly that we have nothing to hide.
3. Principle 9 from the *Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government* states that the decisions of our broader assemblies “derive their authority from their conformity with the Word of God.” However, we cannot judge the conformity to Scripture of decisions that are hidden from public view. By adopting this amendment, therefore, we will eliminate a practice that undermines the perceived authority of the assemblies.
4. Article 29 of our *Church Order* declares that “All decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order.” But neither laymen within the churches nor office-bearers from neighboring classes can judge whether the decisions of a classis conflict with Scripture or the Church Order unless those decisions are openly published.
5. The name and reputation of an individual involved in decisions regarding church discipline or an appeal can easily be protected by omitting the person’s name and identifying details from the public record, while still recording the decision itself.
6. It is important that members of churches that are witnessing the public stages of discipline can know that their elders have exercised due diligence in bringing those discipline cases to classis when required to do so. The decisions of classis advising consistories to proceed with the next step of discipline should be written so as to allow those who know the situation to recognize it, without disclosing identifying characteristics to those who do not know the situation. In this way, the record of the assembly will better support the work of the consistories.
7. To be sure, such an open record may, at times, result in revealing faults of our assemblies when decisions of those assemblies are overturned upon appeal. However, a public record of such decisions is consistent with the instruction of God’s Word, which commands us to honor elders who rule well (1 Tim. 5:17) and to protect them from unfounded accusations (1 Tim. 5:19), while also *publicly* rebuking those who persist in sin (1 Tim. 5:20).
8. By ensuring that the decisions of our broader assemblies are released publicly and fully, we will promote prayer for God to grant wisdom in addressing the difficult decisions that our assemblies face.

Overture – Part 2

Classis Michigan overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to amend Article 26 of the *Church Order*, as indicated. [*Italics with underline indicates the words to be added to the present form of the article.*]

Article 26 – Classis

A classis shall consist of neighboring churches whose Consistories delegate two of their members with proper credentials to meet at a time and place determined at the previous classis meeting, within the next twelve months. If three Consistories in the classis deem it necessary that a classis meet earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur. The churches shall take turns providing a chairman and acting as the convening church.

Furthermore, the classis shall inquire of each Consistory whether Consistory and deacons' meetings are held, the Word of God is faithfully preached, the sacraments are faithfully administered, church discipline is exercised, the poor are cared for, and God-centered schooling is promoted; and whether the Consistory needs the advice and help of the classis for the proper government of the church.

Each classis shall inform the other classes regarding matters of mutual concern by forwarding its *complete* minutes to them in a timely manner.

Grounds

1. This amendment makes it clear that the minutes which are publicly distributed and shared from classis to classis ought to include the complete minutes – not a redacted version from which decisions made during executive sessions are omitted.
2. This amendment will deepen confidence in the broader assemblies of our federation by demonstrating that we have nothing to hide.
3. Principle 9 from the *Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government* states that the decisions of our broader assemblies “derive their authority from their conformity with the Word of God.” However, we cannot judge the conformity to Scripture of decisions that are hidden from public view. By adopting this amendment, we will eliminate a practice that undermines the perceived authority of the assemblies.
4. Article 29 of our *Church Order* declares that “All decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order.” But neither laymen within the churches nor office-bearers from neighboring classes can judge whether the decisions of a classis conflict with Scripture or the Church Order unless those decisions are openly published.

Classis Michigan

Rev. Douglas Barnes, Stated Clerk

Overture 13

Establish Synodical Organizing Committees

Background

As our federation continues to grow, so does the number of delegates attending synod. We currently expect each congregation to delegate two men to represent them at synod. There is a rich blessing in being able to fellowship as a federation in this way. However, there is also a significant logistical challenge. To this point in our history, we have tasked local churches to organize and host synod for the federation. With the potential number of delegates exceeding over 200, plus fraternal delegates, volunteers, etc., there are a diminishing number of local congregations able to hold synod in their own facilities. This has led our churches to rent larger facilities, like Wheaton College and the Buffalo Convention Center. With the expectation that the Lord will continue to bless our federation with new congregations, and assuming we continue to expect each congregation to send two delegates to synod, the logistical challenges of hosting synod are only increasing. With this in mind:

Overture

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Escondido, 2024 to establish two synodical organizing committees (one for the USA one for Canada). These Committees would be tasked with providing the logistical organization for our synod meetings. Each committee would be a subcommittee of the national federational corporations. Each committee would also work with the calling consistory for synod on planning synod.

The mandate of each committee would be as follows: To serve the churches of the federation in their meeting of synod by:

1. Securing a location for hosting synod.
 - a. Consideration ought to be given to Christian organizations able to host synod (universities, conference centers, etc.).
 - b. While the location may move from place to place, the location ought to be as convenient for the churches as possible.
 - c. The location ought to take into consideration the availability of volunteers to assist in the hosting of synod.
2. Providing all the logistical elements necessary for the churches to fulfill their work at synod (accommodations, meals, audiovisual, etc.).
3. Reporting their work to the calling consistory and to the appropriate national corporation.

The members of this committee will be appointed by the churches at synod and will serve a term of four years and may be reappointed at the end of their term.

Grounds

1. The number of delegates and the locations of our congregation make hosting synod an ever-increasing logistical challenge.
2. The costs associated with hosting synod are already borne by the federation through its Joint Venture Agreement.
3. Familiarity with the demands of hosting synod will make organizing committees better equipped than a local church's ad hoc committee that needs to learn all the requirements each time again.

Classis Ontario-East,
Rev. Bryce De Zwarte, Stated Clerk

Overture 14

Amend Church Order Article 6

Background

Currently some churches vote to extend a call to a man before his candidacy exam, conditioned on the man sustaining his exam, sometimes called a “conditional call.” They then present the letter of call immediately after the exam with the expectation of an answer within three weeks. This gives the rest of the federation little or no opportunity to consider the new candidate since most congregational meetings require a two-week prior notice to the congregation. The new candidate is put in the position where he must give an answer to the first call before other churches have had opportunity to consider him.

This process limits the ability of vacant churches to pursue potential candidates. It also limits the potential field of calls for a new candidate to only those churches who were familiar with him before his candidacy was announced. This process also puts the candidate under great pressure to accept the first call he receives because, at the time, he probably has no other calls and no prospect of another before he must answer the first, even though he may think it is not the best match for his gifts.

To give the candidate opportunity to be considered by the whole federation before he must answer any calls, a provision needs to be adopted to give the candidate at least eight weeks after the announcement of his candidacy before he answers any calls he might receive. This provision does not limit the candidate’s freedom to answer any call before eight weeks from the date of the announcement of his candidacy.

Overture

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Escondido to amend Church Order Article 6 titled “Calling a Candidate” by adding the following sentence to the end of Paragraph 3: “*A newly declared candidate shall be given at least eight weeks from the date his candidacy is announced to the federation to answer any calls extended to him during that time.*” The rest of Church Order Article 6 remains the same:

Article 6 – Calling a Candidate

The lawful calling to the office of minister of those who have not previously been in that office consists of:

First, the election by the council of one who has been declared a candidate according to the regulations prescribed herein, after having prayed and received the advice of the congregation;

Second, the examination of both doctrine and life, which shall be conducted to the satisfaction of the delegates to the classis of which the calling church is a participant, according to the regulations adopted by the federation (*see Appendix 4 and 6*). *A newly declared candidate shall be given at least eight weeks from the date his candidacy is announced to the federation to answer any calls extended to him during that time;*

Finally, the public ordination before the congregation, which shall take place with appropriate instructions, admonitions, prayers and subscription to the Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form of Subscription, followed with the laying on of hands by the ministers who are present and by the elders of the congregation, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

Grounds

1. This will discourage the practice of conditional calls by allowing all the churches adequate time and equal opportunity to consider newly declared candidates.
2. If a candidate receives a call seven weeks after his candidacy is announced, the words “at least” still allows him to take three weeks to consider the call.
3. The date of the announcement should be used rather than the date of the exam since some consistories wait until their next regular meeting to act on the concurring advice they received at classis that allows them to declare/announce the candidacy.
4. This will allow candidates to better discern where their gifts may best be used.

Classis Ontario-East,
Rev. Bryce De Zwarte, Stated Clerk

Overture 15

Amend Appendix 8 of the Church Order Regarding Erasure

Background

Synod 2018 provided clear definitions to the churches for dealing with membership departure. One of those definitions is for the process of membership erasure. Appendix 8.4 says, “Consistories may erase the membership of those with whom they have had no contact for at least two years.” We find this provision to be helpful in the case of those with whom we have no contact, despite our best efforts. However, we have had the situation arise in a number of cases, where after many months of trying to make contact, the contact was short and fruitless. That would seem to “reset the clock” and the consistory must now wait another two years before proceeding with erasure.

Overture

Classis Southwest U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to add the word “meaningful” to the first sentence of Appendix 8.4 so that it reads, “Consistories may erase the membership of those with whom they have had no meaningful contact for at least two years.”

Grounds

1. We believe that this addition makes clear the intention of the provision for erasure. There are to be ongoing attempts at meaningful contact with the member. This addition makes explicit what we believe is implicit.
2. We do not believe that the barest form of contact, perhaps a sentence or less by text message, should require a consistory to continue to expend its efforts to contact someone who has made their wishes clear.
3. We believe that as currently written, this understanding of erasure could actually be a disincentive to the consistory to be diligent in their work, fearing that a perfunctory contact from the member will prolong their efforts without a positive outcome.
4. If there has been a short contact late in the process, the classis can determine if it was meaningful before giving their concurring advice, thus encouraging the consistories to remain diligent in their task.

Classis Southwest U.S.
Rev. Michael Spotts, Stated Clerk

Overture 16

Editorial Changes to the Church Order (Part 1)

Background

It has been almost 30 years since the Church Order for the URCNA was written and adopted. It was put together by a well-qualified committee and presented to the churches at the first synod in 1996. At that time, there were a few changes made by the committee. It was also decided to suspend the article regarding changing the Church Order, so that more input could be received from the churches.

At our second synod, St. Catharines 1997, there were 71 overtures requesting changes to the Church Order, in addition to the dozen changes recommended by the Church Order Committee. Some were adopted; some were not. Since that time, there have been approximately two dozen more changes made to fine-tune the Church Order. The accomplished result of all of this is a Church Order that specifically meets the needs of the federation. However, the unintended result of this process has been a lack of internal consistency of language among the articles. The intent of this overture is to provide editorial consistency within the Church Order.

We do not believe that any of these recommendations are substantive, but that they are only editorial in nature.

Overture

Classis Southwest U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to make the following changes to the Church Order in order to provide internal consistency of language.

Introduction

1. In the second sentence, change the word from “creeds” to “confessions” so that it reads:
“We believe and are fully persuaded that the Reformed Confessions do fully agree . . .”

Ground:

We use the terms “Creeds and Confessions” to refer to the ecumenical creeds and the reformed confessions. Here, the reference is clearly to the confessions, not the creeds, since the confessions are listed at the end of the sentence.

2. In the seventh sentence, delete the word “good” before “order” so that it reads: “. . . all things are to be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40) . . .”

Grounds:

- a. Although we often informally quote 1 Corinthians 14:40 including the word “good,” there is no common version of the Bible (see attached list) that uses the adjective “good” before “order.” Since we cite the verse here, we should cite it accurately.

1 Corinthians 14:40 translated in different versions:

KJV – “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

NKJV – “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

RSV – “but all things should be done decently and in order.”

NRSV – “but all things should be done decently and in order.”

ASV – “But let all things be done decently and in order.”

NASB – “But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.”

NIV-84 – “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

NIV-2011 – “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

ESV – “But all things should be done decently and in order.”

- b. It is true that the adjective “good” is used in Belgic Confession Article 30. However the citation in the Church Order is not from the confessions, but from the Scriptures. The language used should come from there as well.
3. In the seventh sentence, change the wording to that it reads: “in the churches all things should be done decently and in [good] order” [depending on the disposition of part 2 of this overture.]

Ground:

The proposed change is a quote from the English Standard Version of 1 Corinthians 14:40. Although this is not the version used in all of our churches, it is the version which is used extensively for quotations in our Forms and Prayers book. This would provide consistency by using that version in the Church Order as well.

I. Ecclesiastical Offices

4. In **Article 11**, change the word in the last sentence from “discharged” to “released” so that it reads: “. . . whereafter he shall be honorably released from office.”

Grounds:

- a. Although we as a federation haven’t specified the categories by which ministers are removed from office as other denominations have, we do have a history of usage in our federation of these types of terms. The term that we normally use for the proper removal of a minister from his office is the term “honorably released.”
- b. This article deals with non-disciplinary removal from office. The word “discharge” has both the connotation and at times the denotation of a disciplinary proceeding. “Release” is a more neutral and appropriate term.
- c. This matches the term used in the title of the article, i.e. “Exceptional Release of a Minister.”
5. In **Article 14**, change the last sentence, so that it reads: “. . . all things be done decently and in order [assuming that numbers 2 & 3 above are adopted].

Ground:

While not a full quotation of the 1 Corinthians 14:40 (as in the Introduction), the proposed language will bring parallel consistency between that citation and this use of the phrase in the Church Order.

II. Ecclesiastical Assemblies

6. In **Article 20**, in the third sentence, delete the word “meetings” so that it reads: “Between broader assemblies, the clerk shall perform his duties . . .”

Ground:

By definition, a broader assembly is a meeting (cf. Church Order Article 16 and 26). To say “broad assembly meetings” is redundant. Nothing is lost by the deletion of this word.

7. In **Article 22**, change the word in the title of the article from “instituting” to “organizing” so that it reads: “Organizing a New Church”
Ground:
This makes the title of the article consistent with the text of the article, “When a congregation is organized within the federation . . .”
8. In **Article 25**, in the last sentence, change the word “power” to “authority” so that it reads: “No broader assembly shall have the authority to depose an office-bearer or otherwise exercise church discipline, since this authority belongs to the Consistory.”
Ground:
The word “authority” carries the same weight, but with greater accuracy and internal consistency (cf. Church Order Article 21).
9. In **Article 26**, in the last sentence of the first paragraph, change with words “churches/church” to “consistories/consistory” so that it reads: “The consistories shall take turns providing a chairman and acting as the convening consistory.”
Grounds:
a. The chairman of classis is not simply a member of the church, but a member of the consistory.
b. It is a consistory, not a church, which convenes a classis.
10. In **Article 35**, in the second sentence, change the word “synod” to “federation” so that it reads: “The classis shall keep the federation informed of such ecumenical relations . . .”
Ground:
Synod is a meeting which takes place at least once every three years. The intent of this provision is to honor our federative bond. As such, the classis should inform the federation of their activities in a timely manner, not just the synod every few years.

III. Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks

11. In **Article 42**, add the words “in a service of corporate worship” following the words “profession of faith” so that it reads: “. . . shall receive holy baptism upon public profession of faith in a service of corporate worship, with the use . . .”
Ground:
This makes the wording of the article parallel to Article 41 regarding baptism, which shall take place “in a service of corporate worship,” and Article 46 regarding the other sacrament, “The consistory shall ordinarily administer the Lord’s Supper . . . in a service of corporate worship.”
12. In **Article 42**, in the first sentence, change the word from “forms” to “form” so that it reads: “. . . with the use of the appropriate liturgical form, and thus . . .”
Ground:
Although there are two approved forms for the baptism of adults, only one of them will be used in the worship service.
13. In **Article 42**, in the first sentence, change the words “accepted as members” to “received as communicant members” so that it reads, “. . . and thus be received as communicant members.”

Grounds:

- a. The addition of “communicant” makes clear, that while the article refers to the person receiving holy baptism, they are being received as communicant, not baptized, members.
- b. The word “received” makes this consistent with the title of Article 44 regarding reception of members.

14. In **Article 43**, in the second sentence, change the words from “public worship service” to “service of corporate worship” so that it reads: “. . . their public profession of faith shall occur in a service of corporate worship . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article parallel to Article 41 regarding baptism, which shall take place “in a service of corporate worship,” and Article 46 regarding the other sacrament, “The consistory shall ordinarily administer the Lord’s Supper . . . in a service of corporate worship,” [and possibly Article 42, depending on the disposition of point 11 of this overture.]

15. In **Article 43**, in the third sentence, change the words from “are accepted into full communion in the congregation” to “shall receive all the privileges of membership in the congregation” so that it reads: “Thereby baptized members shall receive all the privileges of membership in the congregation . . .”

Ground:

This wording helps to avoid the misunderstanding that baptized members are not full members of the congregation. Baptized members are full members. However, they have not received all the privileges of that membership until they profess their faith.

16. In **Article 44**, in the first sentence, change the words from “admitted to communicant membership” to “received as communicant members” so that it reads: “. . . shall be received as communicant members . . .”

Grounds:

- a. The word “received” makes this consistent with the title of the article which uses the word “Reception.”
- b. This makes the wording of the article parallel to Article 42 [depending on the disposition of point 13 of this overture.]

17. In **Article 44**, in the third sentence, change the words from “Their names shall be announced to the congregation two weeks prior to their reception” to “Their reception shall take place after adequate announcement to the congregation” so that it reads: “Their reception shall take place after adequate announcement to the congregation, in order that . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article parallel to Article 43, regarding the reception of professing members.

18. In **Article 45**, in the first and second sentences, change the word from “Lord’s Table” to “Lord’s Supper” so that it reads: “. . . participation at the Lord’s Supper” and “admitted to the Lord’s Supper . . .”

Ground:

This makes the title of the article, “Admission to the Lord’s Supper” consistent with the text of the article, as well as consistent with Articles 42 and 43.

19. In **Article 46**, delete the word “ordinarily” in the first sentence so that it reads, “The Consistory shall administer the Lord’s Supper at least every three months . . .”

Ground:

The words “at least” already provide latitude to the Consistory rendering the word “ordinarily” unnecessary.

Classis Southwest U.S.

Rev. Michael Spotts, Stated Clerk

Overture 17

Editorial Changes to the Church Order (Part 2)

Background

It has been almost 30 years since the Church Order for the URCNA was written and adopted. It was put together by a well-qualified committee and presented to the churches at the first synod in 1996. At that time, there were a few changes made by the committee. It was also decided to suspend the article regarding changing the Church Order, so that more input could be received from the churches.

At our second synod, St. Catharines 1997, there were 71 overtures requesting changes to the Church Order, in addition to the dozen changes recommended by the Church Order Committee. Some were adopted; some were not. Since that time, there have been approximately two dozen more changes made to fine-tune the Church Order. The accomplished result of all of this is a Church Order that specifically meets the needs of the federation. However, the unintended result of this process has been a lack of internal consistency of language among the articles. The intent of this overture is to provide editorial consistency within the Church Order.

We believe that most of these recommendations are not substantive, but that they are only editorial in nature.

Overture

Classis Southwest U.S. overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to make the following changes to the Church Order in order to provide internal consistency of language.

IV. Ecclesiastical Discipline

1. In **Article 51**, in the first sentence, change the word “Christian” to “church” so that it reads: “Since church discipline is spiritual in nature . . .”
Ground:
This makes the wording of the article parallel to Article 11.a., 25, 26, 55, 56, Appendix 8.2, and 8.3.
2. In **Article 52**, delete the word “Addressing” in the title of the article so that it reads: “Article 52: Private Sins.”
Ground:
This makes the wording of the title parallel to the title of Article 53 which does not include the word “addressing.”
3. In **Article 53**, change the word “secret” to “private” so that it reads: “Private sins from which the sinner repents . . .”
Ground:
This makes the wording of the article consistent with the title of Article 52.
4. In **Article 53**, add the words “in love” after the word “admonished” so that it reads: “. . . sins from which the sinner repents after being admonished in love by one person . . .”
Ground:
This makes the wording of the article consistent with the wording of Article 54.

5. In **Article 54**, change the words “by two or three persons” to “in the presence of two or three witnesses” so that it reads: “If anyone has been admonished in love in the presence of two or three witnesses concerning . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article consistent with the wording of Article 53.

6. In **Article 54**, change the word “secret” to “private” so that it reads: “. . . two or three witnesses concerning a private sin and does not repent . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article consistent with Article 52 and 53 [depending on the disposition of part 3 and 5 of this overture.]

7. In **Article 54**, change the words “shall be brought to” to “shall be made known to” so that it reads: “. . . the matter shall be made known to the Consistory.”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article consistent with Article 53 and 55

8. In **Article 55**, change the words “is properly made known to” to “has been properly made know to” so that it reads: “. . . member whose sin has been properly made known to the consistory . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording consistent with Article 53, and 54 [depending on the disposition of part 7 of this overture.]

9. In **Article 55**, make the following additions (in *italics*) and deletions (in ~~strike through~~): “. . . be subject to church discipline ~~according to~~ *in the following three stages:*”

And in b.: “. . . with the use of the appropriate liturgical form, *in the following three steps*, the interval between which . . .”

Ground:

This wording makes the article more explicit and internally consistent.

10. In **Article 56**, change the title from “The Exclusion of a Member Due to Resignation” to “The Discipline of a Member Due to Resignation.”

Grounds:

a. This makes it clear the exclusion is disciplinary in character.

b. It avoids any potential confusion between the title of this article and Article 59.

11. In **Article 56**, change the word “steps” to “stages” so that it reads: “the consistory need not proceed further with the aforementioned three stages of discipline . . .”

Ground:

This wording makes it explicit that we are referring to the stages of discipline, rather than one of the three steps of the sub-category of Public Discipline.

12. In **Article 56**, in the second sentence, change the word “should” to “shall” so that it reads: “. . . the consistory shall seek the advice of classis . . .”

Grounds:

a. Seeking the advice of classis is not optional.

b. This makes the wording consistent with Article 55.b.2.

13. In **Article 56**, in the third sentence, change the words “advised it to proceed” to “advised that it may proceed” so that it reads: “. . . if classis has previously advised that it may proceed to the second step . . .”

Grounds:

- a. This makes it clear that the classis is not instructing the consistory to proceed, but merely giving its advice that it may proceed.
- b. This makes the wording consistent with the words in the next sentence, “may proceed to exclude.”

14. In **Appendix 8.3**, in the second sentence of the 6th paragraph, change the word “should” to “shall” so that it reads: “. . . the consistory shall seek the advice of classis before acting to exclude . . .”

Grounds:

- a. Seeking the advice of classis is not optional.
- b. This makes the wording of the appendix consistent with the wording of Article 55.b.2. and Article 56 [depending on the disposition of part 12 of this overture.]

15. In **Appendix 8.3**, in the third sentence of the 6th paragraph, change the words “advised it to proceed” to “advised that it may proceed” so that it reads: “. . . if classis has previously advised that it may proceed to the second step . . .”

Grounds:

- a. This makes it clear that the classis is not instructing the consistory to proceed, but merely giving its advice that it may proceed.
- b. This makes the wording consistent with Article 56 [depending on the disposition of part 13 of this overture.]

16. In **Article 57**, change the word in the title from “Reconciliation” to “Restoration” so that it reads: “Article 57: The Restoration of a Member.”

Ground:

This makes the title of the article consistent with the text of the first sentence of the article.

17. In **Article 57**, add the word “Communicant” before the word “Member” in the title so that it reads: “Article 57: The Restoration of a Communicant Member” [depending on the disposition of part 16 of this overture.]

Ground:

This makes it clear that we are talking about a communicant member who is still a part of the church, in contrast to Article 58 and Article 60.

18. In **Article 57**, change “two neighboring churches” to “two neighboring consistories” so that it reads: “. . . be decided with the advice of two neighboring consistories of the classis.”

Ground:

This makes it clear that it is the consistory, not the congregation, which is being asked to provide its advice.

19. In **Article 57**, delete the words “of the classis” so that it reads: “. . . be decided with the advice of two neighboring consistories.”

Grounds:

- a. This makes the wording consistent with Article 61 [depending on the disposition of part 29 of this overture.]

- b. Deleting the words “of the classis” emphasizes that in the Church Order, classis is an assembly, not a geographical region.
20. In **Article 58**, change the title to “The Readmission of Disciplined Communicant Members”
Grounds:
a. This title will reflect the change suggested in the next part of this overture.
b. This title makes it parallel to Article 60 [depending on the disposition of part 26 of this overture.]
21. In **Article 58**, change the words “anyone who has been excommunicated” to “any former communicant member who has been excluded or excommunicated” so that it reads:
“Whenever any former communicant member who has been excluded or excommunicated desires to be reconciled to the church . . .”
Ground:
This wording reflects the two means by which discipline is exercised on a communicant member (Article 55.c. and 56), rather than just one (Article 55.c).
22. In **Article 58**, change the word “reinstated” to “readmitted” so that it reads: “. . . be publicly readmitted with the use . . .”
Ground:
This wording makes the language of the article consistent with the title.
23. In **Article 59**, change “members by baptism” to “baptized members” so that it reads:
“Mature baptized members . . .”
Grounds:
a. This wording makes the language of the article consistent with the title.
b. This makes the wording consistent with the first sentence of Article 43.
24. In **Article 59**, add the words “by the Consistory” after the word “excluded” so that it reads:
“. . . if they persist, shall be excluded by the Consistory from the church of Christ.”
Ground:
This makes the wording parallel to Article 55.A. “shall be suspended by the Consistory.”
25. In **Article 59**, change the wording of the last sentence to “The Consistory shall seek the advice of classis before proceeding to such exclusion.”
Ground:
This makes the wording parallel to Article 55.B.2.
26. In **Article 60**, change the title to read “The Readmission of Disciplined Baptized Members”
Ground:
This makes the wording parallel to the title of Article 58 [depending on the disposition of part 20 of this overture.]
27. In **Article 60**, make the following additions (in *italics*) and deletions (in ~~strikethrough~~):
“~~Members by baptism who have been excluded from the church~~ *Whenever any former baptized member who has been excluded from the church and who later repent of their sin* desires to be reconciled to the church by way of penitence, *they* shall be ~~received again into the church~~ *readmitted only upon public profession of faith.*”
Ground:
This makes the wording consistent with the first sentence of Article 43 and Article 59 [depending on the disposition of part 21-23 of this overture.]

28. In **Article 61**, add the Oxford comma after the word “elder” so that it reads: “When a minister, elder, or deacon has committed . . .”
Ground:
This is proper place to use the Oxford comma.
29. In **Article 61**, change the words “the Consistories of two neighboring churches” to “two neighboring consistories” so that it reads: “. . . with the concurring advice of two neighboring consistories. Should he harden . . .”
Ground:
This make the wording consistent with Article 57 [depending on the disposition of part 18 of this overture.]
30. In **Article 62**, change the last word from “excommunication” to “church discipline” so that it reads: “. . . which in any other member of the church would occasion church discipline.”
Ground:
This wording makes reference to the process of church discipline, rather than just one possible outcome.
31. In **Article 63**, add the Oxford comma after the word “elders” so that it reads: “The ministers, elders, and deacons shall exercise mutual censure regularly . . .”
Ground:
This is proper place to use the Oxford comma.
32. In **Article 64**, change the words “at least two years” to “at least eighteen months” so that it reads: “. . . with whom they have not been able to communicate for at least eighteen months.”
Ground:
We believe that eighteen months is a sufficient time to pursue members with which there has been no meaningful contact.
33. In **Article 65**, change the word “Equality” to “Parity” in the title so that it reads: “Parity of Churches and Office-Bearers.”
Ground:
The word “parity,” meaning equality of position or value, better expresses the relationship between churches and office-bearers than the more general word “equality.”
34. In light of the proposed change to Article 65 (above), in **Article 24**, change the word “Equality” to “Parity” in the title so that it reads: “Article 24: Parity and Unity of Congregations.”
Ground:
The word “parity,” meaning equality of position or value, better expresses the relationship between churches than the more general word “equality.”
35. In **Article 24**, delete the words “and equal” in the first sentence so that it reads: “Although congregations are distinct and do not have dominion over each other . . .”
Grounds:
a. The word “equal” is vague and can be confusing.
b. The word “equal” is unnecessary due to the following words “do not have dominion over each other.”
c. Nothing is lost by making this deletion.

36. In **Article 65**, change the word “churches” (twice) and “church” to “Consistories” and “Consistory” so that it reads [depending on the disposition of part 33 of this overture]:
“Article 65: Parity of Consistories and Office-Bearers
No Consistory shall in any way lord it over other Consistories, and no office-bearer shall lord it over other office-bearers.”

Ground:

Parity of churches as congregations was dealt with in Article 24. This article deals specifically with the parity of the office-bearers, corporately and individually, to each other.

The following recommendations come from previous divisions of the Church Order.

37. In **Article 8**, add the words “delegates to” before the words “the classis” so that it reads:
“without an examination conducted to the satisfaction of the delegates to the classis, according to the regulations . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording parallel to Article 6.

38. In **Article 8**, change the last sentence to read: “. . . whereupon the classis shall declare him eligible to be called by the sponsoring Consistory.”

Ground:

This wording also makes the article consistent with Appendix 5.2.d. which says, “Upon sustaining the colloquium doctum, the classis shall declare the minister eligible to be called by the sponsoring Consistory . . .”

39. In **Article 4**, delete the words “a meeting of the” (three times) so that it reads: “. . . which shall arrange for his examination at a classis of which his Consistory is a participant . . . until he has sustained an examination at this classis, in the presence of his Consistory . . . Upon sustaining this exam in the presence of his Consistory and with the concurring advice of the delegates to this classis . . .”

Ground:

By definition in the Church Order, classis is a meeting (cf. Article 16 and 26), making the words “meeting of” redundant and unnecessary.

40. In **Article 26**, delete the word “meeting” in the first sentence so that it reads: “. . . to meet at a time and place determined at the previous classis, within the next twelve months.”

Ground:

By definition in the Church Order, classis is a meeting (cf. Article 16), making the word “meeting” redundant and unnecessary.

41. In **Article 26**, change the word “meet” to “convene” in the second sentence so that it reads: “. . . deem it necessary that a classis convene earlier than the regular time determined . . .”

Ground:

Since classis is a meeting, the word “convene” is a more accurate description of what the article allows to happen.

42. In **Article 9**, delete the word “supervising” so that it reads: “. . . upon approval by his council with the concurring advice of classis.”

Ground:

There is only one type of Council in the Church Order. It is the one that provides supervision, making the word “supervising” unnecessary.

43. In **Articles 12 and 41**, change the words “confessing members” to “communicant members” so that they read: “Only male communicant members who meet the biblical requirements for office . . .” and “. . . signified and sealed to the children of communicant members in good standing . . .”

Grounds:

- a. This wording would be consistent with Article 55 and the current wording of Article 44.
 - b. The wording would be consistent with Article 57 and 58 [depending on the disposition of parts 17, 20-21 of this overture.]
 - c. This language would be consistent with the language proposed in another overture dealing with Article 42 and 44, should it be adopted.
 - d. We have found that using the term “communicant” to refer to a member’s status rather than “confessing” has helped us keep the categories straight, especially when it comes to receiving new members.
44. In **Article 15**, change the words “shall ordinarily meet every month” to “shall ordinarily meet at least once a month” in the last sentence so that it reads: “The deacons shall ordinarily meet at least once a month to transact the business . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording parallel to the wording in Article 21 regarding the meeting of the Consistory.

45. In **Article 40**, change the title from “Catechetical Preaching” to “Confessional Preaching.”

Ground:

The article itself makes reference to preaching the word as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, not just the Heidelberg Catechism (although the catechism does receive special attention). This title more accurately reflects the full content of the article.

46. In **Article 22**, change the word “congregation” to “church” so that it reads: “When a church is organized within the federation . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording of the article correspond to the wording of the title of the article.

47. In **Article 9**, change the title to “The Term of Service.”

Ground:

This fits more consistently with other titles in the Church Order where the title is more generic and the article more specific.

48. In **Article 26** and **Article 28**, add the article “The” to the title so that it reads: “The Classis” and “The Synod.”

Ground:

This makes the titles parallel to articles 21 and 23, “The Consistory” and “The Council.”

49. In **Article 32**, delete the words “and sacraments” in the third sentence so that it reads: “. . . being declared a minister of the Word among the United Reformed Churches . . .”

Ground:

This is the only instance in the ten uses of the phrase “minister of the Word” in the 66 articles of the Church Order, that the phrase “and sacraments” is added. This deletion makes this article consistent with the rest of the Church Order.

The following recommendation comes from the Appendices of the Church Order.

50. In **Appendix 1.3.1**, insert the Oxford comma after the word “Reformation,” add the word “and” before the words “URCNA Federational history” so that it reads, “Courses which cover the Ancient, Medieval, Reformation, and Modern Church, and URCNA Federational history.

Grounds:

- a. This is the proper place to use the Oxford comma.
- b. This makes the article parallel with the use of “and” before the end of a series in 1.3, 2.3, and 4.1.

51. In **Appendix 2.2.b**, change the words “and the successful completion of the exam will be certified to the other Consistories of the federation” to “who must make known that the licentiate has sustained his licensure exam.”

Ground:

This wording is consistent with Appendix 3.2.c.

52. In **Appendix 2.3.b.**, change the words so that it reads: “The oral exam should investigate the following specific areas:”

Ground:

This wording is consistent with Appendix 3.3.b., Appendix 4.3, and Appendix 5.3.

53. In **Appendix 3.2.a**, change the words “request a meeting of classis for this exam” to “invite classis to participate in a candidacy exam” so that it reads: “The prospective candidate’s Consistory must invite classis to participate in a candidacy exam.”

Ground:

This makes the wording parallel to Appendix 4.2.b and Appendix 5.2.a.

54. In **Appendix 4.2.a**, delete the words “Exceptional case,” add the words “shall ordinarily” before the words “be waived,” and change the word “conducting” to “hearing” so that it reads: “a. If the ordination exam would occur in the same classis in which the candidacy exam was sustained, then the ordination exam shall ordinarily be waived by the delegates hearing the candidacy exam.”

Ground:

This makes the article consistent with wording and intent of Appendix 3.2.e.

55. In **Appendix 4.2.a.**, add this final sentence, “This shall apply to both a fully or partially sustained exam.”

Ground:

This makes clear that the provision for waiving the ordination exam applies to either situation.

56. In **Appendix 4.3.(3)**, delete the words “concerning” and “prospective” so that it reads: “. . . the history and content of the Three Forms of Unity, the candidate’s willingness to subscribe to them . . .”

Grounds:

- a. This makes the wording parallel to Appendix 3.3.(4).
- b. This appendix is about an ordination exam for a candidate, not a prospective candidate.

57. In **Appendix 5.1.**, change the words “the examinee” to “the minister to be examined” so that it reads: “one from the minister to be examined and one from the sponsoring Consistory.”

Grounds:

- a. Throughout the appendices, we refer to men in their current state when being examined (“prospective candidate” in Appendix 3 and “candidate” in Appendix 4). This continues that practice, since the man being examined is currently a minister.
- b. Including the word “to be examined” avoids the possible confusion of whether this is referring to the minister to be examined, or the minister of the sponsoring Consistory.

58. In **Appendix 5.2.a.**, change the word “calling” to “sponsoring” so that it reads: “The sponsoring Consistory must invite classis . . .”

Ground:

This makes the wording consistent with 5.1, 5.2.b., and 5.2.d.

59. In **Appendix 5.2.b.**, change the word “examinee” to “minister” so that it reads: “The minister is to preach a sermon . . .”

Ground:

Throughout the appendices, we refer to men in their current state when being examined (“prospective candidate” in Appendix 3 and “candidate” in Appendix 4). This continues that practice, since the man being examined is currently a minister.

60. In **Appendix 5.2.1 (second option)**, change the word “examinee” to “minister to be examined,” the word “examinee’s” to “minister’s,” and “recommending” to “sponsoring” so that it reads: “. . . one from the minister to be examined, one from the minister’s Consistory, and one from the Sponsoring Consistory.”

Grounds:

- a. Throughout the appendices, we refer to men in their current state when being examined (“prospective candidate” in Appendix 3 and “candidate” in Appendix 4). This continues that practice, since the man being examined is currently a minister.
- b. The use of the word “sponsoring” makes this consistent with 5.1, 5.2.b., and 5.2.d.

61. In **Appendix 5.2a. and b. (second option)**, change the word “recommending” to “sponsoring.”

Ground:

This makes the article internally consistent.

62. In **Appendix 5.3.(3)**, delete the words “concerning” and change the words “prospective candidate’s” to “minister’s” so that it reads: “. . . the history and content of the Three Forms of Unity, the minister’s willingness to subscribe to them . . .”

Grounds:

- a. This makes the wording parallel to Appendix 3.3.(4).
- b. This appendix is about a colloquium doctum for a minister, not a prospective candidate.

63. In **Appendix 4.2.e.**, **Appendix 5.2.d.**, and **Appendix 5.2.c. (second option)**, delete the words “and sacraments” so that it reads: “a minister of the Word among the United Reformed Churches.”

Grounds:

- a. The title given to a minister in nine of ten uses of the term in the Church Order (ten of ten, of ten, depending on the disposition of part 49 of this overture) do not include these words.
- b. The usage in the appendices of the Church Order should be consistent with the usage within the Church Order proper.

64. We recommend that the following capitalization guide be followed throughout the Church Order and the Appendices.

- a. The following words will be capitalized:
Consistory, Classis, Synod, Council, Diaconate (if used in the future), Church Order, Lord’s Supper, Word (in the phrase “minister of the Word”).
- b. The following words will not be capitalized (unless required by the context, e.g. in the title of an article; beginning a sentence; in a combination like Church Order):
minister, elder, deacon, office-bearer, chairman, clerk, church (when used independently), federation, baptism.

Grounds:

- a. With regard to the first 3 capitalized words, they are names of assemblies (like the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Supreme Court, and Parliament) and therefore should be capitalized. The fourth and fifth terms are not assemblies, but are meetings of office-bearers and so for consistency should be capitalized. The sixth, seventh, and eighth terms are capitalized in common practice.
- b. Consistency aids in reading and comprehension.

Classis Southwest U.S.

Rev. Michael Spotts, Stated Clerk

Overture 18

Church Order Edits

An overture regarding editorial changes to the Church Order was presented to Classis Southwest U.S., on September 13, 2023. It contained twenty-one suggested editorial changes. Nineteen of those changes were adopted and forwarded to the Synod from the classis. The following two changes were not adopted by the classis.

Therefore, in accordance with the Regulations for Synodical Procedure, Appendix A, Guideline 3, the Consistory of the First United Reformed Church of Chino, California, overtures Synod Escondido 2024 to make the following changes to the Church Order in order to provide internal consistency of language.

(Note: For clarity and economy, we are providing only the 2 parts of the overture that were not adopted, rather than the entire 21-part overture. We respectfully request synod to adopt these two changes.)

Background

It has been almost 30 years since the Church Order for the URCNA was written and adopted. It was put together by a well-qualified committee and presented to the churches at the first synod in 1996. At that time, there were a few changes made by the committee. It was also decided to suspend the article regarding changing the Church Order, so that more input could be received from the churches.

At our second synod, St. Catharines 1997, there were 71 overtures requesting changes to the Church Order, in addition to the dozen changes recommended by the Church Order Committee. Some were adopted; some were not. Since that time, there have been approximately two dozen more changes made to fine-tune the Church Order. The accomplished result of all of this is a Church Order that specifically meets the needs of the federation. However, the unintended result of this process has been a lack of internal consistency of language among the articles. The intent of this overture is to provide editorial consistency within the Church Order.

The Council of our church has a regular practice of reviewing the Church Order every few years. Because of that ongoing review and other circumstances, we have taken a very close look at the internal consistency of the language of the Church Order articles. We have noticed some errors and inconsistency of language which we seek to correct. We do not believe that any of these recommendations are substantive, but that they are only editorial in nature.

I. Ecclesiastical Offices

1. In **Article 15**, delete the word “ordinarily” in the last sentence so that it reads, “The deacons shall meet every month to transact . . .”

Ground:

Everything that is listed in the Church Order is to be done “ordinarily.” It is not necessary to explicitly state that. If that were the case, we would need to add the word “ordinarily” to many more articles in the Church Order. We have always recognized that

at a particular time and under particular circumstances, a certain stipulation in the Church Order might not take place. However, we don't need to codify those exceptions.

II. Ecclesiastical Assemblies

2. In **Article 21**, delete the word "ordinarily" in the first sentence so that it reads, ". . . which shall meet at least once a month."

Ground:

Everything that is listed in the Church Order is to be done "ordinarily." It is not necessary to explicitly state that. If that were the case, we would need to add the word "ordinarily" to many more articles in the Church Order. We have always recognized that at a particular time and under particular circumstances, a certain stipulations in the Church Order might not take place. However, we don't need to codify those exceptions.

Respectfully submitted,
Elder Pete Nanninga
Clerk of Consistory First Chino URC

Board of Directors for the United Reformed Churches in North America (U.S.A.)
Report to Synod Escondido 2024

Dear brothers,

The U.S. Board of Directors has held three Board meetings since Synod 2022. Throughout the last two years, additional meetings have occurred between the URCNA and OPC representatives to the Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture. The Management Committee created under the Joint Venture Agreement with Canada has also held meetings.

The Annual Reports mandated by the Michigan Department of Labor and Regulatory Affairs have been filed and are current, and the corporation remains in good standing with the State of Michigan.

The financial statements for the corporation were reviewed by the Board and distributed to the churches. The financial records and reporting for the calendar years 2022 and 2023 were reviewed by an independent, credentialed accountant. Per the accountant's letter dated February 5, 2024, the items examined for both years appeared to be in good order and materially accurate.

At the January 10, 2023 meeting, Donald Roth was elected as president. Greg Vande Kamp was elected as Secretary, and Michael Kiledjian was elected as Vice Treasurer. John Ehnis was previously appointed as treasurer.

Although he stepped down from the board, Gary Veldink has continued to serve on the Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture committee and he has given regular reports to the Board. We are thankful for the continued work of the Joint Venture. In addition to retaining sufficient funds for ongoing operations, the Joint Venture has distributed to the U.S. corporation a total of \$50,000 USD in 2022 and \$50,000 USD in 2023. Per Synod Niagara's instructions, the U.S. Board equally distributed the surplus of \$305,000 USD to the eight classes of our federation in December 2022.

The business of the Board continues to be dominated by litigation concerns. While we have been able to extricate ourselves from previous litigation, an ongoing lawsuit instituted in California has proven more intractable. The suit alleges that the Federation maintains sufficient direction and control over ministers that they should be considered employees for purposes of what is called vicarious liability. Much like an employer can be held liable for negligent acts committed by an employee within the scope of employment, this case alleges that the Federation can and should be held liable for alleged actions of a pastor and Consistory of a local church. In most states, this argument would not have sufficient merit, and the Federation would likely have been dismissed from the case already; however, in certain plaintiff-friendly jurisdictions, such as California, the outlook is far more uncertain. While we remain hopeful, the simple reality is that this lawsuit has taken far longer and tens of thousands of dollars more to deal with than previous matters.

As part of litigation and in the interest of hedging against future expenses, the Board has explored a number of different insurance products to help manage the risk of future, expensive litigation. Unfortunately, in order to insure us against the sort of wrongdoing alleged in the current case, all carriers would wish to see us institute policies and procedures regarding oversight that lie outside of our authority. In essence, because we cannot act like managers, no insurance company will provide us coverage against being sued on a theory that we are managers.

As a result of both of these observations, the Board recommends that Synod create a specific fund that functions as a form of self-insurance. That is, an amount would be retained in the fund sufficient to cover litigation costs for at least a one-year period, and then litigation would continue as a line item in the budget each year, with excess added to the fund until it reached the cost of roughly two years. At that point, unused litigation funds would be treated as part of the general fund. The hope is that these funds would not be drawn down heavily in most years, but the growing balance in this fund would ensure that we remain solvent during litigation should a situation similar to what we are currently facing arise again. By God's providence, we have had surplus funds recently that allowed us to absorb current expenses, which exceeded \$50,000 total over 2022 and 2023. We believe that an initial increase in askings in 2024 by \$8/family (about \$30,000 total) would help establish an initial fund, at which point the annual line item in the budget could be around \$10,000. This target is set based on our experienced annual cost of maintaining active litigation.

As a related matter, the Board has been in operation since our initial incorporation in 1999; however, we have never revisited our Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws in order to keep them up to date with changes in the relevant laws. In particular, our Bylaws were not reflective of our regular operation, and it is not clear that they could be followed. For instance, as a type of nonprofit known as a membership, Michigan law requires us to hold a members meeting (that is, Synod) at least once a year. There are workarounds for the fact that Synod does not in fact meet annually, but none have ever been followed. The failure to follow corporate formalities is a potential ground for establishing liability.

Given both of these realities, the Board voted to retain counsel to help us with updating and redrafting both our Articles of Incorporation and our Bylaws. Changes to the Articles include stronger statements clarifying our nonhierarchical structure and disclaiming liability for the actions of local churches. Changes to the Bylaws entail shifting our structure from a membership to a directorship. This nonprofit form does not need to hold annual member meetings, but is instead operated by directors elected every two years by Synod. Since this structure naturally fits well with how the Board actually operates, we are recommending these new documents as substantive improvements over what came before. Copies of both documents are appended to this report.

Board Member Will Postma, who has faithfully served for the last 8 years, and Greg Vande Kamp, who has faithfully served for the last 6 years have asked to step down from the Board at

the end of their current term. Board members John Ehnis, Randy Groendyk, Michael Kiledjian, and Donald Roth are willing to serve another term.

Recommendations:

The U.S. Board of Directors respectfully recommends that Synod take the following action:

1. That Synod appoint seven directors to the Board including the four current directors willing to continue for another term.
2. That Synod establish a Litigation Fund, to which U.S. churches make a one-time contribution of \$30,000. This would increase askings in 2024 by \$8 to a total of \$51 per family.
3. That Synod thereafter establish a litigation line item in the general budget of about \$10,000 per year (using 2024 stats, this would add approximately \$2.50/family to the asking amount; actual amounts subject to change based on number of families). Any unused amount to be contributed to the Litigation Fund until it reaches \$60,000, at which point unused expenses would be treated the same as any unused portion of the general budget.
4. That Synod ratify the proposed Restated Articles of Incorporation and Amended Bylaws. (attached)
5. That Synod authorize the Board to make any minor, non-substantive edits to the Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws as might be required, for example, by a State Examiner or other government official as part of the registration process.
6. Should Synod choose to reject ratification of one document, we recommend that approval of both documents be suspended until satisfactory changes can be made.

As the Board of Directors, we remain grateful for the opportunity to serve the churches in this respect.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Board of Directors,
Donald Roth, President

RESTATED NONPROFIT ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION
OF
UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

Pursuant to the provisions of Act 162, Public Acts of 1982, as amended (the Act"), the undersigned corporation executes the following Restated Articles of Incorporation:

1. The present name of the corporation is: United Reformed Churches in North America.
2. The identification number assigned by the Bureau is: 800854895.
3. All former names of the corporation are: None.
4. The date of filing the original Articles of Incorporation was: September 16, 1999.

The following Restated Articles of Incorporation supersede the Articles of Incorporation as amended and shall be the Articles of Incorporation for the corporation:

ARTICLE I

The name of the corporation is United Reformed Churches in North America.

ARTICLE II

The corporation is a nonprofit corporation organized and operated exclusively for religious and charitable purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the "Code"). The purposes of the corporation are the following:

1. To administer the property, assets, rights, and undertakings of the Federation of United Reformed Churches in North America, an affiliation of like-minded churches bound by their common commitment and confession that the Holy Bible is the inspired, infallible and inerrant Word of God, and their common subscription to the historic Reformed Creeds of the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort (the "Federation");
2. To carry out such activities for the promotion of the well-being of the Federation and its member churches as directed by the Federation; provided, however, that nothing in these Articles of Incorporation shall be construed as giving the corporation any control or direction over the business and affairs of the Federation's member churches;
3. To enter into contracts, negotiate agreements, and manage moneys of the Federation as directed by the Federation;

4. As directed by the Federation, to receive funds directly and/or through offerings in the churches for the support of the activities, committees, functions, and programs of the corporation and/or for the purposes of supporting religious, charitable, and educational organizations exempt from taxation under the Code;

5. To conduct a literature ministry for the production and distribution of Christian periodicals and writings, and other publications needed to carry out the religious and charitable objectives and purposes of the corporation, as directed by the Federation;

6. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the formation of this corporation does not establish a presbyterial synodical structure for purposes of property ownership. All congregations affiliating with this corporation do so under a congregational synodical structure. The corporation shall not have or exercise any oversight or control over the individual churches that comprise the Federation, nor shall it have any responsibility or liability for individual church acts or omissions, all of which such responsibility or liability are expressly denied.

ARTICLE III

The corporation is organized on a nonstock, directorship basis.

The corporation is to be financed from contributions from churches which affiliate with the United Reformed Churches in North America.

ARTICLE IV

The address of the registered office, which is the same as the mailing address, is 5401 Byron Center Avenue, Wyoming, Michigan 49509.

The name of the resident agent at the registered office is John Ehnis.

ARTICLE V

No part of the net earnings of the corporation shall inure to the benefit of, or be distributable to, its members, directors, officers, or other private persons. However, the corporation shall be authorized to pay reasonable compensation for services rendered and to make payments and distribution in furtherance of the purposes set forth in Article II.

No substantial part of the activities of the corporation shall be the carrying on of the propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The corporation shall not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing and distribution of statements), any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.

Notwithstanding any other provision of these articles, the corporation shall not carry on any other activities not permitted to be carried on (a) by a corporation exempt from federal income tax under IRC 501(c)(3) or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code or (2) by a corporation whose contributions are deductible under section IRC 170(c)(2) or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code.

ARTICLE VI

On dissolution of the corporation, after paying or providing for the payment of all of the liabilities of the corporation, the corporation's assets shall be distributed (1) for one or more exempt purposes within the meaning of IRC 501(c)(3) of the Code, or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code or (2) to the federal government, or to a state local government, for a public purpose. Any assets not disposed of shall be disposed of by the circuit court of the county in which the principal office of the corporation is then located, exclusively for such purposes or to such organization or organizations that the court shall determine and that are organized and operated exclusively for such purposes.

ARTICLE VII

No person who is a director or volunteer officer of the corporation shall be personally liable to the corporation or its members for money damages for any action taken or any failure to take any action as a director or volunteer officer, except liability for any of the following:

- (a) The amount of a financial benefit received by a director or volunteer officer to which he or she is not entitled;
- (b) Intentional infliction of harm on the corporation or its members;
- (c) A violation of Section 551 of the Act;
- (d) An intentional criminal act; or
- (e) A liability imposed under Section 497(a) of the Act.

No amendment, alteration, repeal or modification of this Article or adoption of any other provisions in these Articles of Incorporation inconsistent with this Article shall have any effect to increase the liability of any director or volunteer officer of the corporation with respect to any act or omission of such director or officer occurring prior to such amendment, alteration, repeal, modification or adoption.

ARTICLE VIII

The corporation assumes all liability to any person, other than the corporation or its members, for all acts or omissions of a volunteer director occurring on or after January 1, 1988 incurred in the good faith performance of the director's duties. However, the corporation shall not be considered to have assumed any liability to the extent that such assumption is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in IRC 501(c)(3) or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code.

If the Act is amended after the filing of these articles of incorporation to authorize the further elimination of limitation of the liability of directors or officers of nonprofit corporations, then the liability of the members of the board of directors or officers, in addition to that described in this Article VIII, shall be assumed by the corporation or eliminated or limited to the fullest

extent permitted by the Act as so amended. Such an elimination, limitation, or assumption of liability is not effective to the extent that it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in IRC 501(c)(3) or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code. No amendment or repeal of this Article VIII shall apply to or have any effect on the liability or alleged liability of any member of the board of directors or officer of this corporation for or with respect to any acts or omissions occurring before the effective date of any such amendment or repeal.

ARTICLE IX

The corporation assumes liability for all acts or omissions of a volunteer director, volunteer officer, or other volunteer occurring after the date these Articles are filed with the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, provided all of the following are met:

- (a) The volunteer was acting or reasonably believed he or she was acting within the scope of his or her authority;
- (b) The volunteer was acting in good faith;
- (c) The volunteer's conduct did not amount to gross negligence or willful and wanton misconduct;
- (d) The volunteer's conduct was not an international tort; and
- (e) The volunteer's conduct was not a tort arising out of the ownership, maintenance, or use of a motor vehicle for which tort liability may be imposed under Section 3135 of the Insurance Code of 1956.

These Restated Articles of Incorporation were duly adopted on the ____ day of _____, 2024, in accordance with the provisions of Section 641 of the Act, and were duly adopted by the shareholders, the members, or the directors (if organized on a nonstock directorship basis). The necessary number of votes was cast in favor of these Restated Articles of Incorporation.

Signed this ____ day of _____, ____

By: _____
(signature of Authorized Officer or Agent)

(Type or Print Name) (Type or Print Title)

AMENDED AND RESTATED BYLAWS

of

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

A Michigan Nonprofit Corporation

ARTICLE I. FUNDAMENTAL TENENTS

1.1 Objectives and Purposes of Corporation. The Corporation is organized and operated exclusively for religious and charitable objectives and purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended. The general religious and charitable objectives and purposes of the Corporation shall be those stated in Article II of the Corporation's Articles of Incorporation.

1.2 The Basis. The basis of this Corporation is the Holy Bible, which we believe, confess, and declare to be the inspired, infallible and inerrant Word of God, and our only rule faith and practice.

1.3 Forms of Unity. The Corporation believes and is fully persuaded that the Reformed Creeds do fully agree with the Word of God and therefore does subscribe to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort.

1.4 Church Government. The Corporation shall be subject to the policies, directives, instructions, mandates and/or guidance of the Federation as expressed by its Synod from time to time. All procedural matters shall, as much as possible, be dealt with by analogy to the church order of the United Reformed Churches in North America.

1.5 Oversight Disclaimer. Notwithstanding any other provision of these Bylaws, the Corporation shall not have or exercise any oversight or control of individual congregations, nor shall it have any responsibility or liability for individual congregational actions or omissions, all which such responsibility or liability is hereby expressly denied.

ARTICLE II. OFFICES

2.1 Registered Office. The registered office of the Corporation shall be located at the address specified in the Articles of Incorporation or at such other place as may be determined by the Board of Directors if notice thereof is filed with the State of Michigan.

2.2 Other Offices. The business of the Corporation may be transacted at such locations other than the registered office, within or outside the State of Michigan, as the Board of Directors may from time to time determine, or as the business of the Corporation may require.

ARTICLE III. DIRECTORS

3.1 Board of Directors. The business and affairs of the Corporation shall be managed exclusively by a Board of Directors. The Board of Directors shall consist of seven (7) persons. Directors shall be elected to two-year terms, to serve until their successors are appointed and qualified or until their earlier resignation or removal. Directors may be reelected for up to three (3) consecutive two-year terms.

3.2 Resignation and Removal. A director may resign by written notice to the Secretary of the Corporation, which resignation shall be effective upon receipt by the Corporation or at a subsequent time as set forth in the notice. Any director may be removed at any time for cause, by the action of two-thirds (2/3) of the Board of Directors.

3.3 Vacancies. Vacancies on the Board of Directors occurring for any reason may be filled by action of Board. A director elected to fill a vacancy shall hold office for the balance of the term being filled and until his or her successor is appointed or until his or her earlier resignation or removal.

3.4 Place of Meetings and Records. The directors shall hold their meetings, maintain the minutes of the proceedings of meetings of the Board of Directors and committees of the Board of Directors and keep the books and records of account for the Corporation, in such place or places, within or outside the State of Michigan, as the Board of Directors may from time to time determine.

3.5 Annual Meetings. The annual meeting of the Board of Directors shall be held, without notice other than this section 3.5, at the same place and immediately after the annual meeting of the Synod of the United Reformed Church Churches in North America (the "URCNA"). If such meeting is not so held, whether because a quorum is not present or for any other reason, the annual meeting of the Board of Directors shall be called in the same manner as hereinafter provided for special meetings of the Board of Directors.

3.6 Regular Meetings. Regular meetings of the Board of Directors may be held without notice at such time and place as shall from time to time be determined by the Board of Directors. Any notice given of a regular meeting need not specify the business to be transacted or the purpose of the meeting.

3.7 Special Meetings. Special meetings of the Board of Directors may be called by the President or the Secretary, and shall be called by one of them on the written request of any two (2) directors, upon at least two (2) days written notice to each director, or twenty-four (24) hours' notice, given personally, by telephone or by electronic transmission. The notice does not need to specify the business to be transacted or the purpose of the special meeting. Attendance of a director at a special meeting constitutes a waiver of notice of the meeting, except where a director attends the meeting for the express purpose of objecting at the beginning of the meeting to the transaction of any business because the meeting was not lawfully called or convened.

3.8 Quorum and Vote. A majority of the members of the Board of Directors then in office constitutes a quorum for the transaction of business, and the vote of a majority of the directors present at any meeting at which a quorum is present constitutes the action of the Board of Directors unless the vote of a larger number is specifically required by the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws. If a quorum is not present, the directors present may adjourn the meeting from time to time and to another place, without notice other than announcement at the meeting, until a quorum is present.

3.9 Report to Synod. The Board of Directors shall cause a financial report of the Corporation for the preceding two fiscal years to be available for distribution to the Synod of the URCNA no less than three (3) months prior to the next annual meeting of the Synod. The report shall include the Corporation's statement of income, its year-end balance sheet and such other statements or reports as the Board of Directors shall deem appropriate from time to time.

3.10 Corporate Seal. The Board of Directors may authorize a suitable corporate seal, which seal shall be kept in the custody of the Secretary and used by the Secretary.

3.11 Compensation of Directors. Directors as such shall not receive any salaries for their services, but by resolution of the Board of Directors a fixed sum and expenses of attendance may be allowed for attendance at each regular or special meeting of the Board of Directors. Nothing herein contained shall preclude any director from serving the Corporation in any other capacity and receiving reasonable compensation therefor.

3.12 Executive Committee. The Board of Directors may designate an executive committee consisting of two or more of the directors of the Corporation. The executive committee, to the extent provided in said resolution, shall have and may exercise the powers of the Board of Directors in the management of the business and affairs of the Corporation, and may authorize the seal of the Corporation to be affixed to all papers which may require it.

3.13 Other Committees. The Board of Directors may designate one or more additional committees which shall have such powers and duties as may be determined by the Board of Directors; provided, however, that no committee shall exercise the powers and prerogatives of the Board of Directors unless such committee shall consist exclusively of Directors of the Corporation.

3.14 Committees Generally. At committee meetings, a majority of the members of the committee shall constitute a quorum and the act of a majority of the members present at any committee meeting at which there is a quorum present shall be the act of the committee. All committees shall keep regular minutes of their proceedings and report to the Board of Directors when required. No committee shall have the power or authority to amend the Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws of the Corporation, adopt an agreement of merger or consolidation, recommend to the Board the sale, lease, or exchange of all or substantially all of the Corporation's property and assets, recommend to the Board a dissolution of the Corporation or a revocation of a dissolution, fill vacancies in the Board of Directors, or fix the compensation of directors for serving on the Board or on a committee.

3.15 Meeting by Communication Equipment. Members of the Board of Directors, or of any committee designated by the Board of Directors, may participate in a meeting of the Board of Directors or committee, as the case may be, by using a conference telephone or similar communications equipment (e.g., Zoom) by means of which all persons participating in the meeting can communicate with each other. Participation in a meeting pursuant to this section shall constitute presence at the meeting.

3.16 Action Without a Meeting. Any action required or permitted to be taken pursuant to authorization voted at a meeting of the Board of Directors, or any committee thereof, may be taken without a meeting if, before or after the action, all members of the Board of Directors, or such committee, consent thereto in writing. Electronic transmission of consents is permitted. The written consent shall be filed with the minutes of the proceedings of the Board of Directors or committee and the consent shall have the same effect as a vote of the Board of Directors or committee for all purposes.

3.17 Conflict of Interest. The Corporation may at any time adopt and enforce a conflict of interest policy. If no such policy be currently in effect, then the provisions of this Section 3.17 shall serve as the conflict of interest policy for the Corporation. At any meeting of the Board of Directors, any director who has a personal financial interest in the action being discussed or taken by the Board of Directors (including without limitation matters of compensation) shall, upon request of the Board, recuse himself or herself from at least a portion of the Board discussion of that matter, and from the vote on the proposed action. This recusal shall be reflected in the minutes of the meeting. In situations where a director has so recused himself or herself, the recused director shall be counted for purposes of determining whether a quorum is present, but shall not be counted for purposes of determining the majority necessary to approve the action.

ARTICLE IV. OFFICERS

4.1 Officers. The officers of the Corporation shall be a President, a Treasurer, and a Secretary, all of whom shall be elected by and from among the Board of Directors. Each officer shall hold office until his or her successor is elected and qualified or until his or her earlier resignation or removal. The officers shall be elected at the first meeting of the Board of Directors after the annual meeting of the Board.

4.2 Other Officers and Agents. The Board of Directors may appoint such other officers and agents as it may deem advisable, who shall hold their offices for such terms and shall exercise such powers and perform such duties as shall be determined from time to time by the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors may, by specific resolution, empower the President or the executive committee, if such a committee has been designated by the Board of Directors, to appoint such subordinate officers or agents and to determine their powers and duties.

4.3 Removal. The President, the Secretary and/or the Treasurer may be removed at any time, with or without cause, but only by the affirmative vote of a majority of the Board of Directors. Any officer or agent appointed pursuant to Section 4.2 may be removed at any time, with or without cause, by action of the Board of Directors or by the committee or officer, if any, empowered to appoint such officer or agent.

4.4 Compensation of Officers. With the exception of the office of Treasurer, no compensation shall be paid to the officers for services rendered to the Corporation as officers. Nothing contained in this section, however, shall be construed to preclude any officer from serving the Corporation in any other capacity and receiving compensation therefor.

4.5 President. Unless the Board of Directors shall determine otherwise, the President shall be the chief executive officer as well as the chief operating officer of the Corporation and shall have general supervision, direction and control of the business of the Corporation as well as the duty and responsibility to implement and accomplish the objectives of the Corporation. The President shall preside at all meetings of the Board of Directors. The President shall perform such other duties as may be assigned by the Board of Directors.

4.6 Treasurer. The Treasurer shall have custody of the Corporation's funds and securities and shall keep full and accurate account of receipts and disbursements in books belonging to the Corporation. The Treasurer shall deposit all money and other valuables in the name and to the credit of the Corporation in such depositories as may be selected by the Board of Directors. The Treasurer shall disburse the funds of the Corporation as may be ordered by the Board of Directors, or the President, taking proper vouchers for such disbursements. In general, the Treasurer shall perform all duties incident to the office of Treasurer and such other duties as may be assigned by the Board of Directors.

4.7 Secretary. The Secretary shall give or cause to be given notice of all meetings of the directors and all other notices required by law or by these Bylaws; provided, however, that in the case of the Secretary's absence or refusal or neglect to do so, any such notice may be given by any person so directed by the President or by the directors, or by the directors upon whose requisition the meeting is called, as provided in these Bylaws. The Secretary shall record all the proceedings of the meetings of the directors in one or more books provided for that purpose, and shall perform all duties incident to the office of Secretary and such other duties as may be designated by the Board of Directors.

4.8 Other Officers. Any officers other than the President, Treasurer and Secretary, if any shall be appointed, shall have such powers and shall perform such duties as shall be assigned to them by the Board of Directors or by the officer or committee who shall have appointed such officer.

4.9 Bonds. If the Board of Directors shall require, the Treasurer or any other officer or agent of the Corporation shall give bond to the Corporation in such amount and with such surety as the Board of Directors may deem sufficient, conditioned upon the faithful performance of his or her respective duties and offices.

ARTICLE V. CONTRACTS, LOANS, CHECKS AND LEGAL ACTION

5.1 Contracts. The Board of Directors may authorize any officer or officers, agent or agents to enter into any contract or execute and deliver any instrument in the name of and on behalf of the Corporation, and such authority may be general or confined to specific instances.

5.2 Loans. No loans shall be contracted on behalf of the Corporation, and no evidences of indebtedness shall be issued in its name, unless authorized by a resolution of the Board of Directors. Such authorization may be general or confined to specific instances.

5.3 Checks. All checks, drafts or other orders for the payment of money, notes or other evidences of indebtedness issued in the name of the Corporation shall be signed by such officer or officers, agent or agents of the Corporation and in such manner as shall from time to time be determined by resolution of the Board of Directors.

5.4 Deposits. All funds of the Corporation, not otherwise employed, shall be deposited to the credit of the Corporation in such banks, trust companies or other depositories as the Board of Directors may select.

ARTICLE VI. MISCELLANEOUS

6.1 Fiscal Year. The fiscal year of this corporation shall be fixed by resolution of the Board of Directors.

6.2 Notices. Whenever any written notice is required to be given under the provisions of any law, the Articles of Incorporation or by these Bylaws, it shall not be construed or interpreted to mean personal notice, unless expressly so stated, and any notice so required shall be deemed to be sufficient if given in writing by mail, by depositing the same in a post office box, postage prepaid, addressed to the person entitled thereto at his or her address as it appears in the records of the Corporation. Such notice shall be deemed to have been given at the time and on the day of such mailing. When a notice or communication is permitted by the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act to be given in writing, electronic transmission is written notice. When a notice or communication is permitted by the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act to be transmitted electronically, the notice or communication is given when electronically transmitted to the person entitled to the notice or communication in a manner authorized by the person.

6.3 Waiver of Notice. Whenever any notice is required to be given under the provisions of any law, or the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws, a waiver thereof in writing, signed by the person or persons entitled to said notice, whether before or after the time stated therein, shall be deemed equivalent thereto.

ARTICLE VII. AMENDMENTS

These Bylaws may be amended or repealed or new Bylaws adopted solely by action of a majority of the Board of Directors, subject to subsequent ratification by the Synod of the URCNA.

22362117.3

Canadian URCNA Corporation and JVA Report to Synod Escondido 2024

To the delegates of Synod Escondido,

The Canadian URCNA Corporation was established in 2002 by Letters Patent from Industry Canada. The purpose of this Corporation is to represent the churches of our Federation in Canada in matters relating to the Federal and Provincial Governments of Canada and to administer those funds provided the Corporation by the churches for the work being done by the Federation.

The Corporation entered into a Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) with the American URCNA Corporation in 2007. For ease of understanding, consider the JVA a subcommittee of the Canadian Corporation. The JVA consists of two Directors of the American Corporation and three Directors of the Canadian Corporation. Through the JVA these directors oversee all the expenses of the Federation that belong to both our Canadian and American churches (Committee meetings, salaries, honorariums, Synod, etc.). The US Corporation supports the work of the JVA by regularly sending the American share of the Federation's budget to the Canadian Corporation. The Canadian Corporation then distributes both the American and Canadian support for the Federation's work through the JVA. The Board of the JVA meets yearly, or more frequently if needed.

The Canadian Corporation funds almost all activities of the Federation through the JVA due to the regulations governing Canadian charities. These rules, which govern how charities spend and direct their money, tend to be stricter for Canadian charities than those of the US government for American charities. Simply put, it is easier to fund the Federation's activities through the Canadian Corporation than it is to do so through the American Corporation.

The differences between American charity law and Canadian charity law also results in a different relationship between these Corporations and the Federation. Whereas the American Corporation can be viewed as a standing committee of the Federation, the Canadian Corporation operates at an arm's length from the Federation. While the Federation appoints members to the Canadian Corporation, it is the members who appoint the Directors, and the Directors who direct the activities of the Corporation. For the Canadian Corporation this means diligently striving to both satisfy the requirements of the Government of Canada, especially as represented by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) while at the same time serving the churches of our Federation, especially in their decisions made at Synod. As a practical example of serving these two masters, the Board of Directors of the Canadian Corporation approves a budget each year, even though the churches have approved a budget for the two years between Synod. By adopting a budget for the corporation, which Budget may have minor amendments (such as providing updated foreign exchange rates or funding the testing required for travel during the time of COVID) the Board demonstrates to the Government of Canada that the Board supervises all the funds under its care. Yet, the budget that is adopted each year is consistent with the budget adopted at Synod and there are never major decisions that are made contrary to the will of the churches. In this way, the Board demonstrates to the churches that it acknowledges their oversight. In the demands of these dual authorities the Canadian Board of Directors is somewhat different than the US Corporation.

This past year has demonstrated again the challenge of maintaining these dual and sometimes dueling obligations of the Corporation. In many respects the work of the past year-and-a-half has been typical for the Canadian Corporation. The Corporation's primary task is ensuring that the funds entrusted to its care are distributed fairly and efficiently. Over the course of time, we have adopted various policies that assist

our Treasurer in distributing those funds (policies related to mileage reimbursement, what costs for travel are to be reimbursed, etc.). By establishing these policies, the Corporation seeks to be faithful in the responsibility the churches have entrusted to it. However, we are always aware of how the Canadian Government views these matters. Should the government audit either the corporation or those who have been reimbursed by the corporation, it is our responsibility to ensure that such an audit will not find anything amiss.

The biggest challenge the Corporation faced this past year-and-a-half involves changes to the Directors of the Corporation and in the position of Canadian Treasurer. Since our last report to the churches, two of our original members and directors requested leave from their work. While we are sad to see them go, the Board acquiesced to their request. With sincere gratitude and appreciation for their years of diligent service, the Board of Directors accepted the request of Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Stan Antonides to be freed from their obligations to the Corporation. Both of these men served from the beginning of the Corporation, serving with distinction and by their service benefiting our churches through their careful work and counsel on the matters related to the financial support of our Federation's work. At the end of our report, we will request that Federation express its gratitude to these men, but we wish to acknowledge our debt of gratitude to these men in this report.

As a result of these brothers' departure, the Board found itself down to only three Directors. Recognizing the need for a full complement of Directors, and that we were facing unique challenges to our expanding responsibilities, the remaining members sought uniquely qualified persons to assist the churches in the work of the Corporation, beginning with soliciting recommendations for persons qualified to serve as Directors on the Board. The Directors are permitted (pursuant to By-Law Article 3.03) to fill such vacancies provided that the individuals are approved as members at the next subsequent Synod meeting. After discussing a number of possibilities, the members of the Corporation asked Mr. Jeff DeWalle and Mr. Daryl Van Dyke to join the Board in service to the churches. Both men bring unique expertise to the work of the Board. Mr. DeWalle owns an engineering company and has been involved in charity matters through his involvement with Hope Academy in Etobicoke, Ontario. Mr. DeWalle provides the Board insight into budgetary concerns and personnel matters. Mr. Van Dyke who works as a Human Resource officer for a floral distribution company brings years of experience in dealing with Canadian and Ontario labour laws and the oversight of employees. Both men are members in good standing of URCNA congregations. These men accepted the members' request to serve as Directors and have been serving faithfully since that time. At the recent Board meeting, held March 21st, 2024, we officially appointed Mr. Daryl Van Dyke as our Board Treasurer (pursuant to By-Law Article 5.01). At the end of our report, we ask that these men also be appointed as members of the Corporation.

In this past year, our Treasurer for the past 20 or so years, Mrs. Pam Hessels, asked to be relieved of her duties. Recognizing the many years of faithful service provided by Mrs. Hessels, the Board accepted her request and began the search for her replacement. In seeking a replacement to Mrs. Hessels, the Board of Directors approved a job description and invited appropriate individuals in Canada to apply for the position. Mr. Daryl Van Dyke interviewed the candidates who applied, and then he and Mr. Hodgkinson interviewed two candidates. Presenting both candidates to the Board, the Board was convinced that Mr. Johnathan Fennema was best suited to serve the needs of the Corporation. Mr. Fennema is a CPA Candidate with a Master of Accountancy, a member of the URCNA in good standing, and has experience in matters related to Charities and their unique obligations to the Canada Revenue Agency. In discussions with Mr. Fennema the Board offered to develop a contract of employment, however, Mr. Fennema prefers to work as an independent contractor, which was agreeable to the Board. Recognizing that the Federation reimbursed Mrs. Hessels for her expertise and experience, we reset the pay package for Mr. Fennema.

Rather than paying him at the rate that Mrs. Hessels was receiving (approximately \$130 CAD per hour), we have set Mr. Fennema's pay package at approximately \$100 CAD per hour, up to \$13,500 CAD per annum to be paid by the Canadian Corporation and the JVA Board.

As all frequent delegates of Synod will know, Mrs. Hessels has ably and faithfully served the churches during her time as the Treasurer of both the Canadian URCNA Corporation and the JVA. Mrs. Hessels has agreed to continue serving until the end of this Synod in order to train Mr. Fennema and help him appreciate the uniqueness of this work. While we will include in our recommendations that the Synod express its appreciation to Mrs. Hessels for her diligent and precise work on behalf of the Federation, we believe an expression from the Board of Directors in the body of this report is also required. Mrs. Hessels has provided the Board of Directors with excellent and faithful service. Mrs. Hessels has kept up to date on matters related to Canadian Charity Law and has always fulfilled her work with the precision it requires. The Board is sorry to see her go, even as we recognize that she has earned the right to decide when to end her service to the churches. We thank the Lord for how he has blessed our churches through Mrs. Hessels.

As was reported at the last Synod, the past few years have involved dealing with a lawsuit brought against the Federation. Since the last report little has happened. The Corporation's attorney continues to press the claimant to drop the URCNA from the suit. We remain hopeful that this will still take place.

In working through the consequences of this lawsuit, the Board realized that one line of protection for the Corporation is developing contracts for our employees. In the initial discussions with our Insurer about the lawsuit, which conversation was used to determine whether our insurer would defend us in the lawsuit, the Corporation's insurer asked about any employees we have and what is found in their contract regarding oversight, etc. They then encouraged us to consider producing such a contract. Since the last Synod, we have looked into developing a contract for the Corporation's employees: the Foreign Missions Coordinator and the Statistician. We are grateful for the diligence and integrity of both these individuals and have never had cause for concern with their work. However, recognizing the cultural context in which their work is done, we believe it is necessary for their sake and for the churches to ensure that every protection is provided for both of our employees and for the churches. Since a contract assists in this, we are in the process of providing contracts for Mrs. Luth and Rev. Bout. None of what is included in these contracts will contradict or alter the expectations of the Federation.

At Synod Niagara, the churches tasked the Corporation with exploring the potential establishment of national Mission Funds (*Acts of Synod Niagara, Article 101.19*). The Board determined that establishing such a fund is within our purview and so considered ways to accomplish the establishment of such a fund. We have discussed this matter with various organizations involved in this kind of work and believe that the technical aspects of this work would be relatively straight forward for our Board to implement. However, the practical aspects of this work present significant challenges. A number of important questions would need to be addressed if this work were to go forward. How much money would need to be collected before any monies could be distributed? What controls would be placed over the investment of such monies? Who would approve the spending of these monies (would a church be in charge, in keeping with our polity, or would the Board, or a committee)? What specific activities would be supported? It is not enough to simply say, "mission activities", specific details need to be provided about to whom, when, and how much will be provided. What will be the safeguards for requests from persons related to those overseeing the funds? Simply put, there are no shortage of practical questions that require solving. We do not believe that this is a matter that our Board should determine. We are convinced the churches should take control of this work and should provide the direction needed. We leave the question of how to accomplish that to the delegates of Synod.

Finally, in the past year (2023) we also made a change to the language in our reports to the churches. Whereas we had used the term “askings” in the past, for a number of reasons we believed the word “assessment” was a better reflection of what these funds represented, i.e., a value assessed by the churches at their Synod for the support of the work of the churches. What is more, the Board believed this change of terminology better reflected the decisions and activity of our Federation. However, Rev. Pontier wrote a letter to the Corporation, endorsed by the Officers of the last Synod, insisting that we continue using the term “Askings”. While the Board was not convinced by the arguments in this letter, we accepted that such a change in terminology is better decided by the churches at Synod. For this reason, we have ceased to use the term “assessment” in place of “askings”.

Humbly submitted on behalf of the Board of Directors of the URCNA Corp. (Canada)

Rev. Joel Dykstra (President)

Mr. Cliffe Hodgkinson (Secretary)

Recommendations:

1. That the Synod, through the office of the Stated Clerk, express our gratitude to Rev. Sikkema and Mr. Antonides for their many years of faithful service to the churches by their work as members of Directors of the Canadian Corporation.
2. That the Chairman of Synod express the appreciation of the churches in a public session at Synod Escondido to Mrs. Pam Hessels for her many years of faithful service.
3. That the Synod appoint Mr. Charlie Fluit, Mr. Jeff DeWalle, Mr. Daryl Van Dyke, Mr. Cliffe Hodgkinson, and Rev. Joel Dykstra as members to the Corporation (Canadian Corporation By-Laws, Article 10.01).
4. That the Synod approbate Mr. Johnathan Fennema’s appointment as Canadian Treasurer, including the pay package.
5. That the Synod approbate the work of the Board without endorsing every aspect of it.

**Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad
(CECCA)
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

Esteemed brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

It is once again our privilege, as the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA), to report to you on the activities of your committee since our report to Synod Niagara, 2022. The following terminology document serves as the mandate of our committee:

- I. The first step, Ecumenical Contact, will follow a period of initial exploration. Ecumenical Contact will focus on studying matters of general concern between the URCNA and the “foreign” federation. This step will be implemented, where possible and desirable, by:
1. Exchange of official observers at major assemblies such that one visit be made to one assembly/church per year to churches with whom we have ecumenical relations.
 2. Consultation on issues of joint concern, including:
 - a. authority and sufficiency of Scripture;
 - b. creeds and confessions;
 - c. formula of subscription to the confessions;
 - d. significant factors in the two federations’ history, theology, ecclesiology and stands on ethical issues;
 - e. church order and polity;
 - f. liturgy and liturgical forms;
 - g. preaching, sacraments and discipline;
 - h. theological education for ministers;
 - i. Exchange of Minutes (Acts) of the broadest assemblies.
 - j. Exchange of denominational Church Directories (Yearbooks);
 - k. Exchange of the most recently published edition of the Confessional Standards;
 - l. Exchange of the most recently published edition of the (Book or Manual of) Church Order;
 - m. Exchange of the most recently denominationally published editions of Psalters/Hymnals;
 - n. Exchange of information regarding current ecumenical relations.
- II. The second step, Ecumenical Fellowship, will focus on the oneness of the URCNA with the “foreign” federation, even though we are separated by geographical boundaries. This step will be implemented according to Church Order Article 36, (in addition to the points listed under step one above) by:
1. Occasional pulpit fellowship (by local option);
 2. Intercommunion, including ready reception of each other’s members at the Lord’s Supper—but not excluding suitable inquiries upon requested transfer of membership as regulated by each consistory (session);
 3. The exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting the fundamentals of Christian unity;

4. Agreement to respect the procedures of discipline and pastoral concern of one another;
5. Joint action in areas of common responsibility;
6. Agreement that, as changes in polity, doctrine or practice are instituted, the churches will inform each other—understanding that the adoption of substantial changes may jeopardize the established ecumenical relationship.

Since our report to Synod Niagara, CECCA has met twice by way of conference calls and once in a face-to-face meeting. At our face-to-face meeting in March 2023, we decided that we would divide the labours of our committee into regions and appoint co-ordinators for each region. The co-ordinators would be responsible to recommend which visits should be made, who should make them, and which church bodies we should be pursuing. All recommendations would come to the Committee with rationale and the Committee would make the final decision. The regions, with the assigned co-ordinators are as follows: Africa: Mark Vander Pol and John van Eyk; Asia: Ryan Glomsrud; Australia/New Zealand: Stephen Wetmore; Europe: Jason Tuinstra; and South and Central America: Rich Bout, Pete Van't Hoff, Gerald Swets. As this is a fresh change, we are still getting use to this arrangement and trust that it will be an effective and fruitful approach to carrying out our committee's responsibilities.

Our report will:

1. focus on churches with which we are in Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase II)
2. focus on churches with which we are in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I);
3. focus on churches with which we are corresponding with a view to entering into Ecumenical Contact (Phase I);
4. focus on the ICRC meeting in Windhoek, Namibia in October, 2022;
5. conclude with a number of recommendations that require action by Synod.

I. Churches with whom we are in Ecumenical Fellowship

The Calvinist Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRC-NTT)

The GGRC-NTT is a federation of churches comprised of 15 congregations spread out in different islands of Indonesia, including Timor, Sabu, Rote and Java. The GGRC was established as a federation in 1950. The federation is organized in two classes. It has a total membership of 1,608 members. Most of the pastors studied at the Reformed Theological Seminary on Sumba (about 45 minutes flying from West Timor). One pastor received his training at the Theological Seminary of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario. Elders and deacons and other church leaders are trained by local leaders via seminars. The GGRC has known the URCNA since 2001 and would love to receive their help in the training of church leaders.

Brother Dick Moes visited the General Synod of the GGRC in August 2022. A report of the visit made can be found in Appendix 1. His fraternal address can be found in Appendix 2.

The Evangelical Reformed Church in Latvia (ERCLAT)

The ERCLAT consists of two congregations. The first congregation, the Riga Reformed Bible Church, was planted in 1990 by Pastor Alvis Sauka. Ten years later, a second congregation was planted in Riga. Recently, a third congregation was started in Pardaugavas.

According to the Pastors, there is no trace of a Christian culture or Reformed heritage in Latvia because of the communist legacy in the region. Ninety-nine percent of the member of the ERCLAT are first-generation Christians.

Church leaders and members embraced Reformed theology through the teaching received at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary in Riga. Professors such as Mark Vanderhart, Cornelis Venema, Gerard Van Groningen, Hans Buyer, Simon Kistemaker, Larry Sibley and more have been instrumental in mentoring the congregations.

Our last visit to Latvia was in February 2020 and at Synod Niagara Rev. Alvis Sauka addressed us.

We informed our brothers that the URCNA had decided to enter in Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase II) with them but have not yet received a response to our communication.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales (EPCEW)

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW) is a federation that was established in 1996 with then 5 churches. The number of congregations within the EPCEW currently stand at eighteen congregations, of which three are church plants in varying stages of growth, these are in Salford, Oxford, and Sunderland. Three of their congregations are outside of the UK, one in Tranas, Sweden, one in Berlin, Germany, and one in Zurich, Switzerland. Statistics for the beginning of 2023 show a total of just over 868 baptised members and about 641 communicant members. A church plant was recently started in Oxford, which has some 90 people attending the morning services.

CECCA received an invitation to send a fraternal delegate to the EPCEW's, normally, biannual meeting where sister churches and other friends of the Presbytery come and share with them about the Lord's work in their denomination. We informed them that it was not possible for us to join them in their meeting.

The Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCC)

The FCC is a federation of churches made up of six presbyteries, representing forty-two congregations. The FCC was formed in 2000 but sees itself as a continuation of the Free Church of Scotland. Given this, they trace their history back to the Disruption of 1843 when, under the leadership of Thomas Chalmers, 450 ministers left the Church of Scotland. Through the Church of Scotland, the FCC dates back to 1560 and the Reformation under John Knox. While the URCNA has a different confessional background than the FCC, it is clear that we share the same, like precious faith. Our practices may differ at points (no instruments, exclusive metrical Psalm singing), but our similarities are clear.

We were invited to address their General Assembly this year but decided to send a letter instead.

The Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI-Nasional)

After the decision to enter Phase II (Ecumenical Fellowship) with the GGRI-Nasional was ratified, they were informed of our decision. We have not received an official response to our communication.

The GGRI-Nasional is composed of three regional synods, namely, the GGRI in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (GGRI-NTT), the GGRI in the province of Kalimantan Barat (GGRI-KalBar), and the GGRI in the province of Papua (GGRI-Papua).

The Rev. Dick Moes made a visit to the National Synod of the GGRI-Nasional in September 2022. A report of the visit made can be found in Appendix 3. A copy of the address given at this synod can be found in Appendix 4.

The Reformed Churches in New Zealand (RCNZ)

The RCNZ is a federation of churches established in 1953 by young Dutch immigrants of reformed persuasion who were unable to find a spiritual home within the more established (mainstream) churches in this country. From the beginning the denomination wanted to be a New Zealand rather than an immigrant church. English became the accepted and spoken language of the church within a few years of its establishment. As a confessional church the Three Forms of Unity as well as the Westminster Confession of Faith were accepted as its standards. Some initial tension was experienced in this area but, by asking office bearers to subscribe to the 'whole system of doctrine', a successful confessional basis has been achieved and maintained. There is therefore a merger of confessional traditions (Reformed and Presbyterian) evidenced in their congregations. The RCNZ remains a small denomination consisting of 3 presbyteries: Auckland – 6 congregations; Wellington – 8 congregations and one preaching place; South Island – 7 congregations and one preaching place (total of 21 churches). Their congregations are clustered mainly around the major population centers: Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton, Hastings, Palmerston North, Nelson and Dunedin. They have 2258 communicant members and 1272 baptised members for a total membership of 3530. They are served by 19 ministers and 4 vicars.

We have been in Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase II) with this federation since 2010 and have recently been invited to send a delegate to their Synod 2024. At the time of this report no decision has been made in response to their invitation.

The Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA)

The Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika (GKSA) came into existence in 1859 and grew from the original five churches to 378 churches in 2024, with a total of 237 active ministers of the Word and 139 retired ministers. The churches are spread right across the RSA and also in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia. These churches are currently being served in approximately 15 languages. They have 54,625 communicant and 15,402 baptised members. The GKSA

established its own theological school, founded in 1869 in Burgersdorp and operating since 1905 in Potchefstroom. The Theological School Potchefstroom (TSP) is staffed with 11 professors.

The GKSA operates from an efficient building complex that includes a well-equipped auditorium and the denomination's archives. Ecumenical ties have been established with churches in the USA, Scotland, Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, the Congo, Japan and Korea. The GKSA operates in accordance with Holy Scripture, the three Formularies of Unity and the Canons of Dordt.

The Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra represented the URCNA at their Synod held in January 2023 and you can find his report and fraternal address in Appendix 5.

The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA)

After the decision to enter Phase II (Ecumenical Fellowship) with the GGRI-Nasional was ratified, they were informed of our decision. We have not received an official response to our communication.

The PCEA is a federation of 12 congregations organized in three presbyteries. The congregations are spread from Brisbane in the north down to Geelong in Victoria. There is one congregation in Ulverstone, Tasmania. The PCEA does not have a seminary, but uses the colleges of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, which is complemented by reading, and essays set by their own Training of Ministry Committee to cover their own distinctive doctrines, history and practice. The PCEA has a membership of about 700 members. It holds to the Westminster Standards and the Westminster Form of Presbyterian Church Government.

CECCA received an invitation to send a fraternal delegate to the PCEA's annual General Assembly in May, 2024. CECCA decided to send a letter of fraternal greetings.

The United Reformed Churches in Congo (URCC)

The URCC is a federation of churches comprised of 189 churches, organized in ten regional synods, which are subdivided into 43 classes. In addition, there are 43 preaching stations with a view to church planting. The URC has 34 ordained pastors, 395 elders and 262 deacons. The total membership of the churches remains at approximately 14,000. The churches operate one Theological Seminary and nine Biblical Training Centers.

We have not had any correspondence with them for some time and we will be reviewing our relationship with them.

II. Churches with whom we are in Ecumenical Contact

Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church (AEPC)

The Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church (AEPC) was founded in 1962. At the moment, it has 87 churches and 12 church plants spread out over seven presbyteries. 60 pastors, 58 elders, and six deacons serve the churches. The federation has a total of 9600 communicant members. The federation has a theological seminary and two Bible Colleges. The federation holds to the Westminster Standards and has a presbyterian form of church government. The AEPC is a member of the ICRC.

Since there has been no contact with the AEPC for some time, CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the AEPC at this time.

Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA)

Post-World War II migrants established this denomination in 1951. Currently, the CRCA has an active membership of around 7800 in over fifty churches spread throughout Australia. From exclusively Dutch beginnings, the CRCA is now a culturally diverse group, reflecting the character of Australian society, and is seeking to proclaim the Christian message in a contemporary and relevant way. It is actively engaged in Christian missions both within Australia and abroad. The CRCA subscribes to the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Confession. The basic unit of the CRCA is the local church, which is governed by the local session as elected by the congregation. All sessions within a geographical area (typically on a statewide basis) meet every 3-4 months as a classis. Nationally, delegates meet every three years as Synod. The synod deals only with issues raised by a classis. The CRCA is a member of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

It is noted that their Synod 2022 appointed a study committee to consider a large number of theological, ecclesiological, pastoral and practical matters that arose from a discussion to amend the form of subscription to allow elders, deacons, and licensed preachers to be ordained to office while not holding to the doctrine of infant baptism. The Study Committee for Children at the Lord's Supper is to report to Synod 2024 with recommendations.

After Synod acceded to CECCA's recommendation to enter Phase I (Ecumenical Contact) with the Free Church of Scotland, they were informed of our decision. We have been invited to send a representative to their Synod 2024 and Rev. Stephen Wetmore has been delegated to attend and address their Synod.

CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the CRCA at this time.

Evangelical Reformed Church in India (ERC)

The Evangelical Reformed Church in India is a federation of churches comprised of 58 congregations spread out in different States of India, including a few fellowships in Nepal. The ERC was established as a federation on November 12, 2010. The federation is organized in five classes. It has a total membership of 1821 members. Most of the pastors studied at the Reformed Theological Institute in North India. One of them has been trained in Mid-America Reformed Seminary Dyer, IN USA. Elders and deacons and other church leaders are trained by the Mission of Peace-Making (MPM) *Teaching Learning Events* (TLEs). The ERC has been the result of many prayers and financial support of the URCNAs since 2004 under the leadership of Mission

of Peace Making. The confessional basis of the ERC is in the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards. Presently the ERC has 48 ministers.

The URCNA entered into Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the ERC at Synod Niagara. Brother Gerry Swets visited the Synod of the ERC in February 2023. His report can be found in Appendix 6. His address can be found in Appendix 7. CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the ERC at this time.

Free Church of Scotland (FCS)

The Free Church of Scotland traces its roots to the Disruption of 1843 and the struggle of the Scottish church to remain ‘free’ from State interference. Under the leadership of the Free Church’s first moderator, Thomas Chalmers, 450 ministers left the Church of Scotland. The denomination currently has over 100 congregations in Scotland, as well as one in London, plus sister churches founded by mission work in India, Peru, and South Africa. The Church has a full time seminary in the middle of Edinburgh for the training of its ministers and other Christian workers. The Free Church is a member of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) and has fellowship with many other Reformed churches throughout the world. The FCS stands firmly in the tradition which accepts the Bible as its supreme standard and the Westminster Confession as its subordinate standard. While the Free Church continues to prize its heritage and traditions, it also feels compelled to work creatively to bring the good news about Jesus to bear on each generation, convinced that the timeless message of the gospel speaks to all of life with up-to-the-minute relevance and power.

After Synod acceded to CECCA’s recommendation to enter Phase I (Ecumenical Contact) with the Free Church of Scotland, they were informed of our decision. They welcomed the news and they look forward to mutual support and encouragement in the service of the Lord.

CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the FCS at this time.

Free Reformed Churches in Australia (FRCA)

The Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) are a federation of 16 congregations, 14 of which are in Western Australia, two in Tasmania and a home-congregation in Cairns. They have a membership of about 5,000 members. Their historical roots are in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Liberated (GKv) as a result of post-World-War II immigration. The churches subscribe to the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity. The FRCA terminated their sister church relationship with the GKv in 2018 because of increasing liberal trends and decisions in the GKv.

The URCNA entered into Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the FRCA at Synod Niagara. Since then we have had a question regarding the fencing of the Lord’s Table. We pointed them to the appropriate section in the Acts of Synod 2018 and noted that there is a latitude of practice within

the URCNA regarding who is invited to attend the Lord's Supper as a guest. Upon receiving an invitation to send an observer to their Synod 2024, Brother Gerry Swets was appointed to attend.

CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the FRCA.

Sudanese Reformed Churches

The Sudanese Reformed Churches (SRC) started as a small household fellowship in outskirts of Khartoum in 1992. This fellowship gave birth to three other household fellowships in Khartoum. By February 2005, these four fellowships were organized as a Christian denomination under the name 'Sudanese Reformed Churches'. On October 31, 2005, the need for a governing body was discussed and a committee was formed. The governing body was formed with the purposes that it would provide leadership, would govern these churches and ensure that matters of doctrine and life, and growth (in faith as well as numbers) were and are grounded in the Reformed faith as taught by the Reformers (Luther and Calvin) and the Reformed confessions. A church order was adopted in the same year.

The URCNA entered into Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the SRC at Synod Niagara. Since then, two members of CECCA, Rev. Richard Bout and Rev. John van Eyk, spent some time in South Sudan visiting some churches and investigating how we could help our brothers and sisters in the Sudanese Reformed Churches. There is ongoing consultation with other Reformed and Presbyterian bodies who have an interest in the Sudanese Reformed Churches. Rev. Bout's report is found in Appendix 8.

CECCA proposes that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the SRC.

III. Churches with whom we are corresponding with a view to Ecumenical Contact

When Churches approach CECCA expressing a desire to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship with the URCNA or CECCA approaches them with a view to Ecumenical Fellowship, we send them a form requesting information about their denomination. That form has been sent to the Anugraha Reformed Presbyterian Churches (ARPC) Bangalore, India, the Evangelical Church of Ukraine, and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Africa (Uganda). We are in process with each of these federations. Please see Appendix 6 where Br. Gerry Swets reports on his visit with brothers from the ARPC.

IV. The International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC)

The International Conference of Reformed Churches is a conference of Reformed Churches around the world held once every four years. The first preliminary meeting was held in 1982 in the Netherlands with the Free Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (liberated) taking leading roles. Subsequent meetings have been held in Scotland (1985), Canada (1989), The Netherlands (1993), Korea (1997), the USA (2001), South Africa (2005), New Zealand (2009) and Wales, United Kingdom (2013), Canada (2017), and Namibia (2022). The next conference will, the Lord willing, be held in Korea in 2026 with the Kosin Presbyterian Church being the hosting federation.

The purpose of the conference is:

1. to express and promote the unity of faith that the member churches have in Christ;
2. to encourage the fullest ecclesiastical fellowship among the member churches;
3. to encourage cooperation among the member churches in the fulfillment of the missionary and other mandates;
4. to study the common problems and issues that confront the member churches and to aim for recommendations with respect to these matters;
5. to present a Reformed testimony to the world

The URCNA was represented by the Revs. Dick Moes and John van Eyk. During the breaks in the proceedings visits were made with various federations who were in attendance. Please find the official press release in Appendix 9. Please note the membership termination of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated). More information about the ICRC can be found at icrconline.com.

VI. Recommendations

CECCA recommends to Synod Escondido that:

1. Synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of CECCA to answer Synod's questions regarding this report: Rev. Wm Jason Tuinstra (Chairman) and Rev. John van Eyk (Secretary);
2. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church (AEPC);
3. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Christian Reformed Churches in Australia (CRCA);
4. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Evangelical Reformed Church in India;
5. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Free Church of Scotland;
6. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Free Reformed Churches in Australia (FRCA);
7. the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase I) with the Sudanese Reformed Churches (SRC).

Humbly submitted,
Rev. Richard Bout, member
Rev. Mark Vander Pol
Rev. Pete Van't Hoff
Rev. Stephen Wetmore, member
Br. Gerald Swets, member
Br. Ryan Glomsrud, member
Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra, chairman
Rev. John van Eyk, secretary

Appendix 1

Report of the Visit to the Synod of the Calvinist Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRC) on August 29-31, 2022

In late August, I had the privilege of attending the synod of the GGRC which was held in Kupang, West Timor, Indonesia from August 29-31, 2022. I was blessed to have two delegates from the Canadian Reformed Churches present, Dr. Andrew Pol and Rev. Henry Versteeg, both of whom spoke Indonesian. This enabled me to follow the flow of the discussions and the decisions taken. Also present at this synod were two delegates from the Free Reformed Churches in Australia, Rev. Able Pol and Rev. Anthon Souman. On the Sunday preceding synod, I preached in one of the GGRC churches in Kupang.

I offer the following summary of some of the discussion points and decisions taken.¹

Government Regulations

The government has changed its regulations and has urged the GGRC either to return to the church they came from, or to join with an existing registered church. Accordingly, Synod decided that the GGRC will request to be under the legal umbrella of the GGRI-NTT. As stated on the floor of Synod, this is because “they are closest to us. This will benefit our cooperation together too.”

Theological Training

Synod decided to urge the local churches to prepare young men for ministry in the GGRC, sending them for theological studies to solid Reformed seminaries in Indonesia or abroad. Evangelists and ministers can be called from among those who have studied at the Reformed Theological Seminary of the GGRI in Sumba, as well as the theological training centre of the GGRI-Timor in Kupang, and a Reformed Seminary in Bali. Those newly appointed to serve as evangelists are to be supervised and guided by the local GGRC pastor or by one nearby before serving.

Financial support of ministers

Local churches are to be responsible for caring for the financial needs of the minister and his family and the income should be at least equal to the Regional Minimum Wage.

Pulpit Exchanges

The mandate was given to the Deputies for Contact to arrange a schedule for pulpit exchanges both within Indonesia and outside of Indonesia.

¹ This summary could not have been made without the excellent notes taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew Pol, the consecutive oral translation he gave during synod and the report he wrote for their Committee for Ecumenical Contact.

Relationship with the GGRI-NTT

Synod decided to intensify the collaboration with the GGRI-NTT as follows: The Deputies for Relations will write a letter to the GGRI-NTT in the month of September requesting that the GGRC be included with the GGRI-NTT in dealing with legal issues in regard to the government (e.g., when marriage certificates are issued). Synod also urged the churches to increase the desire for collaboration with the GGRI in all sorts of aspects to build each other up and to let the light of the Reformation shine in the NTT province, but also further in the world. Synod appointed a committee for communication with the GGRI-NTT, and to work together with the representatives of their Deputies for Relations in Kupang. Synod also decided that the matter of unification and unity between the GGRC and the GGRI-NTT should be pursued by the Deputies on the basis of the Word of the Lord and the confessions of the churches.

Relationship with the Canadian Reformed Churches

Gratitude was expressed for the willingness of the Canadian Reformed Churches to offer help in Reformed doctrine and for the invitation to attend the next Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Synod also appreciated the reminder to prioritize the singing of Psalms in the liturgy of the churches. Synod gave the mandate to their Deputies for Relations to request financial aid in obtaining printed copies of the Psalms for the GGRC and to continue the fraternal relationship and cooperation with the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Relationship with the GGRI-Timor²

In response to a letter from the Smithville Canadian Reformed Church, Synod observed that the GGRI-Timor has never sent a delegation to attend the synod of the GGRC. Further, it expressed the hope that those churches would unite with the GGRC, as originally agreed upon. Until now, efforts to arrange for a meeting have not been successful. The decisions of their 2016 Synod have never been received despite having been requested. Regret was expressed at the lack of communication by Smithville when visiting Indonesia, particularly when the mission churches formed a classis and subsequently a new organization, violating the initial agreement between Smithville and the GGRC that no new federation would be established. Together with the other fraternal delegates, I urged the GGRC brothers to be patient. Smithville is no longer responsible

² In 2003, the Smithville Canadian Reformed Church opened a mission field in Timor, settling its missionary, Rev. Edward Dethan (Rev. Yonson Dethan's brother) in Kupang. Subsequently a Theological Seminary and a Teachers' College (STAKRI) was established here. Kupang is where the GGRC currently have several churches and STAKRI is within a few miles of where the GGRC operate a K-12 school (Children of Light). The intention of the Smithville CanRC has been that any churches formed out of its mission work would join the GGRC. The GGRC were informed of this in letters dating to 2003 and 2004, and reassured of this in 2012. However, much to the frustration of the GGRC, this has not happened. Rather, in the fall of 2016, the nine churches born out of Smithville's mission work federated as the GGRI-Timor. In a letter dated April 9, 2018, the Smithville Canadian Reformed council informed the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad of the Canadian Reformed Churches of this. The letter noted: "Despite Smithville's encouragement and hope that the mission churches would have joined themselves to the GGRC, this did not occur." Within the GGRI-Timor the impression exists that the GGRC has a tendency to hierarchy and strong men; thus it is not appealing for those who are now in the GGRI-Timor, among whom there are some former members of a liberal church with hierarchy and strong men, to join the GGRC. On August 4, 2018, the CRCA was informed by the Timor Mission Board that the GGRI-Timor is seeking to join the GGRI-nasional.

for the GGRI-Timor. They are independent churches now, and Smithville can only give advice. Don't push, but pray for patience. Sometimes God does not give reconciliation (Acts 15:39; 1 Cor 7:9-11). Don't look backward, but forward. Similar sentiments were also expressed by other members of Synod. Synod finally decided to refrain from striving for a meeting but to be patient and prayerfully await the Lord.

Relationship with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv)

Synod decided to terminate the relationship with the Reformed churches in the Netherlands because of its unfaithfulness to the Word of God in allowing for women in office and for tolerating homosexual relationships in church life. Furthermore, these churches did not respond to a letter from the GGRC calling them to repentance and to return to scriptural teaching and for displaying no signs of repentance. Synod also took note of the testimonies of sister churches that the situation in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands has continued to deteriorate when evaluated in the light of Scripture. The GGRC urged churches within its own federation as well as Reformed Churches abroad to continue to pray for the repentance of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The deputies for Relations were instructed to write a letter to the Dutch Deputies of its decision.

Next Synod

The next Synod of the GGRC is scheduled for August 2025 with the Ichthus Church in Kupang, Timor, as the convening church.

I was deeply impressed by the Indonesian brothers' faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, their fellowship in the Spirit, and their love of God the Father, each other, and the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. May the Lord continue to bless them and make them a blessing to one another and to those outside their federation.

Respectfully submitted.

Dick Moes
Fraternal delegate

Appendix 2

Fraternal Address to the Synod of the Calvinist Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRC-NTT), August 29-31, 2022 in Kupang, West Timor.

Greetings in the name of our risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit of adoption we both address our God as "Abba Father." The Spirit who prompts us to address our God as "Abba, Father," is also the Spirit who has led us into Ecumenical fellowship with one another. Thus, it is good to be in your midst once again as a fraternal delegate to your synod and as a brother of the same household of faith.

The last two years have been difficult for the URCNA because of Covid 19 as they undoubtedly have also been for you. During some months, we were not able to worship physically in our buildings, but only online. During other months, only a percentage of the congregation was allowed to worship in their building. When we are allowed to worship together physically, often mask are required to be worn. All these and other regulations led to a lot of extra work for church councils. Often it was difficult to get all council members to agree on how to respond to government regulations. No matter what decision was taken, not all members in the congregation would agree. Needless to say, this led to a lot of friction within local congregations. Thankfully, most of that has now subsided. Yet, we would ask you to remember our local churches in prayer asking our heavenly Father to continue to fill each congregation abundantly with the Spirit of our risen Saviour and Lord who alone can enable them to bear witness to the new life they have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We recently celebrated our 25th anniversary as a church federation. We are grateful to our heavenly Father who has led and provided for us during these 25 years in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Because we firmly believe that nothing in our federation happens by chance, but comes from his fatherly hand, the Spirit is continually teaching us to be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and have a firm confidence with regard to the future. Truly, because we are so firmly in the hand of our trinitarian God, we rest assured that nothing will separate us from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For the first time in four years, our churches will be meeting together in Synod Niagara in Buffalo, New York from October 17-21, 2022. Among other items, this synod will deal with:

1. recommendations of CECCA on how best to respond to requests for diaconal assistance from churches with which we have ecumenical contact or ecumenical fellowship;
2. recommendations to accept two new churches into our federation, viz., a new church in Chilliwack, British Columbia, and a new church in Anchorage, Alaska.
3. a proposal from our Missions Committee for re-organizing the manner in which we conduct, supervise, and fund missions. Synod will be discussing our overall approach to missions, the structure of our classical and consistorial involvement in missions, refinement of the role of our mission coordinator and, whether to take on a second missions coordinator.
4. how to best advance our ecumenical relations with our sister Presbyterian and Reformed churches both at home and abroad. Central to these ecumenical relations will be the status of our relationship with the Canadian and American Reformed Churches.

Please remember our upcoming synod in prayer as it deals with these and other matters.

We wish you the Lord's blessing on your work at this synod. We also wish you the Lord's blessing on your local congregations.

I would like to end with these words from the apostle Paul: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according

to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:14-21).

Rev. Dick Moes
Fraternal delegate of the URCNA

Appendix 3

Report of the Visit to the Third Synod of the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI-Nasional) on September 5-8, 2022

Following the GGRC Synod, I had the privilege of attending the national synod of the GGRI, also known as the GGRI-Nasional, which was held in Benkayang, Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia, on September 5-8, 2022. This synod was comprised of delegates from the three provincial synods that together form the GGRI-nasional. They are: the GGRI in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (GGRI-NTT), the GGRI in the province of Kalimantan Barat (GGRI-KalBar), and the GGRI in the province of Papua (GGRI-Papua). In addition to the ministers Andrew Pol, Henry Versteeg, Able Pol, and Souman, two ministers from the GKv also attended this synod: Dr. Melle Oosterhuis and Henk Venema.

I offer the following summary of some of the discussion points and decisions taken.³

Revised Reformed Church Order

Synod decided to accept the revised Reformed Church Order that was worked on by a team (of the GGRI-NTT) appointed by the Second National Synod and studied further by a team appointed by the Third National Synod. The work, which is very similar to the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches, was approved and now applies for the three regions represented at Synod (KalBar, NTT, and Papua). Also adopted for the new Church Book (like our *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* and *Forms and Prayers*) were the Psalms (Yamuger edition) and the linguistic updates of the creeds and confessions, a list of the parallels between the confessions, liturgies, and liturgical prayers.

Women in Ecclesiastical Offices

³ This summary could not have been made without the excellent notes taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew Pol, the consecutive oral translation he gave during synod and the report he wrote for their Committee for Ecumenical Contact.

Synod reaffirmed the decision made at the First National Synod that women are not to be ordained to ecclesiastical offices in the Reformed Churches. Synod also welcomed future seminars on this topic to be organized in the churches of the various regions.

The Churches in Papua

The churches in Papua continue to experience difficulties caused by the group that separated from it and claimed to be the continuation of the Reformed Churches. This has caused problems with the government. These churches therefore requested a letter from Synod to indicate their own status as part of the national federation of Reformed Churches, recognized by the GGRI of the KalBar and the NTT provinces. This letter can be used to support their registration with the government. Synod approved of this.

Official Ministerial Clothing

Synod agreed that ministers can use official clothing such as a toga or suit and white shirt and tie, but leaving it up to the freedom of the churches locally.

Baptism of Children

A question was raised as to whether having a marriage done under the auspices of the church should be a condition for the baptism of children. Behind this lies the issue that some couples live in a common-law relationship (usually because of difficulties in meeting demands for the payment of a bridal price), leading to children being born in the meantime. Others have had a traditional “adat” marriage (conducted according to pagan customs), usually because they were not yet Christians at the time. Synod decided that in the case of a “church marriage,” the church should issue a certificate so that an official certification of marriage can be obtained from the government. In the case of a marriage conducted according to the “adat,” children can also be baptized. In either case, baptism can only take place if at least the husband or the wife is a communicant member of the church.

Government Registration

The delegates from the GGRI-NTT noted that the GGRI-Timor (originating from the mission work undertaken by Smithville), will likely be needing to shelter under the umbrella of a registered Reformed Church since they are not registered. Synod observed that all three Reformed federations in the NTT province (GGRC, GGRI-Timor, and the GGRI-NTT) have the same doctrinal basis and that the GGRC has asked the GGRI-NTT to shelter under their “umbrella” for legal protection. It would also be desirable for the GGRC and GGRI-Timor to form one federation together with the GGRI-NTT. Accordingly, Synod decided to encourage the GGRI-NTT to take steps toward establishing a relationship with the GGRI-Timor.

Relationship with the Dutch Reformed Churches (GKv)

Synod noted that the GGRI-NTT in their provincial synod already decided to terminate the relationship with the Dutch Churches because they have maintained the decision of the Dutch

Synod Meppel in 2017 concerning women in ecclesiastical offices, despite a letter of admonition written by the GGRI-NTT on January 3, 2020. Synod also observed that although the GGRI-KalBar and GGRI-Papua reject women in office, they have not yet decided to terminate the relationship with the Dutch Churches at their respective provincial synods. Synod therefore decided to give them time to deal with this and to write letters of admonition to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands urging them to revisit their decision concerning women in office. This will be dealt with again at the next National Synod.

Relationship with the United Reformed Churches

There was a request from the GGRI-NTT to expand the relationship already initiated by these churches with the URCNA to include all the churches of the national federation. Synod decided on the basis of the shared doctrinal basis to receive the URCNA as sister churches and to communicate this decision to the URCNA by means of an official letter.

Ministers and Politics

The GGRI-NTT requested the help of the national synod in regard to the question as to whether a minister may also be involved in a political party and accept a political appointment. After considering input from the GGRI-KalBar and the GGRI-Papua, synod decided that a minister may not be involved in a political party. If he does, he should resign from being a minister of the Word.

Federational Logo

Synod decided that the same logo would be used by each of the regions of the GGRI to identify themselves in correspondence.



Accreditation of Theological Seminaries

The accreditation of the theological seminaries in the provinces of GGRI-NTT (Wai Marangu, Sumba) and KalBar (Benkayang) continues to pose difficulties. Synod therefore decided to approve of steps toward cooperation with certain seminaries in order to obtain an operational permit and accreditation through the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education. In regard to the seminary in Bengkayang, this would involve trying to get an operational permit for a program of theological education and for teaching the Christian religion as well as a counseling program.

The Future of Theological Education

For the future of theological education at the seminaries the GGRI, it is important to have instructors who have an M.Th. or doctorate. Synod therefore decided that steps could be taken in cooperation with the URCNA and the CanRC with a view to theological students continuing their studies in North America.

Next Synod

The GGRI-Papua will be responsible for convening the Fourth National Synod of the GGRI. It is scheduled to take place in September 2025.

It was heartwarming to see how the churches in Indonesia are striving to be faithful to the Lord in their context. There are shortcomings and struggles. There are, however, also encouraging signs of growth. The ministers, including those of a younger generation, show commitment to upholding the faith as we confess that together. The churches also seem to be displaying a growing commitment to supporting church life financially.

There are many signs that the Indonesian economy is improving and that churches are benefiting in the process. The younger generation of church members has more opportunities to receive a better education and will be in a stronger position to promote the well-being of the churches in the future. Accordingly, as time progresses, if and when financial aid is given, priority can be given to matters such as helping to promote the theological education of future church leaders, offering financial support for church buildings where congregations have limited means, and providing disaster relief where local means for dealing with this are overwhelmed.

It should be noted that because of the connections between the various regions, the theological seminary in Wai Marangu, Sumba, has received various students from the GGRI-KalBar as well as from the GGRI-Papua. Students from the GGRI-NTT have also been sent to KalBar and to Papua for their one-year internships, which has given the churches in those regions a practical sense of the value of having a national federation. One student from Sumba returned to KalBar and has married a member of the churches there. He hopes to receive a call to serve as a minister in those churches.

WhatsApp is a commonly used medium for communication between Indonesians among each other, as well as for interactions with people in other countries. This is especially true for matters that can be dealt with quickly and briefly. Nonetheless, interactions between the GGRI of the three provinces are still somewhat limited, which is why having a national synod to address matters of concern jointly is very important.

Respectfully submitted,

Dick Moes
Fraternal Delegate

Appendix 4

**Fraternal Address to the National Synod of the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI),
September 5-8, 2022 in Bengkayang, West Kalimantan.**

Greetings in the name of our risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit of adoption we both address our God as “Abba Father.” The Spirit who has led us to Ecumenical contact with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (Nusa Tenggara Timur) is also the Spirit who has led us to this national synod of the Reformed Churches in Indonesia. Thus, it is good to be in your midst as a fraternal delegate of the United Reformed Churches in North America to your synod and as a brother of the same household of faith.

While the GGRI-NTT is familiar with the United Reformed Churches, many of you may not be. We are a relatively young federation that just celebrated its 25th anniversary. The roots of our origin lie in a deep concern regarding a new interpretation of Scripture that led to decisions in the Christian Reformed Church, such as, the freedom to ordain women in the offices of minister and elder. At that time, many felt and still do, that instead of the biblical narrative interpreting culture, culture was interpreting the biblical narrative. Our membership is around 27,000 spread out over about 130 congregations, including a number of church plants that have not yet been organized as independent congregations. We are engaged in mission activity in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Italy, Mexico, the Philippines and Romania. Together with the OPC we have produced the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* with the Ecumenical Creeds, the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards in the back.

The last two years have been difficult for the URCNA because of Covid 19, as they undoubtedly have also been for you. During some months, we were not able to worship physically in our buildings, but only online. During other months, only a percentage of the congregation was allowed to worship in their building. When we are allowed to worship together physically, often mask are required to be worn. All these and other regulations led to a lot of extra work for church councils. Often it was difficult to get all council members to agree on how to respond to government regulations. No matter what decision was taken, not all members in the congregation would agree. Needless to say, this led to a lot of friction within local congregations. Thankfully, most of that has now subsided. Yet, we would ask you to remember our local churches in prayer asking our heavenly Father to continue to fill each congregation abundantly with the Spirit of our risen Saviour and Lord who alone can enable them to bear witness to the new life they have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

For the first time in four years, our churches will be meeting together in Synod Niagara in Buffalo, New York from October 17-21, 2022. Among other items, this synod will deal with:

1. recommendations of the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) on how best to respond to requests for diaconal assistance from churches with which we have ecumenical contact or ecumenical fellowship;
2. recommendations to accept two new churches into our federation, viz., a new church in Chilliwack, British Columbia, and a new church in Anchorage, Alaska.

3. a proposal from our Missions Committee for re-organizing the manner in which we conduct, supervise, and fund missions. Synod will be discussing our overall approach to missions, the structure of our classical and consistorial involvement in missions, refinement of the role of our mission coordinator and, whether to take on a second missions coordinator.

4. how to best advance our ecumenical relations with our sister Presbyterian and Reformed churches both at home and abroad. Central to these ecumenical relations will be the status of our relationship with the Canadian and American Reformed Churches.

Please remember our upcoming synod in prayer as it deals with these and other matters.

Our Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad would like to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship with the National Reformed Churches in Indonesia. Because we have already been in an Ecumenical Contact relationship with the GGRI-NTT for seven years, we have proposed to Synod Niagara that we enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (the second stage of our ecumenical relations) with the GGRI-NTT with a view to the GGRI-NTT overture this national synod to extend this relationship to the GGRI-Nasional. It is our hope and prayer that this will take place at this synod. I believe you may have done this once before in the past when you decided to enter into formal fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches.

We wish you the Lord's blessing on your work at this synod. We also wish you the Lord's blessing on your local congregations.

I would like to end with these words from the apostle Paul: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:14-21).

Rev. Dick Moes
Fraternal delegate of the URCNA

Appendix 5

Report on GKSA (Reformed Churches in South Africa) Synod 2023

by Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra

General Overview:

On Monday, January 30, 2023, the proceedings for the GKSA's Synod 2023 began with the signing of Psalm 150 and an encouraging address from Mark 9. This synod was the fifth General Synod since the reintegration of Regional Synods that had previously been divided along racial

lines. The Synod was held in Potchefstroom, South Africa at the Theological School of the GKSA (TSP). Going into this meeting there was a palpable tension due to several matters before this synod related to women's ordination and congregations that were acting contrary to former synodical decisions.

The tension quickly revealed itself during what is normally the simple and mundane act of calling the roll. This was halted by an appeal. It was revealed that Regional Synod Pretoria (RSP) had not recognized certain congregations when nominating delegates to the General Synod. This was due to these congregations not adhering to previous synodical decisions on women's ordination. Contrary to settled and binding decisions of Synod, these congregations were ordaining women as elders. Before Synod 2023 could be properly constituted, this matter had to be settled and there was no clarity as to how this was going to be resolved. To the frustration of the delegates from RSP, their credentials were withheld so that Synod 2023 could be constituted, and the matter formerly discussed. Before Synod was constituted and the opening declaration read (delegates rise stating their commitment to honor their ordination vows and subscription to the Three Forms of Unity and adherence to the Church Order), there was a motion to seat RSP. The chair did not recognize this motion and had the clerk read the declaration. At this point, many delegates refused to stand to accept the declaration and demanded to be heard. So began Synod 2023.

As a first-time foreign delegate to the GKSA, the initial frenetic activity was extremely hard to follow. First, it is a totally new church government. Each federation of churches has their own unique way of doing things. Hence, there is a bit of a learning curve and catching up that one must do. Second, all the proceedings were conducted in Afrikaans and translated into English via an interpreter. While this is a tremendous blessing, it has its limitations. What required no translation was the fact that this was going to be a divisive meeting despite the day's closing message from Ephesians 4 and the need for the church to be united in her love for the Lord and one another.

Women in Office (WIO):

The GKSA has been debating the issue of WIO for decades. In 2009, a definitive decision was made against the ordination of women. This decision was repeatedly contested by those in favor of WIO. Nevertheless, 2009's careful exegesis was upheld as the standard for the GKSA at Synods in 2012, 2015, 2016 and 2018. And yet, despite all their study and debate, this issue of WIO was before the GKSA once again.

At the heart of the debate this year was what to do with congregations that openly ordain women. RSP handled this by not delegating anyone from these congregations due to their flagrant disregard for the GKSA's position on WIO. But this was soon decided by Synod 2023 to be out of order. On a church orderly ground, the RSP was said to have not followed the letter of the Church Order when it barred delegates from churches who had ordained women. This was seen as a form a disciplinary action that a Regional Synod is not permitted to take against a local congregation.

Instead of Synod 2023 making a statement against churches violating a settled and binding decision on WIO, the GKSA decided to re-open this matter to answer the following questions:

1. Are previous decisions regarding WIO essential matters that would justify breaking fellowship with churches who have different practices and beliefs regarding WIO?
2. How should the GKSA address churches that fail to uphold other articles of the Church Order? How should settled and binding decisions be applied in general?
3. Can the matter of WIO be a matter of freedom at the local church level and so preserve the unity of the church in the name of love and tolerance?

To answer these questions, both sides of the biblical and theological debate surrounding WIO will be opened once again. This was equally stunning and sad to behold. Despite their synodical decisions from 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016, and 2018, they need to study this matter for another three years.

In the different addresses from foreign delegates, such as myself, the common theme was for the GKSA to remain faithful and true to the clear teaching of God's Word concerning WIO. In one such address, a brother from the Northern part of Africa implored the GKSA to remain steadfast in this area stating, "As goes the GKSA, so goes Africa." The GKSA has been a faithful beacon of light and truth for many years. God has blessed her tremendously. She was the first federation to come alongside the URCNA when we were in our fledgling years. Now, more than ever, the GKSA needs faithful friends that are prepared to rebuke her in love for the steps that she is taking to soften the clear teaching of God's Word regarding WIO and second-guess her own decisions on the matter.

While there were many other matters before the Synod, this issue loomed large. And yet, despite this report having to cover this sad development, there is much to rejoice over. As I spent time with several young pastors, it was clear, the generation coming up through the ranks, are faithful, decidedly confessional, and committed to an orthodox understanding of office. They are eager to settle this issue once and for all so that their energy can be focused outward to a culture that desperately needs to hear the gospel. They are well educated, passionate for Christ, and desirous to be used for the building of His Kingdom! While there was much that was sad and all too familiar about what I witnessed during my time at Synod 2023, my lasting memory is the integrity and desire of the young pastors to honor Christ and His Word in all areas of life. They are courageous and their example, no doubt, will be used by God to great things in a country that needs a great work to be done.

May the Lord's favor, love, and blessing rest on the GKSA!

Humbly Submitted,

Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra

**Fraternal Address to the Synod of the Reformed Churches
of South Africa**

Beloved brothers and Co-Laborers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

I am humbled to be among you and address you on behalf of the United Reformed Churches in North America. This is the first time since 2018 that we have been able to send a delegate to your assembly. It has been too long. But I am honored to be among you and have enjoyed your generous hospitality. Over the past two decades, it has been either Rev. Ray Sikkema or Rev. Dick Moes who has addressed you. They certainly enjoyed the warmth of your fellowship and the depth of your love for Christ and His church. As they have both retired from our committee this past year, it is now my privilege to bring you greetings on behalf of the 130 congregations and over 25,000 souls that comprise the United Reformed Churches in North America.

For those of you who may not know, the GKSA was the first foreign federation to reach out to the URCNA. It was June 5, 2000 and the URC was only some four years old at this point. We had just begun to find our way in establishing ecumenical relationships. In fact, you helped us to develop a structure for the committee on which I now serve. From that first meeting, it was clear that we share a common love for the Lord and a commitment to His Word as summarized in the Reformed Confessions. As the one with whom we have the oldest foreign relationship, it remains clear that this love for the Lord and a commitment to His truth is the link that continues to unite us some 23 years later.

We rejoice that over those years, through sometimes difficult discussions, our ecumenical bond has only grown stronger. I know that it was a blessing for Rev. Moes in 2018 to announce to you that the URCNA, after many years, had formally moved into the closest phase of ecumenical relations we have in our federation. This was due, in large part, to the work and labor of many of your own delegates and the biblical line that you drew in 2016, and now maintain, concerning the issue of women's ordination. I know that you have a number of matters to address on this very issue once again this synod. Going back to the 1970's, it seems that this has been an issue before you, in one way or another, for many years. It has certainly been a part of many of our discussions, and even the fraternal addresses that we have made among you. We stand with you in these struggles and commend you to the Lord as you submit yourselves to His unchanging Word that addresses our ever-changing times. Remain faithful and resolute, even as you seek to be pastoral and charitable in making your decisions.

In going through your agenda, it was interesting to note how the technological world in which we live, raises similar questions that our federations are simultaneously seeking to answer. At our last synod a few months ago in Buffalo, New York, we formed a committee to deal with the question of virtual church and the increasing popularity of people attending church via a livestream. Technology, as with most things, tends to bring both blessings and curses. But it also offers an opportunity to clarify our thinking on pressing issues. As our committee begins to wrestle with the questions that they were tasked to answer, they will, no doubt, benefit from the work that Regional Synod Pretoria has put together and the matters that they struggled with in their majority and minority reports. While we are on different continents and in different hemispheres, we can certainly benefit from your wisdom and careful deliberations in these matters.

Brothers, my time is nearly up and I know what is like to listen to foreign delegates when you have, fresh in your minds, the pressing matters of your agenda. You have a lot to deal with

and they are weighty matters. But allow me to end by simply encouraging you. Now, more than ever, we need to stand together because the important and weighty matters you are dealing with are not an end in themselves. These are the labors we perform, the business we undertake, *so that* the gospel of Jesus Christ might be faithfully heralded in a world that desperately needs to hear His clear voice!

The days are dark. The challenges can feel enormous. But our God is faithful. He will equip you with all you need for the task to which He has called you. The gospel shall prevail. Our King is on His throne. He will protect His church because He loves His bride! He laid down His life for her when no one else could or would. In that love, labor on. For that love, remain faithful. Through that love, be steadfast. Because of that love, go forth and lift high the name that is above all others!

In His name and for His glory, we, the United Reformed Churches in North America, are your brothers and sisters.

Humbly Submitted,

Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra
Foreign Delegate (URCNA)

Appendix 6

Report from India visit February 2022. Gerry Swets CECCA

The purpose of my trip to India was to attend the synod of the Evangelical Reformed Churches (ERC) of India from February 14-17,2023. At Synod Niagara, this past October, we officially entered Phase 1 of our Ecumenical Contact with them. They sent 3 representatives to Synod Niagara. They also delivered a letter of invitation for us to attend their upcoming synod in February 2023. We also received a request from the Anugraha Reformed and Presbyterian Churches(ARPC) in Bangalore India, to begin a partnership with their denomination. They met some of our representatives at the recent ICRC meeting in Namibia, Africa. Based on those 2 factors I was asked by this committee to try to schedule time to meet with this group during my trip to India.

I found it most convenient to meet with them at the beginning of my trip so I flew to Bangalore in the south, first. I was met at the airport by Rev Edward Singh and Rev Paul Raj. This wasn't the same Paul Raj I had heard about. It seems there are a few reformed Rev Paul Raj in India. It was in Bangalore, also know as Bengaluru, that I met with 17 pastors from the Anugraha Reformed Presbyterian churches, they traveled to the city of Bangalore to meet with me. They are a registered denomination working in South India presently. This ministry was established in the year 2008. There are 22 member churches in their denomination now with 1,000 members. Their churches spread across three states of South India, namely: Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

We met at a meeting/social compound of the Catholic Church, which they use regularly for their meetings and training. I was welcomed by them placing a necklace "garland" of beads around my neck, a shawl over my shoulders and a turban for my head. The garland and shawl were to accept me as family and the turban was to welcome me as an important official in their state of Karnataka, India. My address to the pastors was translated into 2 different languages, Tamil and Kannada one sentence at a time. They were so excited to get response from the URCNA and that we were willing to schedule a meeting with them.

They were humbled by my presence, and I was humbled by their welcome and hospitality in the name of Christ and His Church. Their aim is to provide, equip and encourage pastors and leaders in the solid foundation of Reformed faith. This is a huge task, as they have shortage of printed resources in local languages. At the same time, they are utilizing every opportunity, trainings, and resources to build up strong leaders. They shared their prayer concerns as a group of churches with me. They desire to plant more reformed churches but lack the candidates and financial resources. These churches struggle to become and remain financially stable. One prayer is that they can plan for stability for the next 5 years. Much of India is dealing with the issue of under-employment. Many members have had their work schedules reduced from 6 days down to 3 or 4 days. Many of the Federation churches meet in rented places on Sundays for the worship services. This is a struggle to manage the rent with loss income of the churches. Especially in the states of Karnataka, where an anti-conversion bill has been passed by the government making it illegal to convert a Hindu. This makes it difficult to find a place to rent for the worship service. The work of evangelism in any form is very problematic here, in addition the Hindu fanatics are very proactive. As a result, the numerical growth in the churches is small. Thus, please pray for spiritual and numerical growth of the churches of ARPC.

Then I flew north to meet with the representatives from the ERC India. One of them, Anup Hiwale, was a graduate from MidAmerica Seminary in Dyer. He was a student while my son Steve Swets studied there. I went north to Dehradun to visit the reformed seminary they have established, the Reformed Theological Institute. At the seminary I was asked to address the students and professors. I was asked to encourage them on the importance of the reformed creeds and confessions. Afterwards, I was given a tour of their library and the resident areas of the students. They have 15 students living at the compound and a few married students in separate housing. When they run special classes, they have up to 40 students. We then drove to the city of Delhi, the capital of India. On Sunday morning we attended the Tamil Church of Delhi, that met in Faith Academy, a Christian School. The pastor there founded the church and school. They have school in 2 shifts, morning and evening. They have students from preschool through 10th grade and have 4,000 students attending. I was asked to address the congregation, which I did highlighting Ephesians 6, to put on the full armor of God, challenging them to guard their hearts with the Breastplate of Righteousness and guard their minds with the helmet of Salvation. Without the Spirit in your heart and mind, we can be so easily deceived and led to actions which are not pleasing to God.

On Monday we met with officials from the school and then drove to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal. This was important because I was told to apply for a tourist visa. If you are coming only as a church visit, obtaining a visa may be difficult. Then we flew to the middle of India and drove to Ahmednagar, in the state of Maharashtra, where the ERC of India synod was to be held. I visited

the site of the new Jr College the ERC of India are building. In India schooling ends after 10th grade, then you go to work or on to Jr College to prepare for attending a university. These churches are so much more than just growth by evangelizing and through church plants. They have opened Christian Schools and Jr Colleges as well as homes for unwed mothers and children. In India, if you have a Christian church or school that owns their property, the government will mostly leave you alone. If you have to rent your building, it is difficult to grow because the people don't see you as stable. Many time the government will put pressure on landlords to not allow them to rent to Christians. This is the type of persecution they get from the government. In some areas, especially up north, radical Hindus will attack Christians or burn down their homes, schools or churches. The government can't be depended on for protection, because in most areas, the government doesn't want Christians to prosper. One pastor in the north was at the home of a member of the congregation to celebrate a birthday. They also had neighbors invited. When the pastor prayed for the meal, someone called the police. They were arrested and charged with trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. They spent 9 days in jail before being released. He said there a currently many Christians in jail, but the church continues to grow because, while in jail they have an opportunity to share the Gospel. Then when those prisoners get out of jail, they look for a reformed church to attend.

The synod meeting began with a worship service. After that an hour message challenging the churches on the importance of the Reformed creeds and confessions. Then they had an hour-long education session on systematic theology. Then there was an examination of a candidate for ministry. He sustained his examination and was ordained the next day at a worship service that included the Lord's Supper. The main topics before the synod where how to deal with the persecution, how to help the churches that don't own their own building and how to purchase an ambulance that can be shared with 13 villages who don't have that service, the cost would be \$7,500. It was inspirational to worship with these brothers. When we sang "How Great Thou Art" it was a thunderous chorus of voices from the 50+ in attendance. When I gave my greeting and message it was translated into Hindi. Each state or region has its own language, but Hindi is the main language in India. It was previously an English colony, so many know English very well, also. There was a lot of time dedicated to meals and time of fellowship. I met pastors from all over the country of India. I also met 3 pastors from the Reformed Fellowship of Nepal. I small group of 5 churches in the country of Nepal. They are busy there training men to plant more churches.

This was a trip that opened my eyes to the persecuted church in India, but specifically, individuals that must deal with it every day of their lives. To see their dedication to reformed doctrine, their dedication to building Christian schools and caring for their communities. There is so much to pray for.

Appendix 7

Fraternal Address to the Evangelical Reformed Church in India, February 2023

Greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is such a privilege to be here at your assembly, to address you on behalf of the United Reformed Churches of North America. We have been side by side with you for many years. I believe dating back to 2003, we were with you through Missions of Peace Making (MPM) and now we propose as a federation, to stand by your side as we both face the challenges of the world around us.

I am humbled to be invited to stand before you today. These past few months have brought numerous steps in our relationship between Churches, building blocks if I may use that as an example. You accepted our invitation to send delegates to our synod, Synod Niagara this past October. It was there that you were able to witness the decision we made to enter Phase 1 of our Ecumenical relationship, Ecumenical Contact with the Evangelical Reformed Church in India. We received an invitation to attend your synod which we accepted, and I was delegated to attend and be given the opportunity to bring our greetings with you face to face, today. And now, it is now my distinct honor to formally and officially bring you greetings on behalf of the United Reformed Churches in North America. You may not know much about us, so allow me to use my time to introduce you to the churches that I serve and represent. The United Reformed Churches of North America was formally organized in 1996. This was an exciting time, but it came through a painful process. The preceding years were ones of heartache as we saw our former denomination surrender the authority of Scripture to the same issues that still plague the church today. After years of seeking to work against this erosive tide, the Lord graciously allowed the URCNA to organize. Since 1996, the Lord has tremendously blessed the URCNA. We are a federation of 126 congregations spread throughout the United States and Canada. We consist of just over 25,000 souls, being served by nearly 1200 elders and deacons along with 191 pastors. We have several church plants across North America that have not yet been organized as independent congregations. Outside of North America, we have foreign works in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Honduras, Philippines, Italy, and Romania. Many of our churches also engage in short-term mission projects organized on a local level.

Our federation has constituted several synodical committees. One of these is CECCA (Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad), of which I am a member. Our responsibility oversees our relationships internationally, or abroad. The first official phase in our relationship with other federations or denominations is Ecumenical Contact. The second phase in a relationship is Ecumenical Fellowship where two denominations share “oneness” despite geographical boundaries. According to the guidelines of CECCA, our ecumenical fellowship comes to expression in several ways: occasional pulpit fellowship, intercommunion, exercise of mutual concerns and admonition, agreement to respect each federation’s discipline, joint action in areas of common responsibility and agreement to inform each other of changes in polity. In Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 55, we confess that we believe that as members of Christ the Lord, we not only have communion with Christ and share in all his treasures and gifts, 2nd that we should consider it our duty to use the gifts God has given readily and joyfully for the wellbeing , that is service and enrichment of the other members of the church. This is how the United Reformed Churches in North America understand our Ecumenical Contact and Ecumenical Fellowship relationship with other Reformed churches throughout the world. Because we are united to Christ through faith vertically, we are also united to each other through faith horizontally. And we desire to come along side other Reformed

churches and encourage them and have them encourage us as we continue the journey of faith together to the new heaven and new earth.

We are aware that you, like we face significant challenges in being the church of Jesus Christ in our post-modern, secular and highly technological world that is often so very hostile to Him and His Church. We are face with adversity all around us. It seems society has been taken over by evil. Disrespect and violence are now accepted, too easily. The love and compassion for our neighbors, that I experienced for many years has been minimalized or dismissed all together. This is the struggle we face. I challenge you to be diligent, to hold fast to His Word. That you minister to those around you. Minister in love, the love we experience through the Holy Spirit, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Your challenges may be significantly different than ours, but we still struggle every day, each of us. We ask that you pray for us as we continue to dedicate ourselves to preaching the Christ-centered gospel, to administering the sacraments and conducting church discipline when necessary, to catechizing our youth and to educating our laity. We will pray for you as you do likewise.

I want to conclude by thanking you for your hospitality and for the opportunity to address you as a fellow-laborer in the cause of our Savior and King. I hope this brief address gives you a little glimpse into who we are as the United Reformed Churches of North America. My prayer is, and has been, that on this building block, the Lord might establish a lasting, enduring relationship for the advancement of His kingdom.

Your Brother in Christ,

Gerry Swets
CECCA of URCNA

Appendix 8

Report on Trip to Egypt & South Sudan – October 30 – November 16, 2023 (Richard Bout)

I have returned home from trip to South Sudan, and am very thankful for a very busy, yet profitable trip. Accompanying me on this trip was Rev. John van Eyk (Pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alberta and a member of CECCA), Jan Beekman (an elder in Lethbridge), John Otten (Word and Deed), and Rev. Vince Ward (RPCPA Global Missions), who served as a missionary in Aweil, South Sudan for 9 ½ years from 2006 to 2016.

Egypt

It was decided beforehand to add a couple of days to meet with church leaders in Egypt, because our flights were going through Cairo. We left Toronto and arrived in Cairo on the 31st and stayed at an Anglican guest house. The following day we travelled to Alexandria, a couple of hours away, to meet with members of El Soora, an organization that prints, publishes, and teaches the Reformed faith in the Middle East. We met with several leaders: Sharif Fahim, the director of El Soora, two PCA missionaries, who serve as professors in a conservative Anglican

seminary – AST (Alexandria School of Theology), as well as a few other leaders. All of them are members of the Evangelical Church of Egypt (Synod of the Nile), a large, mainly liberal Presbyterian denomination. They are trying to breathe new life into the church through teaching and publishing. We had opportunity to spend the day with them, learning of their work and getting perspective on what it is like to serve as pastors in a very Muslim environment. It was fascinating to begin to understand the challenges they face, even if just for a short time. The following day we had further time to visit with the brothers and then returned to Cairo. The following day we flew to Juba, South Sudan.

In Juba we were met at the airport by Rev. Patrick Jok, a pastor and moderator of the Sudanese Reformed Churches (SRC). He has been the main contact with CECCA for many years. The SRC is a member church of the International Conference of Reformed Churches. He warmly welcomed us and for the next 10 days arranged for many of our visits throughout the country. The first weekend we spent in Juba, with opportunity given to us to preach in the churches and meet members and leaders. There are numerous churches and church plants in the Juba area, and we visited several of them. We also had opportunity to visit several of the schools that Word & Deed has funded over the years. Two of the schools have been functioning for two years with over 700 students attending. Building has begun on one more school that will have capacity for 500 more students. We also went to visit one of two refugee camps in the area. There are several SRC church plants in these camps that have set up makeshift shelters for meetings.

We visited with William Wol of Street Children Ministry, a work that helps street boys in Juba. William is from South Sudan and married a young lady from the URCNA who had been serving with the RPCNA team as a teacher in their Christian school. They have begun a home for 15 of these boys, helping them get off drugs (glue) and stay off the streets. They have also started a small Christian school that the boys attend. They are in the process of building a larger home, and hope that within a year that will have a capacity for at least 30 boys. William was discipled by Vince Ward and over the last number of years they have worked together in this ministry through a board that was formed.

On Tuesday the 7th we flew to Aweil to visit the RPCNA work, Cush4Christ. This was a work that was founded by the Wards about 15 years ago among the Dinka people. Several RPCNA families have worked in this area over the years and several churches, a school (funded by Word & Deed), and a radio station have been established. It was a blessing to see how God has prospered this work over the last 15 years. We stayed on the mission compound, had meals with the missionaries, and spent a morning in the Christian school. Many of the children have had no opportunity to study, and in many of the grades the ages can vary greatly. We were able to sit with the children and help them with their course work. From there we drove up the city of Wau, and visited with some of the churches that have been planted by the SRC. We were warmly welcomed by the people there.

Our final weekend we returned to Juba. On the Saturday we were invited to speak in a daylong conference for the area churches. About 70 people attended. We also were invited to have a meal with one of the leaders of government, an older lady (Julia) who has served in many high positions in the country. She gave us an in-depth history lesson on the many troubled years that South Sudan has faced since the British left in 1955. The nation suffered almost non-stop war

from that time till their independence in 2011. Two years later they experienced a civil war which ended in 2020. Many people were left displaced during the wars and several large refugee camps were set up (which we visited). Since that time there has been a stabilization of the country, and hope is once again returning. Julia hopes to run for president in the scheduled 2024 election.

On Sunday Rev. van Eyk preached and the local news station was there filming the service. Pastors Patrick and van Eyk both were interviewed afterwards, and they were included in the evening news that is broadcast throughout the country.

On Sunday afternoon we had an invite to a meal with a family in the church and many of the church members came. I had an opportunity to sit down with the young people of the church. We talked at length about the complexities of getting married with the dowry system, and families arranging marriages. The young men still need to pay a large dowry (like a mortgage) to have the right to marry a girl. Many of the young people expressed frustration that they desired to marry but were restricted by their traditions.

We also had the opportunity to meet as the URCNA (John, Jan, and myself) with a committee of the SRC to discuss ways that we can help them and work together in the future. It was a profitable meeting. They asked that we return to specifically give training to their leaders and young people. They have had difficulty in raising up the next generation of leaders. A large percentage of the men they sent to study in Mukhanyo Theological College in South Africa did not return. They are looking for ways to train men on the ground in the local context. We hope to have a meeting with the OPC and ARP (who also have trip planned to SS) to see how we can collaborate in the future.

So overall, the trip was a real eye-opener.

There are three takeaways from the trip:

- 1) There is a tremendous need for the Gospel in South Sudan - there are still many areas that are still unreached and where the Bible has yet to be translated.
- 2) The SRC is asking that we be involved through teaching of leaders in the church. We will be talking with the OPC and ARP about possibly joining together in this.
- 3) The RPCNA team in Aweil could use additional families to join them and would be open to URC singles or married couples to join them.

Appendix 9

ICRC 2022 Press Release

The 10th quadrennial meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) took place from October 13 through October 18, 2022, at the Windhoek Country Club Resort in Windhoek, Namibia, hosted by the Reformed Churches in South Africa. This meeting was originally to take place in October 2021, but had been postponed due to global travel restrictions on account of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Basis

The basis of the ICRC is “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort) and the Westminster Standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms).” The purpose of the ICRC is:

1. to express and promote the unity of faith that the Member Churches have in Christ;
2. to encourage the fullest ecclesiastical fellowship among the Member Churches;
3. to facilitate and promote cooperation among the Member Churches in such areas as missions, theological education, and ministries of mercy;
4. to study the common problems and issues that confront the Member Churches;
5. to present a Reformed testimony to the world.

Membership

At its start the ICRC was composed of the following 34 Member Churches.

1. African Evangelical Presbyterian Church (AEPC (Kenya))
2. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC (USA & Canada))
3. Calvinist Reformed Churches of Indonesia (CRCI (Indonesia))
4. Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC)
5. Christian Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (CRCN)
6. Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA)
7. Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW)
8. Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ireland (EPCI)
9. Free Church of Scotland (FCS)
10. Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCS-C)
11. Free Church in Southern Africa (FCSA)
12. Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA)
13. Free Reformed Churches in South Africa (FRCSA)
14. Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC (USA & Canada))
15. Independent Reformed Church of Korea (IRCK)
16. Kosin Presbyterian Church in Korea (KPCK)
17. Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC (USA & Canada))
18. Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA)
19. Presbyterian Church of Uganda (PCU)
20. Presbyterian Free Church of India (PFCI)
21. Reformed Church in the US (RCUS)
22. Reformed Churches in Brazil (RCB)
23. Reformed Churches in Indonesia (RCI (Indonesia))
24. Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA)
25. Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) (RCN(l))
26. Reformed Churches of New Zealand (RCNZ)
27. Reformed Churches of Spain (RCS)
28. Reformed Presbyterian Church of India (RPCI (India))
29. Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland (RPCI (Ireland))
30. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA)

31. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North East India (RPCNEI)
32. Sudanese Reformed Church (SRC)
33. United Reformed Churches of Congo (URCC)
34. United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA)

For diverse reasons, the FCSA, PCEA, and RCS were not able to be present in person at this conference. Several delegates of churches in attendance were also unable to attend last minute, many for health reasons.

New Members

Applying for membership, and thus also represented at the Conference, were:

1. Anugraha Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bangalore, India (ARPCBI)
2. Evangelical Reformed Church in India (ERCI (India))
3. Reformed Churches The Netherlands (RCN)
4. Reformed Presbyterian Church of Africa (RPCA (Uganda))
5. Reformed Presbyterian Church of Central and Eastern Europe (RPCCEE (Hungary, Ukraine, Romania))

Admission for membership requires compliance of the church with the conditions described in the ICRC Constitution and being sponsored by two member churches of the ICRC. All churches met these requirements.

Membership Termination

At the ICRC 2017 the membership of the RCN(1) was suspended as its practice with respect to office bearers was no longer in agreement with the Basis of the ICRC. Upon direction of their broadest assemblies, the CanRC put forward a motion, which the OPC seconded, that the membership of the RCN(1) in the ICRC be terminated as the RCN(1) continued to be at odds with the Basis. Almost all member churches in good standing present at the ICRC 2022 voted in favour of the motion, one church abstained and no churches voted against the motion. The decision was taken with a heavy heart, as the RCN(1) has been instrumental in the formation and running of the ICRC since its beginnings in 1982.

With the termination of one Member Church and the admission of five Member Churches, the total number of Member Churches now is 38.

Appointments

Appointed to the executive of the ICRC for the duration of ICRC 2022 were:

As Chairman, Rev. Dr. Douw Breed of the RCSA, the hosting church of ICRC 2022.

As Vice-Chairman, Dr. Aaron Bae of the KPCK, the designated hosting church for ICRC 2026.

As Corresponding Secretary, Rev. Dr. James Visscher of the CanRC.

As Recording Secretary, Rev. Dr. Karlo Janssen of the CanRC (filling in for Rev. Dr. Peter Naylor of the EPCEW, who resigned from his position for health reasons in 2020)

As Treasurer, Mr. Kyle Lodder of the CanRC.

As Coordinator of Committees, Elder Mark Bube of the OPC.

For the period following the ICRC 2022, Rev. Dr. Karlo Janssen was appointed Corresponding Secretary and Rev. Dr. Albert Coetsee of the RCSA was appointed Recording Secretary.

Devotions

A prayer service was held on the evening of October 12. Local pastor, Rev. Henning Venter, welcomed delegates and described the Reformed Churches in Namibia. Local pastor, Rev. Dr. Paul de Bruyn, preached on Ephesians 4:7-16, proclaiming how the mission of all, and thus also of church leadership, is to serve each other, how we are challenged by childishness in fulfilling this mission, and how in Christ we grow to maturity, so as to speak the truth in love.

On the morning of October 13, the outgoing Chairman, Rev. Dr. Dick Moes of the URCNA, led the opening devotions. His message focused on Genesis 2:1-3, pointing out that our goal is the eternal Sabbath where heaven and earth meet, and thus our focus on earth should be to reflect God to one another, made possible in Christ.

Each day was begun with devotions led by a minister serving with the hosting church, the RCSA. Throughout each day God's praise was sung with songs chosen from the Anglo-Genevan Psalter and the Trinity Psalter-Hymnal.

Papers and Panels

A core activity of the ICRC is the presentation of several papers centred around a theme. These papers are presented in the evening, followed by a panel discussion on the paper on the morning of the next Conference Day.

The theme for the ICRC 2022 was Theological Education. The following papers were presented:

“Seminaries: A Centre for Theological Education, Ministry Training or Spiritual Development” by Rev. Dr. Mohan Chacko, professor at Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dehradun, India.

“Models or Alternate Strategies for Ministry Training” by Rev. Dr. Douw Breed, emeritus minister of the RCS of Waterkloofrand in Pretoria and extra-ordinary researcher of the North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa.

“The Authority of the Scriptures in Diverse Situations and Ethical Contexts” by Rev. Dr. Henk van den Belt, professor of Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Panelists discussions fielding questions from the floor served well to assist the member churches in equipping the saints for the ministry of mercy, for building up the body of Christ.

Reports

The ICRC 2022 received the following reports with gratitude:

The Corresponding Secretary and the Treasurer;

The Theological Education Committee; the Diaconal Committee; the Missions Committee;

The Publications Committee responsible for the ICRC website and the publication of the quarterly *Lux Mundi*.

Following each report, opportunity for discussion was given. Some detailed attention was given to the functionality of *Lux Mundi*. The Diaconal Committee was given a more manageable mandate.

Encouragement

Time was set aside each afternoon of the conference to allow delegations from churches to meet bilaterally or multilaterally. Thus churches could encourage one another, strengthen their ties with one another, and become acquainted with each other.

Hosting

The ICRC enjoyed the gracious hospitality of the Windhoek Country Club Resort and the two RCSA congregations in Windhoek. The Conference experienced warm and joyous fellowship with fellow delegates, observers, and other guests.

Proceedings and Next ICRC

The Proceedings of the ICRC 2022, reports to the ICRC 2022, and papers presented to the ICRC 2022 will be published as soon as possible on the ICRC website: www.icrconline.com.

The next meeting of the ICRC is scheduled for mid October 2026, to be hosted by the Kosin Presbyterian Church in Korea.

Rev. Dr. Karlo Janssen
ICRC 2022 Recording Secretary

**Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity
(CERCU)
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

I. Introduction

Esteemed Brothers,

Our committee is privileged to serve the churches in our ecumenical opportunities and responsibilities according to the following mandate adopted by Synod Hudsonville 1999:

*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 Committee shall execute its task and carry out its mandate by following synod's Guidelines for Ecumenicity and Church Unity. The committee shall keep the churches regularly informed of its work and the progress made, and shall publish its reports to synod in the agenda.
(1999 Acts, pages 17 & 49)*

From our early beginnings as a federation through today, the pursuit of genuine biblical and confessional ecumenicity has been an integral component of our identity as churches. Indeed, it is reflected in our name “United Reformed”. For over two decades, we have been richly blessed (and have been a blessing) through our contact and growing fellowship with many confessionally faithful Reformed and Presbyterian bodies that share with us like and precious faith. We take seriously the call of 1 Cor 1:10, where Paul appeals to the church “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” to “agree” and have “no divisions among you” and to be “united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

We also remain sensitive to the challenge and irony that the pursuit of our ecumenical calling can still be, at times, an occasion for some disunity among us. We need to demonstrate much grace and forbear with one another as we continue to engage in work that requires patience and prayerful perseverance. And we need the collective wisdom of the body, for it is a work we believe can and will only progress as the Lord blesses us with a great degree of unanimity. If the churches feel rushed, forced, or unconvinced concerning further progress in unity, then that true and helpful unity will not materialize. Our committee is committed to work according to the mandate we have received from the churches, that we work “with a view toward complete church unity” (CERCU mandate). We believe that in principle, if not always in practice, there is a large degree of unanimity amongst us as URCNA churches on this. We are also humbly aware, however, that such complete unity will not always be attained for a variety of reasons.

By the grace of God, we are a federation of churches that is known for its strong commitment to the absolute authority of the Word of God as faithfully summarized by our Three Forms of Unity. Any pursuit of unity that would stand opposed to this commitment to the truth should be summarily rejected. Many of us can speak from painful experience of the damage that was done when unity was promoted at the expense of truth. The unity our Savior envisions and prays for is a unity that must be governed by the truth – his word is truth (John 17:14, 17).

Nevertheless we strive for unity, asking God for his grace and his Spirit to operate so that we would increasingly reflect the unity he calls us to as one body, worshipping one Lord, confessing one faith, united in one baptism through Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all who believe. John 17 reveals the heart of Jesus' prayer for greater expressions of unity, so that the world may know that the Father has sent Him (John 17:21, 24). Recognizing this, we prayerfully continue to pursue various expressions of unity with diligence, also for the sake of our witness. We rejoice that the work of our committee has borne fruit in cooperative endeavors with other denominations in pursuit of our common missionary calling. We have learned much from others as well, and this enhances our witness to the world.

The question remains, does such blessing require organizational unity? Perhaps not always. But certainly, the unity we enjoy in the truth within our own federation bears witness to our conviction that where such organizational expression of unity is possible, it is a good thing. Jesus prays to the end that our spiritual unity is manifested (see also Foundational Principles of Church Government, number 10). We take organizational unity to be an application, a helpful way of bringing the unity for which Jesus prayed to expression. We recognize that it would not be proper to assert that this is the singular application, or the only way of bringing this unity to expression. But if, by the grace of God, greater organizational unity can be safely and wisely attained, we believe it does serve the wellbeing of the church and enhances her mission (Foundational Principle 7).

We seek to carry out this important work joyfully according to the following synodical guidelines:

GUIDELINES FOR ECUMENICITY AND CHURCH UNITY

United Reformed Churches in North America

Phase One - Corresponding Relations

The first phase of ecumenicity is one of exploration, with the intent that by correspondence and dialogue, mutual understanding and appreciation may develop in the following areas of the two federations' lives:

- a. view and place of the Holy Scriptures
- b. creeds and confessions
- c. formula of subscription to the confessions
- d. significant factors in the two federations' history,
 1. theology, and ecclesiology
- e. church order and polity
- f. liturgy and liturgical forms
- g. preaching, sacraments, and discipline
- h. theological education for ministers

Ecumenical observers are to be invited to all broader assemblies with a regular exchange of the minutes of these assemblies and of other publications that may facilitate ecumenical relations.

Phase Two - Ecclesiastical Fellowship

The second phase of ecumenicity is one of recognition and is entered into only when the broadest assemblies of both federations agree this is desirable. The intent of this phase is to recognize and accept each other as true and faithful churches of the Lord Jesus, and in acknowledgment of the desirability of eventual integrated federative church unity, by establishing ecclesiastical fellowship entailing the following:

- a. the churches shall assist each other as much as possible in the maintenance, defense, and promotion of Reformed doctrine, liturgy, church polity, and discipline
- b. the churches shall consult each other when entering into ecumenical relations with other federations
- c. the churches shall accept each other's certificates of membership, admitting such members to the Lord's Table
- d. the churches shall open the pulpits to each other's ministers, observing the rules of the respective churches
- e. the churches shall consult each other before major changes to the confessions, church government, or liturgy are adopted
- f. the churches shall invite and receive each other's ecclesiastical delegates who shall participate in the broader assemblies with an advisory voice

Entering this phase requires ratification by a majority of the consistories as required in Church Order, Art.36.

Phase Three - Church Union

The third phase of ecumenicity is one of integration with the intent that the two federations, being united in true faith, and where contiguous geography permits, shall proceed to complete church unity, that is, ecclesiastical union. This phase shall be accomplished in two steps:

Step A – Development of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union

Having recognized and accepted each other as true and faithful churches, the federations shall make preparation for and a commitment to eventual, integrated federative church unity. They shall construct a

plan of ecclesiastical union which shall outline the timing, coordination, and/or integration of the following:

- a. the broader assemblies
- b. the liturgies and liturgical forms
- c. the translations of the Bible and the confessions
- d. the song books for worship
- e. the church polity and order
- f. the missions abroad

Entering this step of Phase Three requires ratification by the consistories as required in Church Order, Art. 36.

Step B – Implementation of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union

This final step shall only be taken when the broadest assemblies of both federations give their endorsement and approval to a plan of ecclesiastical union. Entering this step of Phase Three requires ratification by a majority of the consistories as required in Church Order, Art. 36.

II. Committee Membership and Budget

a. Committee membership and Terms

The classes are reminded of their continuing responsibility to appoint or reappoint classical representatives (and alternates) to CERCU in the manner the classes deem appropriate.

Regarding the members-at-large, the Regulations for Synodical Procedure adopted by Synod London 2010 stipulate that the members of a standing committee shall serve no more than three three-year terms consecutively, each term commencing at the time of synodical appointment. Members who have completed three consecutive terms are eligible for reappointment after one year (Regulations 5.3.2.c.). Synod Nyack 2012 clarified that if the term of a member-at-large expires in a year that synod does not meet, he shall serve the full three years of his term and the term shall expire on July 1. The replacement appointed at the previous synod shall assume the position at that time (Art. 54.3).

The committee is currently comprised of two members-at-large and eight classical representatives, one per classis. These members are as follows:

Classical representatives:

Classis	Delegate	Alternate
1. Central US	Rev. Harold Miller	Rev. Joel Vander Kooi
2. Eastern US	Rev. Robert Godfrey	Rev. Aaron Verhoef
3. Michigan	Rev. Casey Freswick	Rev. Matthew Nuiver
4. Ontario East	Rev. Joel Dykstra	Rev. Martin Overgaauw
5. Pacific Northwest	Mr. Doug Field	Rev. Craig Davis
6. Southwest US	Rev. Daniel Ventura	Rev. Daniel Hyde
7. Southwestern Ontario	Rev. Jeremy Veldman	Rev. Peter Vellenga
8. Western Canada	Rev. Jason Vander Horst	Rev. James Roosma

Members-at-large:

Name	Term	Action Suggested
Rev. William Boekestein	Appointment ends July 1, 2025 (Originally appointed in 2016)	See Recommendation 3
Rev. Calvin Tuininga	Appointed ends July 1, 2025 (Originally appointed in 2016)	See Recommendation 3

b. Budget

We are asking that the annual budget for CERCU be set at \$10,000. The annual meeting of NAPARC each year is the primary place that CERCU meets and that is where the majority of our budget is spent. As a committee, we see the need to continue to have at least one face-to-face meeting each year. The importance of classical representation necessitates our being a large committee. It is also important to travel for the synods/GA's of other churches to continue our encouragement in unity. The Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) will be hosting NAPARC this year in Kansas City, MO.

III. Reports on Churches in Ecumenical Relations

Your committee counts it a privilege to engage in ecumenical dialogue and seeks to promote greater unity among 12 synodically approved bodies of churches in North America. They are as follows:

Churches in Phase One – Corresponding Relations

1. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC)
2. Free Reformed Churches (FRC)
3. Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC)
4. Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC)
5. Korean Presbyterian Church in America – Kosin (KPCA)
6. Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
7. Presbyterian Reformed Church

Churches in Phase Two – Ecclesiastical Fellowship

1. Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC)
2. Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)
3. Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS)
4. Reformed Church of Quebec / L’Eglise Reformee du Quebec (ERQ)
5. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA)

At Synod Wyoming 2016 CERCU proposed “Guidelines for speeches of fraternal observers and delegates to our Synod” (Article 20.10 of the *Acts of Synod*) which was approved and immediately implemented. Those guidelines have served us well in past synods and, we trust, will continue to do so going forward.

A. Churches in Phase One – Corresponding Relations

1. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP)

The ARP was founded in Philadelphia in 1782. It was a combination of the American portions of two Scottish presbyteries that had previously left the Church of Scotland: The Associate Presbytery began in 1733 and the Reformed Presbytery in 1743. It owns Erskine College and Seminary. The churches no longer are required to practice exclusive psalmody, which was its heritage. In the last quarter of the 20th century, they threw off the influence of neoorthodoxy, which reached the height of its influence among them in the 1960’s.

As of June 2023, the ARP had 10 presbyteries with a total number of organized and unorganized churches at 260. Their total membership was over 25,000. The ARP and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) have been in a process of growing closer to each other as denominations. They have expressed this in more urgent unity meetings and joint General Assemblies at Bonclarken, Flat Rock, NC, among other activities.

The ARP holds to the Westminster Confession of Faith as well as the Larger and Shorter

Catechisms. In November 2015 they reported to NAPARC that in addition to these, their standards include “our recently revised Form of Government, our recently revised Directory of Public Worship, and our Book of Discipline, which is currently under revision.” They are members of NAPARC and the World Reformed Fellowship. They were also at one-time members of the ICRC but have reported that stewardship considerations have compelled them to withdraw from that arrangement for a time.

They desire to “elevate” our status to “Fraternal Relations”. Most notably, the expectation accompanying this would be that we send a delegate to their General Synod every other meeting, and they send a delegate to our opposite General Synod. We have agreed to pursue Phase 1 topics with the ARP with a view to moving forward in our relations. The ARP reports that they have two study committees: on “Secret Societies” and “The Office of Deacon.”

2. Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA)

The Free Reformed Churches of North America were established in 1921. As of October 2022, they had a total of 23 congregations with a total membership of 5,420. They hold to the Three Forms of Unity. Their churches are scattered across North America, mainly in Canada. The FRCNA trace their roots to the secession that occurred in the established Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands in 1834.

The FRCNA are the spiritual descendants of the churches in the Netherlands which did not join in the merger of 1892, which formed the GKN. They were then, and are today, particularly concerned about the influence of Abraham Kuyper, most specifically in relation to his view of presumptive regeneration in connection with baptism. Although they trace their roots to the Netherlands, they greatly value and appreciate the theology and preaching of the English and Scottish Puritans and those who followed in their footsteps especially the experimental and discriminating character of Puritan preaching, their emphasis on the need for conversion, cultivating a close personal walk with the Lord, and eschewing worldliness. They work closely with the Heritage Reformed Churches in the operation of the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI.

A number of our own URC churches have developed very good working relationships with FRCNA congregations through connections with Christian schooling, conferences, ministries to migrant workers, as well as through mutual involvement with Word & Deed and in Redemption Prison Ministries.

We have noted in our bi-lateral meetings that the FRCNA is somewhat hesitant to move forward in our relationship because of what our Phase 2 entails – particularly, the opening of pulpits to one another’s ministers. It is apparent that they are not comfortable with all our ministers potentially having this opportunity. We also note that three years ago, the HRC was quite eager to increase their interactions with us, but the FRCNA led them to slow down while they focused on each other. Now that those two have paused their conversations, the HRC is more eager again to engage with us.

3. Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC)

The HRC was established in 1993. Their synod meets annually with each of their 10 congregations sending a delegation. As of September 2022, they had a total membership of 2,186. They confess both the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster standards. They operate the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI, which enrolls over 100 students from several different countries and church denominations. Apart from the main campus in Grand Rapids, Puritan Reformed has five global extension campuses for the ThM degree in Africa (Pretoria, South Africa), Asia (Taipei, Taiwan), Europe (London, United Kingdom), the Middle East (Cairo, Egypt) and South America (São José dos Campos, Brazil).

The HRC has five levels of fellowship, which are as follows:

- Level 1: Informal Contact
- Level 2: Formal Correspondence
- Level 3: Limited Fellowship
- Level 4: Full Fellowship
- Level 5: Full Union

In 2013 the HRC voted to enter into their Level 2 with us which corresponds with our Phase One. As these discussions continue under the blessing of God, perhaps further progress can be made. We have met with their representatives at NAPARC each of the last few years and have experienced a great deal of warmth and affinity with one another. We continue to be encouraged by the outgoing and forward-looking emphasis of the HRC leaders. It is somewhat reflective of the reach PRTS is having in the world. We continue to encourage active engagement in opportunities for advancing this relationship at the consistorial level as well.

At the latest NAPARC meeting, we discussed the benefits of exchanging papers on pertinent topics and hosting pulpit exchanges. We had a Zoom meeting on January 16, 2024 to discuss experiential preaching. Our committee members affirmed our basic agreement to the principles of experiential preaching as summarized in an article presented to the committee, while making it clear that the application or sermonic form of those principles may not look exactly the same. The HRC brothers noted that experiential preaching is more than just distinguishing between the saved and unsaved; it diagnoses the various spiritual conditions that are likely to be present and addresses them all, as the text encourages. We shared a common desire to avoid “experientialism” on the one hand, and a lack of experiential focus, on the other. We discussed the impact this experiential emphasis has on professions of faith and participation in the Lord’s Supper among the HRC. Although they are still culturally influenced by their history, major changes in their practices were noted. All those professing their faith receive pastoral encouragement to come to the Table. The prevailing sentiment from both committees is that the meeting was beneficial and encouraging.

4. Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC)

The KAPC was established in 1978. They are a primarily Korean speaking church which makes a pursuit of fuller union with them complicated. Their membership has risen since our last report. As of November 2023, they have 80,000 members in 650 congregations over 31 presbyteries. Most of their growth has taken place due to immigration to America. Their churches are located

primarily in large urban centers. They hold a General Assembly annually.

At NAPARC 2016 CERCU met with the representatives from the KAPC for the first time. This was a good meeting. Much of this meeting was “getting to know” each other. They have a fascinating history and relationship with the KPCA (Kosin). We do not have anything new to report regarding this sister denomination. In the foreseeable future, we do not anticipate growing much closer with the KAPC until their church becomes more thoroughly English speaking.

5. Korean Presbyterian Church in America – Kosin (KPCA)

The KPCA was established in 1985 and they have 118 churches as of September 2023. Interestingly, they count 295 men as ordained ministers within their midst. They have active mission fields in many countries where Koreans have immigrated.

We have not had any direct contact or meetings with the KPCA except for informal contact at NAPARC. This is a denomination which is even more connected to Korea than the KAPC. Their services are in Korean and they foresee this as a potential hurdle in the future as the next generation seeks English speaking churches.

6. Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

The PCA was established in 1973 as a break off of the PCUSA over the issue of the inerrancy of scripture. It is the largest member church of NAPARC. As of May 2023, the PCA had over 390,000 members in 1,932 churches/mission works. They hold to the Westminster standards. In addition to NAPARC, they are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Reformed Fellowship.

The PCA has two levels of ecclesiastical relationships. They designate their entry level of relations as Corresponding Relations. Fraternal Relations is the more intense level of relations, one which they have with all NAPARC denominations or federations by virtue of membership in NAPARC. This means that short of the pursuit of a merger, from the perspective of the PCA we are already in their highest level of relations.

At our latest NAPARC meeting, we received an update on the work of the PCA, noting that there are approximately 600 full-time missionaries and 1,100 support workers. There is a new director in the PCA church-planting ministry who has revitalized the work, and there are more church planters now than ever before in the history of the PCA. The past year has been one of increased growth, after a couple of years of stagnation. It was also noted that about 50% of the churches have a second service.

The PCA indicated that there is no ordained office of “deaconess” in the church and that it remains the position of the PCA that only men may serve in church offices. While there are women who are commissioned to various ministries of mercy, there are no ordained women in the PCA.

There may be PCA churches which have practiced paedocommunion, but this is outside of the polity of the PCA. It was also noted that the challenges of retaining youth remain the burden of

both our churches, one which we need to address without falling into the temptation to withdraw from, and thus not engage with, the culture.

We expressed to them our appreciation for the Geneva Benefits group. Every US-based minister and congregation in the URCNA would do well to look into what they have to offer for pastors' retirement benefits.

At the end of our meeting, one of their delegates asked, "What is preventing us from getting together?" We agreed to pursue Phase 1 topics with the PCA with a view to moving forward in our relations, and we encourage local churches to seek greater dialogue with their local PCA's.

7. Presbyterian Reformed Church (PresRC)

The PresRC is the smallest group in NAPARC. It is an indigenous North American group of churches continuing historic Scottish Presbyterian orthodoxy in doctrine, worship, government, and discipline, on the basis of a conviction that these principles and practices are founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God. This body consists of 166 members in 6 congregations. They are committed to a strict adherence to "The Directory for the Publick Worship Of God" (1645) and exclusive psalmody. All of their churches have ministers, but most of their ministers are bi-vocational since their congregations are small and unable to fully support their pastors financially.

At our latest NAPARC meeting, they related some of the personal and fraternal ties they have had with URCNA ministers and Word & Deed. Discussion was held regarding the NAPARC Comity Policy. The PresRC brothers were asked about potential ecumenical fellowship between the RPCNA and the PresRC, and about their inter-church relations with the FRCNA, HRC, and OPC.

Although they are committed to organic union with like-minded churches, because of geography and their strict adherence to "The Directory for the Publick Worship Of God" (1645), including exclusive psalmody, we have not yet pursued deeper dialogue with this group. We will continue informal contacts at NAPARC and we urge classes and congregations to pursue local contact where it is available to gain greater awareness and familiarity.

B. Churches in Phase Two – *Ecclesiastical Fellowship*

1. Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC)

We have been in a Phase Two relationship with the Canadian Reformed churches since the ratification of the decision of Synod Escondido 2001. We thank God for this relationship and believe the Lord continues to use it for much mutual blessing between the churches of our respective federations.

As of January 2023, the CanRC consisted of 76 congregations/mission works (69 organized congregations) and almost 20,000 members. They have a federational seminary in Hamilton, ON. Several URC students have graduated from the Canadian Reformed Seminary in the past number of years. This has been a blessing to have a faithful seminary option in Canada.

In many places, our Phase Two relationship has borne the fruit of much greater spiritual unity with Canadian Reformed brothers and sisters and congregations in ways that could not have been imagined but a few decades ago. While we thank God for this, it must also be acknowledged that this is not an experience that has been shared by everyone. As the Canadian Reformed Churches exist almost exclusively in Canada, lack of interaction with many of our churches in the US is a large factor. It is not the only factor, however. Even in Canada, there remains skepticism among our churches owing to a history of separation, antagonism, and isolation, and/or a conviction of incompatibility in terms of church government. The Canadian Reformed are perceived by some of us as being more hierarchical in polity. Generally, there doesn't appear to be enthusiasm among United Reformed Churches for beginning to function together under the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO).

It is our judgment that where there is meaningful interaction between our churches, the possibility of full organizational unity is not dismissed out of hand. Equally, in those places where there is little understanding of or even awareness of the CanRC, there is little desire for further expressions of unity. For this reason, we believe increased interactions among those churches that, to date, have not had much interaction will assist our churches in understanding the close connection we share with the CanRC and prove to be of mutual edification and blessing. To that end we will propose to this synod that an amount be set aside in the budget for pulpit exchanges **among churches that are further afield from one another**; our committee could oversee the arrangements of said pulpit exchanges/supply.

At Synod Wyoming 2016, CERCU communicated to the churches its intention not to come with any recommendation to proceed to Phase Three, Step A (Development of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union) with the Canadian Reformed Churches for at least six years. At Synod Niagara 2022, we did not propose a change to our relationship with the CanRC, rather we committed to steady progress in local, organic relations as well as broader classical relations where feasible. This remains the recommendation of CERCU.

As you will remember, we had submitted a survey prior to our last synod regarding outstanding matters of question and/or concern relating to the CanRC. We reported this to Synod Niagara. Since then, we sent a letter to our CanRC counterparts that included the following questions:

Questions:

1. How do you characterize the openness of the Lord's Supper table in the Canadian Reformed Churches? For example, what percentage of churches would accept a visitor who is a member in good standing at a local Baptist church? (Though we also differ on this within the URCNA, we are interested in getting a sense of how prevalent this practice is within your churches.)
2. Does Canadian Reformed preaching call the children of the church to faith, or does an element of "covenantal automatism" live among the churches, where the baptized child's regeneration is presumed? What about in Canadian Reformed schools – are the youth challenged to respond to their baptism?
3. At our 2007 Synod in Schererville, the URCNA adopted nine points of pastoral advice regarding justification. Two of the points are as follows:

We reject the errors of those:

5. who teach that a person can be historically, conditionally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness (CD I, V);

6. who teach that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way such that there is no distinction between those who have only an outward relation to the covenant of grace by baptism and those who are united by grace alone through faith alone (HC 21, 60; BC 29);

Do Canadian Reformed people agree with this? Are they comfortable speaking of “the outward administration of the covenant of grace” and “an outward relation to the covenant of grace”?

4. We understand that the Federal Vision controversy has not impacted the CanRC to the same extent as it has the URCNA, and so has not been addressed by any of your synods. Given the sensitivity that exists within the URCNA on this matter, what is the CanRC prepared to do (i.e. how far is the CanRC prepared to go) in order to put concerns about Federal Vision within the CanRC to rest?
5. In light of the concern about extra-confessional binding, is the CanRC open to making Doctrinal Affirmations, as the URCNA has done? A Doctrinal Affirmation is an interpretation of the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity on a specific point of their teaching, and as such may not be directly or indirectly contradicted in preaching or in writing.
6. What can you tell us to assuage the concerns of many URCNA congregations that perceive a greater degree of hierarchy within the CanRC?

Their committee preferred to discuss these matters face to face, and so we did so at NAPARC. Although they are generally more hesitant than we are to discuss a “federational view” on a question, we had a very open and fraternal discussion as we explored answers to these questions. We discussed what the next step for our two federations will be, and noted that it is unclear: Are we in a “perpetual pause?” Is Phase 3a in sight?

Along with our CanRC counterparts, we noted that there is an identity crisis of sorts occurring within the CanRC as some churches seek to implement different practices in their worship and fellowship that increase the diversity and decrease the uniformity of their federation. They have to work through this before we can progress any further.

Looking to the future, we encouraged joint classis meetings and discussed the possibility of hosting our synods concurrently in 2028. (The CanRC plans to meet in 2025 and then 2028; we plan to meet in 2024, 2026, and 2028). For items of discussion, we could delve into and clarify matters of church history that have relevance for our discussions today.

Concerning our relationship with the CanRC, we desire to reiterate how much we cherish the current degree of unity among us. We are committed to continual efforts in overcoming lack of information and interaction among our respective churches. Though we have things to work

through, our federations have been mutually blessed by one another, and we anticipate this blessing to continue. Pulpit exchanges, sharing of schools, conferences, seminary use, youth camps, mission works, and church plants are all being blessed by the Lord. Such church unity is a gift of the Spirit. As we work and wait for the Lord, we are comforted in knowing that there is only one, holy, catholic church.

2. Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS)

The RCUS was established in 1746 by German immigrants. As of December 2022, the RCUS had a membership of 3,340 over 43 churches and mission works.

In many places where there are both RCUS congregations and URC's side by side there is a good and mutual opportunity to serve together. We have enjoyed a Phase Two relationship with the RCUS since Synod Calgary 2004. The RCUS is a faithful federation which holds to the Three Forms of Unity. They operate a small seminary (Heidelberg Seminary) in Sioux Falls, SD. In our annual meetings at NAPARC, it has become clear that there is not a great desire of moving the relationship forward between our churches. The RCUS seems content to keep things the way that they are at this point.

At our latest NAPARC meeting, we discussed various issues surrounding pastoral burnout. They also gave us an overview of their "Welcoming Committee", which intentionally responds to people seeking information about the RCUS. The committee has been working on presenting positive information about the RCUS, and several contacts have been made through their committee web site. They desire to listen to what people are saying about themselves even before they explain who they are. There are a number of groups of local believers who have contacted the RCUS and who have subsequently become organized RCUS congregations. It was also noted that their "askings" are around \$400 per household. This number is increasing as the denomination grows.

We encourage those classes and congregations in geographic proximity with RCUS classes and congregations to continue to promote and enhance the unity of faith we enjoy with this body through the exchange of fraternal delegates at broader assemblies, and in local engagement and encouragement of combined activities with RCUS churches as the Lord allows.

3. Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)

The OPC is a denomination which began as a stand against liberalism and modernism in the PCUSA in the 1930's. The OPC was established in 1936 and now their membership is 32,720 members among 332 churches and mission works. The OPC has a strong emphasis upon missions in the world.

We have been in Phase Two with the OPC since Synod Schererville 2007, and our relationship has continued to grow. We view them as an older sister who continues to teach us many valuable lessons. We continue to thank the Lord for the blessing of the Trinity Psalter Hymnal which was produced in cooperation with the OPC. Our Synod 2018 concurrently with the OPC was a tremendous blessing and a picture of ecumenicity between churches of like faith and practice, and as such was a monumental event in the history of our young federation as the first concurrent synod had with a sister federation of churches. The fellowship was sweet, and praise was given

to the Lord. We have been tremendously blessed by their efforts in church planting. As time goes on, the URC puts into practice many of the policies that are bearing much fruit in the OPC.

We meet with the OPC each year at NAPARC and our discussions are fruitful and encouraging. At the latest NAPARC meeting, they informed us that they are working on a report concerning protection of the flock from sexual predators; we should be able to benefit from this by putting it on the radar of our churches. They expressed thanks for our cooperation in various mission works (particularly foreign) and on the Trinity Psalter Hymnal.

We look forward to more fruit upon our ecumenical efforts with the OPC in the days to come. To that end we heartily encourage classes and congregations in geographic proximity with OPC presbyteries and congregations to continue the exchange of fraternal delegates, and to engage in other ecumenical activities that may be available.

4. Reformed Church of Quebec / L’Eglise Reformee du Quebec (ERQ)

The Reformed Church of Quebec is the smallest denomination with which we have a Phase Two relationship. They have five congregations. The ERQ was established in 1988 and it is the only Reformed denomination in the province of Quebec. All of their churches are French speaking. The ERQ devotes significant energies to translating faithful and helpful books on Christian doctrine and practice from English into French.

At our most recent NAPARC meeting, they shared the difficulties they are facing in Quebec. Many there view religion as a negative topic from the start. They discussed the blessings of immigrants who have come to Quebec and are looking for churches. They also shared the need for pulpit supply and meeting places in the life of the church, and then went on to share the blessing of how one church received a building at 50% below market value.

It is important to encourage these brothers – can we provide them with ministerial help and/or financial assistance? The ERQ’s identity probably needs to be solidified prior to further steps in our interaction.

5. Reformed Presbyterian Church in North American (RPCNA)

The RPCNA has its roots in Scottish Presbyterianism. It was organized in North America in 1798. As of December 2022, the RPCNA had 7,625 members in 101 churches and mission works. They operate a theological school, the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, established in 1810. The seminary is committed to the inerrancy of Scripture and to the Reformed Faith as summarized in the Westminster Standards and in the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. Their worship is characterized by exclusive psalmody and singing without musical accompaniment. The RPCNA owns and operates a liberal arts college, Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, which is now 171 years old.

We are in their Level 2 *Fraternal Relations* category. Their category 1, which is full intercommunion, is made up of three denominations overseas. The RPCNA continues to discuss greater unity with the ARPC, which we encouraged. Exclusive Psalmody with no instrumentality

seems to be the biggest hurdle in that process between those denominations.

CERCU met again with the RPCNA at NAPARC. They updated us on a difficult situation involving a church in Indiana which left them after discipline that occurred as part of the fallout from a case of sexual abuse. They spoke of how this has impacted the URC church plant in Indianapolis, and the care that has been taken on both sides to do things with wisdom and in good order.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada (RPCC) has been formally organized as a denomination out of a presbytery of the RPCNA. We anticipate entering into ecclesiastical relations with the RPCC in due time.

In those places in North America where our churches are in close proximity, there is a good and healthy relationship. We encourage congregations and classes to continue this process of unity on a grassroots level.

C. North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC)

Since our last synod meeting, NAPARC has met each year with the exception of 2020. NAPARC consists of 13-member churches, all of which are in a Phase One or Two relationship with us.

The basis of NAPARC's fellowship is as follows:

“Confessing Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Sovereign Lord over all of life, we affirm the basis of the fellowship of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches to be full commitment to the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts, and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms.” (NAPARC Constitution)

A large portion of the meeting consists of hearing reports from each of the member churches, after which there is an opportunity for questions. It is good to hear updates of each of the churches.

As CERCU, we use the opportunity of NAPARC to meet in bilateral meeting with several other denominations. This past NAPARC meeting, we met with the ARP, RPCNA, OPC, PCA, HRC, FRCNA, RCUS, ERQ, and CanRC. These meetings were fruitful and encouraging.

It is also of interest that over the last few years, there have been two denominations observing NAPARC. They are the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Protestant Reformed Church. Both of these denominations explained why they are not yet ready to join NAPARC. Though this led to a bit of discomfort, it was wonderful to experience how a brotherly spirit prevailed. These difficult but important conversations are important in order that we as churches may encourage each other to faithfulness, and also to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

CERCU continues to see NAPARC as a tremendous opportunity to show the catholicity of the

church in North America. The Lord is certainly blessing many of these relationships. We do wish that there would be an up-to-date, official NAPARC Google map, and we will work towards that end. For 2024, our committee intends to overture NAPARC to develop common language and steps for ecumenical relations.

IV. Recommendations

1. That Synod grant the privilege of the floor to the committee chairman and secretary when committee matters are being considered (Regulations 5.4.2).
2. That Synod commend the classes for their faithfulness in appointing or reappointing classical representatives (and alternates) to CERCU in the manner the classes deem appropriate.
3. That Synod discontinue the appointment of members-at-large for CERCU.
Grounds:
 - a. This follows the direction CECCA took.
 - b. We are already represented geographically.
 - c. Removing at-large members does not prohibit others from helping with the work of the committee.
 - d. This saves expense.
4. That Synod set the budget for CERCU at \$10,000 US per annum.
5. That Synod set aside an amount in the budget of \$3000 US per annum for the purpose of facilitating pulpit exchanges among URCNA and CanRC congregations that are far afield from each other. Our committee is willing to oversee the arrangements of said pulpit exchanges/supply.
6. That Synod take note that the Canadian Reformed Committee for Ecumenical Relations (CER) is willing to answer questions, speak at classis meetings, and promote the unity of our churches. Synod encourages the classes to use them to that end. Additionally, our classes can consider joint classis meetings with a CanRC classis in close proximity.
7. That Synod remind the churches of our mutual responsibility to engage one another in our ecumenical task through prayer, classical dialogue, local efforts, and expression of concerns.
8. That Synod approve the work of the committee.

Humbly Submitted,

Rev. Joel Dykstra, chairman

Rev. Jason Vander Horst, secretary

**Liaison Consistory to the Presbyterian and Reformed Commission
on Chaplains and Military Personnel (PRCC)
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

Esteemed Brothers,

As the URCNA liaison to the PRCC, we present the following brief report.

I. Review of the Committee's Mandate

Synod 2014 adopted the following recommendations:

That Synod appoint the Consistory of Faith URC of Beecher, Illinois, to serve indefinitely without need of re-appointment as the URCNA liaison to the PRCC, and that Synod requests that this Consistory submit reports on the PRCC to future synods.

That Synod authorize the Consistory of Faith URC of Beecher, Illinois, to send one or two observers to PRCC meetings occasionally, at URCNA expense, leaving it to the Consistory's discretion whether and when such observers will be sent. Costs should be set at \$500 USD per annum. (Acts of Synod Visalia 2014, pp. 27-28)

Synod 2022 adopted the following recommendation:

That Synod request the Consistory of Faith URC of Beecher, IL, to revisit the question of whether the URCNA should remain an associate (non-voting) member of PRCC or pursue full (voting) memberships and report back with a recommendation to the next synod. (Acts of Synod Niagara 2022, pp. 126-127)

II. Summary of the Committee's Activities

Rev. Andrew Spriensma met in person with the PRCC executive director, Dr. James Carter on October 11, 2023 while attending the PRCC annual training conference in order to discuss the possibility of the URCNA applying for full membership in PRCC. The PRCC Chaplain's Manual, dated February 2022, has been reviewed concerning the process of applying for full membership. While the consistory of Faith URC (Beecher, IL) did not send an observer to the annual PRCC commissioner meetings in Atlanta, GA., the Executive Commissioner reports and minutes for these meetings have been received and reviewed, followed by telephone calls to the PRCC administrator and executive director. We report our observations below.

III. Report on PRCC

A. The Mission of the PRCC (NO CHANGES)

The PRCC's Mission Statement declares,

The Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel is a ministry of member denominations dedicated to obeying Christ's Great Commission by providing men to serve as chaplains in military and civilian organizations. The Commission endorses and ecclesiastically supports ordained, qualified chaplains; approves chaplain candidates; and helps presbyteries and congregations in biblical ministry to military personnel and their families.

The Commission is governed by representatives or *commissioners* from its five member denominations: ARPC, KAPC, OPC, PCA, and RPCNA. It is also the endorsing body for two associate member (non-voting) denominations: KPCA and URCNA. Membership in the PRCC is limited to NAPARC denominations.

Five lines of effort that summarize the PRCC daily work follows: *CATCH* new applicants who are considering a call to chaplaincy ministry, *CREDENTIAL* them properly so that they have ecclesiastical endorsement to serve in their field, provide pastoral *CARE* to chaplains and their families, *COVER* them with spiritual and legal advice to proclaim Christ freely in a secular organization, and *CONNECT* chaplains with their home church congregations.

B. Chaplains Endorsed by the PRCC. (UPDATED)

The PRCC endorses a growing population of 323 military chaplains, chaplain candidates, and civilian chaplains. (242 PCA; 29 KAPC; 23ARPC; 15 OPC; 9 KPCA; 3 RPCNA; 2 URCNA).

Rev. Daniel Cortez concluded his service as a U.S. Air Force Reserve chaplain in order to receive a new commission as an Active Duty Navy Chaplain in early 2023. After completing his initial training in New Port, RI, he reported to Naval Base San Diego to serve as the chaplain for the USS Sterett. He ministers to a crew of approximately 350 sailors aboard the destroyer and has spent many months of the past year underway throughout the Pacific Ocean. He remains under the oversight of Christ URC (Santee, CA) and can be contacted at cortez_daniel22@yahoo.com.

Rev. Andrew Spriensma continues his service as a U.S. Army chaplain under the oversight of Faith URC (Beecher, IL). He is currently stationed at Schofield Barracks, HI while serving as the field artillery brigade chaplain in the 25th Infantry Division. His duties involve preaching at the post chapel and leading a Tuesday night Bible study, providing pastoral care to the brigade command team and headquarters company, and supervising, mentoring, and resourcing four Christian battalion chaplains within the brigade. Together, they minister to a brigade of 2,200 soldiers. Chaplain Spriensma can be contacted at amspriensma@gmail.com.

C. Religious Liberty Issues (NEW). PRCC chaplains increasingly expressed concerns regarding pressure to affirm, promote, or participate in training, instruction, or workplace policies and practices a) conflicting with their religious-biblical convictions regarding justice opposing discriminatory treatment based on race, and/or b) root theories of human identity fundamentally in sexual orientation or race rather than fundamental biblical concepts such as imago Dei, original sin, and available reconciliation in union with Christ. The PRCC advised that while institutions may appropriately require their personnel, to include chaplains, to merely receive and understand training and instruction about the institution's own policies, procedures, and theories regarding race and gender; requiring chaplains to personally affirm and actively promote such policies against their religious convictions and conscience violates both legal prohibitions and PRCCMP requirements of its chaplains. They are encouraged to contact the executive director immediately if they perceived such a violation to be occurring.

The early portion of this reporting period also dealt heavily with religious accommodations regarding COVID vaccinations. The PRCC issued ethical guidance early on to help chaplains determine the appropriate response for themselves and for the service members under their care to follow their faith and honor God in their conscience. In September 2021, Executive Order 14043 required vaccination of all service members, and chaplains had a central role in assisting service members to apply for exemption to the vaccine for religious reasons. Beginning in February 2002, refusal of the vaccination without an approved accommodation was grounds for separation. Unfortunately, the approval rate of the thousands of religious accommodations was incredibly low. In December of 2022, the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act removed the mandate of COVID vaccination. However, over 8,000 service members (not all of which had applied for religious accommodation) had already been separated from the military for refusing the order to be vaccinated.

The full discussion and advisement is found at the very end of chap. 10 in the PRCC manual: [\(https://resources.pcamna.org/resource/chaplain-ministries_chaplain-resources_chaplainmanual/](https://resources.pcamna.org/resource/chaplain-ministries_chaplain-resources_chaplainmanual/)

D. Dues and Costs

The PRCC collects funds from both its endorsed chaplains and also from its member denominations. The denominational contributions are \$1000.00 USD for each chaplain per year, which amounts to \$2,000 USD for the total URCNA denominational contribution. The dues for individual chaplains vary depending on rank and duty status, currently set at \$996 USD combined for both chaplains. Synod Wyoming 2016 made this a reimbursable expense to the individual chaplains; however, no receipts have been submitted thus far. The travel allowance of \$500 USD set by Synod 2014 needs to be adjusted for inflation and costs increase. We recommend \$1,000 USD per annum if the URCNA applies for full membership. This would support sending two commissioners per year.

IV. Recommendation Regarding Application for Full Membership (NEW)

A. Background. Synod Schererville 2007 voted to apply for associate membership in the PRCC (formerly PRJC) in order to allow URCNA ministers to receive the necessary endorsement to serve as chaplains in the U.S. Armed Forces. The PRCC has two forms of membership. Full membership requires not only the approval of the commission, but also ratification by each member denomination's general assembly or synod. Associate membership required only the approval of the commission itself. While both forms of membership provided the same level of credentialing and care towards chaplains in the field, the main difference is the level of involvement on the commissioner board itself. Associate member denominations are invited to attend the annual meetings but have no voting rights. Full member denominations are expected to attend the annual meeting and possess the right to speak and vote on the matters at hand. The URCNA applied for associate membership with the following grounds. 1.) It provided the quickest route to endorsement 2.) It allowed the opportunity to send observers to the PRCC meetings and become better acquainted with this body, and 3.) it allowed time to consider whether a commitment to the responsibilities to full membership would be justifiable in the future.

B. Discussion. Synod 2022 requested a recommendation from the Consistory of Faith URC regarding whether the URCNA should pursue full membership in PRCC based on the following grounds:

1. The addition of a second chaplain. The low number of URCNA chaplains was indeed part of the reason for associate membership instead of full membership. Full membership would potentially require more delegates than chaplains represented, making the commitment more difficult to justify. In 2021, the URCNA was blessed with a second chaplain to enter service into the Armed Forces. While we rejoice to see a small numerical growth in military chaplain ministry, the increase from one to two alone does not provide sufficient justification. The recommendation to Synod 2007 regarding application for associate membership stated that “it would not be justifiable to pursue full membership if *only one or two* ministers entered the chaplaincy.”

However, the addition of second chaplain presents more significantly a longitudinal development than a numerical growth. For 17 years, the URCNA has labored alongside the PRCC in support of one chaplain’s ministry to the U.S. Armed Forces. While the majority of his service as a chaplain is now behind him, the ministry of another chaplain has just begun. This forces us to ask the question, what might URCNA chaplaincy ministry look like in 17 years from now? The policies of the U.S. military have also changed significantly in the past 17 years, and full membership in the PRCC would enable the URCNA to shape policy that supports and governs their chaplains’ ministry for many years to come.

2. Synod 2007 voted to apply for associate membership in part due to expediency. The context of 2007 involved a URCNA ministerial candidate and Army chaplain candidate with a pending deployment to Iraq in the beginning of 2008. The process was not only quicker, but it also afforded the URCNA the opportunity to become better acquainted with the PRCC and to assess the wisdom of applying for full membership in the future.

We have now had about 17 years serving alongside the PRCC, during which delegates have observed the PRCC commission. The board is comprised with men who are committed to the Reformed faith and the advancement of the gospel in both the military and several other civilian settings. While every denomination has its own particularities, the PRCC works together in a godly harmony to further the proclamation of the gospel with a solidarity committed to the Reformed confessions. Chaplain Spriensma has been able to receive pastoral guidance, visits, and encouragement numerous times over the years from both the PRCC staff and senior PRCC chaplains.

The URCNA has had sufficient time and opportunity to become fully acquainted with the PRCC and the role of chaplaincy in the military. Full membership in the PRCC would strengthen our ecclesiastical relations with other NAPARC denominations and signal our support for the chaplaincy ministry. It would also avail our churches to resources that the PRCC has begun to publish to assist the local church in ministering to veterans in our communities.

3. The 2022 PRCC report highlights a number of pressing issues for chaplains which may recommend that the URCNA play a voting role in this body. This is the decisive question between associate membership and full membership. While the PRCC has served our

URCNA chaplains well and faithfully during our associate membership, the matter before us is whether it is prudent for us to invest in a leadership role as a part of the PRCC, given our limited number of chaplains.

While the PRCC has guided and protected Reformed chaplains through many challenging policies and unrighteous cultural shifts, the work continues to actively shape policy that both guards and governs chaplain ministries in the PRCC. The PRCC benefits from the dialogue between commissioners of different denominations, and we believe the URCNA would have a beneficial voice in the discussion. For instance, the PRCC has added the Three Forms of Unity to its governing documents for our sake, yet we, the only denomination who subscribes to them, currently do not possess the innate authority to speak for them in critical matters before the commission.

Ultimately, our calling Consistories have the spiritual authority and oversight over the ministry of our chaplains in the field. Yet, from a legal perspective, the PRCC is the entity that the U.S. government looks to as the endorsing agency for our chaplains. It is also often a means of practical pastoral advisement and encouragement for chaplains in their ministry. In short, the URCNA taking a role of leadership in the PRCC would be a blessing not only to the URCNA chaplains in the field., but to all PRCC chaplains.

C. Requirements and Procedures of Applying for Full Membership. The additional requirement of full membership would be the expectation to send delegates to serve as commissioners at the PRCC meetings, which meet in person for two days once a year in Atlanta, and then meet telephonically as well at least once a year. Each denomination is entitled to three Commission members for its first fifty thousand members or portion thereof. One additional Commission member may be added for each additional fifty thousand members or portion thereof. (The PCA generally has 7 commissioners.) While URCNA could send up to three delegates at their discretion, the mandate is at least one present, with a preference for two from a member denomination. The appointment and terms of commissioners is internal to member denominations. Commissioners could include, but not be limited to, office bearers from the calling churches. There are elders and ministers throughout the federation who are veterans and/or have a heart for the men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces that could serve well in this capacity. Junior chaplains are not the best fit for this responsibility, since the board seeks to mentor and minister to them.

The procedure for application would be for the stated clerk of the federation to send a formal letter to the commission requesting full membership in the PRCC. After the PRCC commission votes on the request at their next meeting, they will send the decision to each member denomination to be ratified at their next General Assembly / Synod. All current member denominations must approve.

V. Recommendations

1. That Synod set the budget for the PRCC at \$3,996 USD per annum to cover required denominational contributions, the \$1000 travel costs of attending Commission meetings should a representative attend, and individual chaplain dues should they be submitted.

2. That Synod instruct the stated clerk to apply immediately, on behalf of the URCNA, for full membership in the Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel (PRCC).

Grounds:

- a. An additional URCNA chaplain may signal, Lord willing, additional decades of gospel ministry in the context of the U.S. military.
- b. For the past 17 years, the PRCC has demonstrated its commitment to Reformed faith, the churches and chaplains it represents, and the advancement of the gospel through the chaplaincy.
- c. Through full membership, the URCNA can join with other NAPARC churches in creating policy that guides and guards the ministries of our own chaplains and all PRCC chaplains.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Andrew Spriensma
For the Consistory of Faith URC (Beecher, IL)

March 27, 2024

**Oversight Consistory for the Website Oversight Committee (OCWOC)
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

At Synod Niagara we sought to have relief from this labor. This request was granted, and we were tasked with recommending our own successor (see Acts of Synod Niagara, Article 105, Recommendation 3). After sending a letter to interested churches, when no single consistory responded that they would take this appointment, we began to pass over some of our volunteer duties directly to the Website Oversight Committee (WOC). Those duties, which already fit within the mandate of the WOC, were graciously received by the committee. We also communicated with the WOC to be sure that it was no longer necessary to have a consistory available to act as the legal entity.

In light of the above considerations, we crafted an overture to synod, through our classis, to dissolve this appointment for an oversight consistory. That overture passed at the classis level and is now here for our consideration.

Since the previous synod we overviewed the minutes of the WOC when they were sent out way. We did not have any special requests from the WOC.

We have been glad to serve the churches in this capacity since 2007.

In Christ's Service,
Consistory of Grace United Reformed Church in Waupun

Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions Report to Synod Escondido 2024

I. Formation and Mandate

Synod Niagara (2022) saw some significant changes to how the URCNA structured the work of its former Missions Committee. The committee was in essence divided into two halves, one serving foreign missions and the other home missions (see Acts of Synod Niagara, Art. 95, 97, 101). Synod further developed the work of the new Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions (SCFM) from that of the former Synodical Missions Committee and re-tasked the former Synodical Mission Coordinator to the new position of “Foreign Missions Coordinator.” (Acts of Synod Niagara, Art. 101.17)

The mandate of the Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions is, “To provide counsel to the federation, classes, consistories, and mission works in starting, strengthening and at times closing foreign mission fields.” (Niagara, 97.8). The committee is composed of 1 classical rep per classis, 2 members-at-large appointed by Synod and the URCNA Foreign Missions Coordinator (Niagara 97.9). The mandate is further outlined in Article 97.10 with:

- a. To continue the regular work of the previous Synodical Missions Committee by serving the federation through the development of policies, and the promotion of training and resources for foreign missions.
- b. To serve the federation by giving counsel to consistories that seek to open or close a foreign field.
- c. To receive and publish the reports, goals, and concerns of the various foreign fields to the churches of the federation in order to encourage and facilitate greater unity throughout the federation in prayer and in the use of resources (e.g. manpower, money, etc.). This will help us achieve our goal of establishing and/or strengthening foreign federations composed of faithful Reformed churches.
- d. To help all consistories to become involved in foreign missions by providing expertise, counsel and coordination in the expansion of current fields.
- e. To aid in the investigation and planning of new foreign fields, where applicable.
- f. To work with consistories through “field committees” that will determine the particular posts that are to be occupied on foreign fields, and to communicate throughout the federation where there is need for more missionaries.
- g. To aid in developing potential missionaries by connecting interested individuals with current missionaries (and with calling consistories, where necessary) for short-term service abroad.
- h. To work with young people who are interested in foreign missions by organizing internships, cross-cultural missions training, and medium to long-term mission trips.
- i. To give counsel to the classes of the federation when advice is sought by a Consistory for the sending of missionaries to or removing them from foreign fields.

The churches of the URCNA, through its Synod, also voted to create field committees, “To integrate resources and personnel in the URCNA for the supervision of particular foreign mission fields.” (97.11) The mandate for field committees is outlined in Article 97.13 as well as Article 101.

This new plan for missions was encouraged by Synod Niagara, but not mandated by the Synod (Art. 101.15).

The (re-tasked) Foreign Missions Coordinator was given the following specific tasks (Art. 101.17)

1. To visit missionaries and their fields from time to time, as directed by the SCFM, for the purpose of counseling them concerning their work, and promoting such understanding and harmonious cooperation between the workers of the various posts as shall secure the harmony and

advancement of the work. He shall provide to the overseeing consistories timely and thorough reports of all such visits.

2. As time allows, to visit potential fields or current fields for longer periods of time in order to assist missionaries, or to investigate new fields.
3. To assist the SCFM in all their work.
4. To serve as an advisory member on the various field committees.
5. To visit as many classical meetings and congregations as occasion may require, or as the SCFM may advise and his other duties will permit. The purpose of these visits shall be to enlighten our people on the subject of missions in all its branches, to stimulate prayer for missions, and to encourage participation in the work of missions.
6. To promote and organize mission festivals and conferences, and to present the cause of missions upon these occasions.
7. To promote giving, by individuals and congregations, and publish financial needs of foreign mission works to the churches.
8. To provide the SCFM with bi-monthly reports of his work.
9. To work together with the Synodical Committee on Home Missions as necessary.
10. To edit and publish (together with the Synodical Committee on Home Missions) *The Trumpet*, and to distribute other missionary newsletters and information.
11. To maintain (together with the SCHM) the URCNA Missions website.

Synod Niagara also tasked the US and Canadian Corporations, “To explore the potential establishment of [national Mission Funds] and to report back to the next Synod for final consideration by the churches.” (Art. 101.19)

II. Membership

The Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions is composed of the following members:

Rev. Harry Bout (Classis Ontario-East)
Rev. Richard Bout (Foreign Missions Coordinator)
Rev. Greg Bylsma (Classis Southwest Ontario, Chairman)
Rev. Casey Freswick (Classis Michigan, Clerk)
Elder Steve Howerzyl (Classis Southwest U.S.)
Elder Duane Konynenbelt (Classis Western Canada)
Elder Harold Meinders (Classis Central U.S.)
Rev. Steve Poelman (Member-At-Large)¹
Elder Al Rumph (Member-At-Large, Vice-All)
Elder Paul Scharold (Classis Pacific Northwest)
Elder Steve Schulz (Classis Eastern U.S.)

III. Starting the Work

Our newly formed committee held its first meeting November 29, 2022 (with Synod 2022 being delayed to October). Since then our primary focus has been to be in contact with sending churches, encouraging them to allow us to come alongside them in their labours so we can get to know their areas of

¹ Rev. Ken Anema, appointed Member-At-Large by Synod Niagara (Acts 123.2) was unable to serve. The Consistory of the Escondido URC, convening our next Synod, appointed Rev. Steve Poelman in his place.

ministry and help more effectively. Drafting an initial letter and establishing contact took us well into 2023.

The response of the churches to Synod Niagara was largely positive, and we are very grateful for the new focus and emphasis on partnership and cooperation in missions that has been evidenced within the federation as we work more closely together in foreign missions. While the new structure was voluntary, five of our sending churches in the URCNA (to foreign fields) have members of our committee participating in a more hands-on way in their missionary work at this time.

To date, our partnership with the churches has not included any type of reinvention of current plans or structure. Essentially, churches are allowing members of the SCFM into their already existing Missions Committees and we are simply working together under rubrics that the sending churches have already established. This has transitioned the work of committee members away from monthly meetings with the *synodical* committee and into meetings with sending churches and their missionaries. Committee members serving with sending churches are spending more time with the local mission subcommittee than with the synodical committee, resulting in a hands-on, personal approach that makes the work of this committee exceptionally enjoyable. We have lots to learn, some things to share, and certainly appreciate working shoulder to shoulder with the saints.

Committee members have been assigned to different fields and the needs of those fields are communicated through the synodical committee so that the whole federation can help. Since November 2022 we have already seen 2 churches send representatives to foreign fields to see if they can help sister churches strengthen existing fields. The sharing of work and information through cooperation allows for a much broader support and care for God's kingdom outside of Canada and the U.S.

We continue to give help wherever asked and our Foreign Missions Coordinator serves in various advisory capacities among all the churches (even where committee members have not been invited to join committees). While increased partnership is a joy and blessing, it is our prayer that we will still faithfully serve all our churches regardless of their support for the mission structure our federation set at Synod Niagara.

Fields where committee members are currently serving include:

Perugia, Italy (Rev. Andrea Ferrari sent by Christ URC of Santee)

Steve Howerzyl, Steve Schulz, Rich Bout

Milan, Italy (Rev. Michael Brown sent by Escondido URC of Escondido)

Steve Howerzyl, Paul Scharold, Rich Bout

Costa Rica (Rev. Bill Green sent by Bethany URC of Wyoming)

Duane Konynebelt, Al Rumph, Rich Bout

Turkey (Rev. Cagdas Coskun sent by Walker URC of Walker)

Casey Freswick, Harold Meinders, Rich Bout

Quinende, Ecuador (Deacon Josh Vogel sent by Covenant URC of Wyoming)

Harry Bout, Greg Bylsma, Rich Bout

The Pella URC of Pella (sending church of Rev. Pablo Landazuri in Quito, Ecuador) and the Christ URC of Santee (sending church of Rev. Mihai Corcea in Bucharest, Romania) have decided not to invite synodical representatives onto their respective field committees at this time, although we do stay involved as we are able in the encouragement, prayer support and advisory support of these works when so requested.

We continue to investigate opportunities with the Hope URC of Brampton (sending church of Rev. Matt VanDyken in Tepic, Mexico).

Honduras (Rev. Ernie Langendoen sent by Emmanuel URC of Jordan) does not currently have Rev. Langendoen on the field in a full-time capacity, but help is being offered here by our Foreign Missions Coordinator on how to potentially transition that field to another NAPARC missionary or a potential local pastor.

We are also blessed to have a new work officially joining the URCNA since our last Synod. Rev. Eric Kayayan has worked for many years in missions through Reformed Faith and Life, and the Oak Glen URC of Lansing has taken on oversight of this mission in calling Rev. Kayayan since our last Synod. As this is primarily an educational ministry to French speaking areas, we have been involved with the church in an advisory capacity and are exploring potential involvement with their field committee.

In other areas, we give thanks for the establishment of the Cross Cultural Missions Training program (CCMT). This program had its first month-long session run in May-June of 2023 with tremendous success. Not only were all places on the mission filled, but God richly blessed the time of teaching, service and field experience that attendees were able to receive. Rev's Paul Murphy, Ken Anema, Matt VanDyken, Zach Anderson and Rich Bout taught about foreign and home missions, and attendees broke up into four different areas of Mexico for two weeks of service after the initial two week teaching time. Looking forward to 2024, this will again take place in Mexico (DV) and for 2025 we will be potentially making plans for Costa Rica. Spots for 2024 are currently filled, but we would encourage churches to encourage youth in considering this extraordinary opportunity to grow in knowledge of and love for serving God in foreign missions within a Reformed setting.

It has been our blessing to pray for and support the work of Christ through URCNA foreign missions regardless of whether churches have invited our more active and personal involvement or not. We are grateful that Pastor Richard Bout continues to serve very faithfully in the role of Foreign Missions Coordinator, and pray that God will continue to build up Christ's kingdom both at home and abroad to the glory of His name, the upbuilding of His church, and the salvation of the lost.

Foreign Missions Coordinator Report

Due to the later date of our last Synod meeting this report highlights the activity of Pastor Richard Bout from November 1, 2022 to March 1, 2024.

Missions Coordinator Report – March 7th, 2024

It has been a great blessing to serve the URCNA through this last year and a half since Synod Niagara 2022. The role given to me as Foreign Missions Coordinator has been a challenge and a joy, as I have continued to work with missionaries and churches, visit fields, and encourage our missionary endeavour. Our Lord Jesus, who prayed so lovingly and sacrificially for the protection and sanctification of His church, has been faithful in His provision of His Word and Spirit in our midst. My heart is full of thankfulness for the gospel labour that I am privileged to share with my brothers and sisters in the URCNA.

I see greater unity and cooperation in our federation as we have formed field committees for six of our eight foreign mission works. To work shoulder to shoulder with the foreign missions committee and our sending churches in a unified way has been a step forward for our churches and an encouragement to me as Foreign Missions Coordinator. I pray that we will continue in this in the coming years.

Below are the activities that I have been involved with over the last 16 months (this does not include my daily activities, personal meetings, zoom calls, etc.):

1) Regularly Scheduled Activities

- i) Publication of the Trumpet – Monthly Newsletter of the URCNA (home and foreign).
- ii) URCNA monthly prayer requests for URCNA bulletins (home and foreign).
- iii) Yearly financial needs letter – sent at the end of each year (home and foreign).
- iv) Prayer Map (home and foreign).
- v) Missions Conference – Organization 2023 & 2025.

2) Contact with Foreign Missionaries

I have regular communication with all our foreign missionaries and have enjoyed getting to know each of these men. I have regular zoom calls/prayer times with most of them.

- Eric Kayayan – (Zoom meetings & prayer)
- Andrea Ferrari (Zoom meetings & prayer)
- Mike Brown (Zoom meetings & prayer).
- Matt Van Dyken (Zoom meetings & prayer).
- Bill Green – (Zoom meetings & prayer).
- Josh & Michelle Vogel (Zoom meetings & prayer).
- Pablo Landazuri (occasional Zoom meetings & prayer).
- Mihai Corcea (Zoom meeting & prayer).
- Cagdas Coskun (Zoom meeting & prayer).
- James & Ester Folkerts (regular communication)
- Mark & Carla Van Essendelft – former diaconal missionary to Uganda (occasional communication)

3) Visits with Foreign Missionaries in Canada

Both Rev. Andrea Ferrari and Rev. Mike Brown visited Canada last year and stayed with us in our home. I set up visits with local pastors and preaching in our area churches. It was a privilege for us to have them come and visit. I have invited all our missionaries to visit the southern Ontario area to broaden their prayer and support base.

4) Cross-Cultural Missions Training (CCMT)

Taking place in Mexico, May 10-June 13, 2023, the first year of this project was a very blessed time. We had 21 young people participate, including two married seminary couples. Rev. Paul and Julie Murphy, Rev. Matt and Anne-Marie Van Dyken, Rev. Ken Anema, Rev. Zac and Sandy Anderson and I and my wife Angela taught, mentored, and facilitated this project. We were thankful for how all the moving pieces worked together! God's protecting hand was over us over the many kilometres (over 1000) travelled. The six Mexican national churches that we worked with expressed a great deal of appreciation for the participation of the YP.

I have been busy working through all the details of this year's program. We have once again had a great response! We are at capacity of 20 young people (with a waiting list for next year.) We will be sending YP to four areas for their internships: Queretaro, Merida, Guadalajara, and Mexico, DV.

I am so thankful for the commitment of the men in United Reformed Missions Association (URMA) for their partnership in financially supporting this program.

5) Meetings with Overseeing Consistories/Committees

- **Costa Rica** - oversight committee.
- **Ecuador** - oversight committee.
- **Turkey** – oversight committee
- **Perugia** – oversight committee

6) Contact with Home missionaries.

I continue to have contact with several of our home missionaries and church-planters and have visited/preached for several of them:

- Niagara Falls – Rev. Rich Bultje
- Toronto Covenant – Rev. Jose Ramirez
- Poconos – Rev. Rich Kuiken
- St Catharines, ON – Rev. Thabet Megaly
- Ontario, CA – Spanish Ministry – Rev. Taylor Kern

7) Committee/Inter-church Meetings

- CECA (member)
- United Reformed Missions Association (advisor)
- ICRC Missions Committee (member)
- Word & Deed (advisor)
- Reformed Seminary of the Americas (board of visitors)
- Come Over and Help (COAH)
- Helping Internationals (HI)
- Radius International
- OPC Foreign Missions
- MARS, Greenville and Canadian Reformed Seminaries

8) Local International Work

The opportunity to work with new immigrants has opened over the last year in the Brantford, ON area. Many thousands are arriving, and we have been privileged to work with people from nations all over the world.

- We have begun a monthly international service and dinner for new immigrants that is translated into Swahili and Spanish. We have around 25 people attending.
- We have begun a monthly Bible study for 4 Spanish families, that has been very well received. There are many more Hispanics arriving, and there is potential for growth.

9) Speaking & Preaching

I preach regularly in area URC churches as I am able. On occasion I also accept invitations to speak in local churches or seminaries.

- January 4, 2023 – Canadian Reformed Seminary Missions Conference
- Calgary, AB - August 8th-12th 2023- Speaker – Summit Youth Conference
- Wyoming, MI – October 14th & 15th 2023- Speaker at Bethany Missions Conference
- Chicago - October 4-6th 2023 - MARS Missions Conference (speaker)
- Hope Reformed School - 2024

10) Mission Coordinator Trips

- i. Trip to Ontario, CA – Jan. 20th-27th, 2023
 - Speaker in Ontario URC Missions Conference
 - Visit to Ontario Spanish Ministry
 - Preaching in Ontario URC
- ii. Trip to Flat Rock, NC. March 24th-April 2nd, 2023
 - Organization of URCNA Pastors' and Missions Conference
 - Visit with Van Essendelfts
- iii. Trip to Santee, CA
 - Meetings with Santee & Escondido consistories
- iv. Trip to Mexico – May 11th – June 10th 2023
 - CCMT
 - Visit/work with Van Dykens
- v. NYC -September 7th -9th 2023
 - CCMT meetings
- vi. Philadelphia, PA – September 19th-21st 2023
 - Yearly NAPARC Missions Meetings
- vii. South Sudan – October 30th – November 14th 2023
 - Visit/preach in South Sudanese Reformed Churches
 - Made with CECA rep Rev. John Van Eyk and Word & Deed
- viii. Costa Rica – December 4th – 13th 2023
 - Visit with Bill & Aletha Green.
 - Preach in San Jose congregation.
 - Visit with leaders in CLIR
- ix. Mexico – January 26th – March 2nd 2024
 - Exploratory Trip to Investigate a new field
 - Made with members of Woodstock and Brantford URCNA's
 - We visited 4 potential cities where one or two missionaries could be sent.
- x. Turkey – February 21th – March 1st 2024
 - Visit to Rev. Cagdas Coskun.
 - Visited the Izmir congregation and met with leaders in church.

IV. Recommendations to Synod

RECOMMENDATION #1: That synod give the privilege of the floor to the SCFM chairman, clerk, and the FMC while foreign missions are being discussed.

RECOMMENDATION #2: That synod grant an opportunity for Rev. Richard Bout to give a verbal report in person on the floor of Synod 2024.

RECOMMENDATION #3: That synod approve the work of the Foreign Missions Coordinator with hearty thanks.

Ground:

1. Rev. Richard Bout continues to serve the cause of Christ through URCNA foreign missions in an exemplary capacity. His advice is frequently sought and appreciated, and his heart for seeing missionaries raised up and sent out has been a catalyst through which many have given a more serious consideration of the importance of foreign missions and God's potential calling upon their lives in that regard.

RECOMMENDATION #4: That synod establish the annual budget of the Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions at \$14,500 USD (up from \$11,000 USD).

Grounds:

1. Committee members are preparing for trips to the field alongside sending Consistories where possible. These trips will have additional costs to the federation.
2. Our hope is that money for yearly face-to-face meetings will now be defrayed by meeting only once every 2-3 years, allowing costs for trips to the mission fields to be defrayed by reduced costs associated with face-to-face meetings.
3. We have moved web-hosting to a professional service provider at a cost, shared with the Synodical Committee on Home Missions, of \$4,000 per year (\$2,000 per committee).

Background for Recommendation #5

In the past, both the Missions Committee and the SCFM has approved Mrs. Angela Bout, the wife of our Foreign Missions Coordinator (formerly the Missions Coordinator), to travel with her husband once per year under Rev. Richard Bout's synodical travel budget. These trips were permitted only when it was requested by the missionary family and deemed beneficial to the care and wellbeing of the missionary family. In recent years Angela has accompanied her husband on trips such as that to Costa Rica (after Aletha Green had been diagnosed with cancer), a single trip to both Uganda and Italy (after Rev. Folkerts had been attacked while driving), and volunteering and organizational work with the Cross Cultural Missions Training program as well as occasional others.

The URCNA Board (Canada) has sought clarification on these trips as they seek to manage the money of the federation in a stewardly fashion.

RECOMMENDATION #5: That synod approve expenses for the wife of the FMC to accompany her husband on one trip per year under the authority of the Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions.

Grounds:

1. There are occasions where care on the field is greatly heightened through a husband and wife team to a husband and wife team (or family).
2. The wife of the FMC has missionary experience and is a godly woman whose gifts and experience can greatly encourage those on the field.
3. The URCNA Canada Board has asked for Synodical affirmation of the decisions of the URCNA Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions in this regard.

Appendix

Letter sent to the Sending Churches from the SCFM – Dec 2022-Feb 2023

Dear Brothers in Christ,

Warm greetings on behalf of the newly formed foreign missions committee of the URCNA! We invite you to rejoice with us in this season as we meditate on how the Lord uses the meek and lowly to accomplish His sovereign will. This was marvellously true of Christ our Saviour and His work of redemption for us, and it continues to be seen now with our labours in His kingdom.

The purpose of this letter is to follow up with sending churches in light of the decisions of Synod Niagara this past October. As you may be aware, at synod a new plan for foreign missions was presented and adopted by the body. The heart of this new plan is to give sending churches greater federational support and investment for their work on the foreign field. The goal is to open a door to this greater federational support through encouraging partnership between sending churches and the URC Foreign Missions Committee through the work of field committees. The specific shape of that partnership will be flexible based on the current structures and desires within the sending church, however the goal of this partnership is to help the entire federation more consciously participate in and strengthen our various foreign fields as we partner together in this new, more cooperative way.

To this end, we would like to suggest an initial face-to-face meeting to discuss practically what this partnership could look like. The road forward is flexible, and we respect the significant work that so many of our sending churches have invested in the foreign field. The goal of these face-to-face meetings is to get to know each other, hear of your work more closely, and present ideas of how to move forward in a wise manner. Our thought is that a face-to-face meeting with your council (where possible) would be best, and that the meeting would involve your local classical representative from the committee, one other foreign missions committee member and the missions coordinator.

Would you be willing to work towards a meeting with us early in the coming year? If you could present us with a few dates that might work with your schedules it would be much appreciated. We look forward to hearing back from you.

The apostle Paul unites us in this encouraging exhortation, *"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."* 1 Cor. 15:58. Our prayer is that God would allow our labours to abound for His glory as we work together to support the Gospel's advance among the nations.

Warmly in Christ,

[List of SCFM members]

Synodical Committee on Home Missions Report to Synod Escondido 2024

INTRODUCTION

It is a glorious privilege for us Christians to have been called by God into the fellowship of his Son and then into his mission to the world. The cultural context in which we find ourselves today appears to be growing ever more hostile to the gospel, but this will not deter the saints from going forward in faith, with greater evangelistic urgency and a firm confidence in Jesus, our victorious Savior –

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.
(Revelation 12:10-11)

Christ is building his church, and he is pleased to equip and employ his people in this great task of spreading the gospel throughout the world for the making of more disciples. Through his gracious guidance and provision, our federation has seen considerable developments in missions since Synod Niagara 2022. First, the work of missions in the URCNA was divided into foreign missions and home missions, each branch having its own synodical committee. Secondly, each classis has established its own classical committee on home missions (CCHM).

The Synodical Committee on Home Missions (SCHM) is composed of eight men, one representative for each classis. Your committee believes that the work of home missions is an essential function of a healthy church, and that each and every congregation should be seeking opportunities to carry out the great commission in its particular context. It is this committee's hope and prayer that our federation will continue to grow in wisdom, maturity, and faithfulness in its home missions activities. With firm confidence in our great God, who will save a countless multitude of sinners from every tribe and nation, we anticipate that home missions in the URCNA is only going to grow more faithful and fruitful in the years to come.

The focus of the committee has been on the promotion of church planting among the URC with the strong conviction that healthy churches plant churches. We envision that our work will be carried out more and more in conjunction with, and in service to, classical committees on home missions which are particularly positioned to encourage and equip local congregations for the work of home missions in their own settings. It is our hope to be a source of encouragement for the churches in the future, and to provide them with solid resources for home missions. But we also mean to challenge our churches to take a more proactive approach to evangelism and church planting. Indeed, we have been blessed to be a blessing to others, to be a "so-that" people whose mission activity reflects who we are, not merely something we might get around to doing when opportunity arises. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" (Ps. 67:3)

Here is what follows in the remainder of our report:

1. mandate for the Synodical Committee on Home Missions
2. overview of the committee's work since the previous synod
3. state of home missions and church planting in the URCNA
4. recommendations of the committee
5. Church Planting Manual, second edition 2024

1. MANDATE FOR THE SYNODICAL COMMITTEE ON HOME MISSIONS

Synod Niagara 2022 established a Synodical Committee on Home Missions composed of one representative from each classis for the purpose of promoting church planting resources, communication, and support in the federation. The SCHM was given the following mandate:

- (1) Composition of Committee – a representative from each classis (it might be ideal for each classis representative also to be serving on a Classical Committee on Home Missions).
- (2) Work of the Synodical Committee on Home Missions –
 - a. Meet four times each year (most meetings conducted remotely);
 - b. Report to synod regarding the committee's work and the state of church planting;
 - c. Report to each classis by means of classis representative serving the committee;
 - d. Maintain a website for posting news, resources, etc.;
 - e. Promote resources for evangelism, disciple-making, and church planting;
 - f. Promote tools for consistories/classes to use for evaluation of church planters/plants;
 - g. Identify training and developmental programs for home missions;
 - h. When requested, advise Classical Committees on Home Missions;
 - i. Annually inform the federation of the varying financial needs of church plants.

Synod Niagara 2022 also directed the SCHM to work on the following, as necessary, with the Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions and/or the Foreign Missions Coordinator:

- publishing the *Trumpet* and distributing other missionary newsletters/information;
- maintaining the website for URCNA missions;
- developing/maintaining onramps to mission work (e.g. internships) that will help the federation to recruit seminarians.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE COMMITTEE'S WORK

What follows is a summary of the work of the Synodical Committee on Home Missions since its establishment at Synod Niagara 2022.

(2.1) Meetings of the SCHM

The committee has been meeting at least four times each year by means of video conferencing. In the beginning it was important for the SCHM to understand its mandate and how the committee would initially tackle the work. The committee's first in-person meeting took place on March 30, 2023 at the Bonclarken Conference Center in Flat Rock, NC, where the Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions (SCFM) was also having its first in-person meeting.

The two synodical committees briefly met with each other to clarify matters related to the new division of labor. The SCHM held its second in-person meeting on February 28, 2024 in Las Vegas, NV. Video conferencing (via Zoom) has served the committee well, but annual in-person meetings have proven very beneficial – we hope to continue this pattern going forward.

(2.2) SCHM Interaction with Foreign Missions Coordinator

Since the first in-person meeting in March of 2023 the committee has had intermittent interaction with Rev. Richard Bout, the Foreign Missions Coordinator. Occasional discussions have taken place with regard to the work that he would continue to do in connection with communications and publications for home missions – (1) monthly publication of the *Trumpet* missions newsletter; (2) monthly publication of missionary prayer requests; (3) annual publication of the missions prayer map; and (4) development of the federation’s missions website. We believe that Rev. Rich Bout would be mostly, if not entirely, relieved of such work in home missions were the SCHM to have someone serving as home missions clerk (more information regarding that possible new position can be found later in this report). The committee anticipates its working with Rev. Bout to plan a “missions evening” at Synod Escondido 2024.

(2.3) SCHM Interaction with Churches & Classes

To date the committee has not had any official correspondence with particular churches in the federation. This is to be explained in large part by the fact that the actual work of church planting in the URCNA is done by consistories that are supported by their classis. Since the men serving on the SCHM are also members of classical committees on home missions, some beneficial cross-pollination regularly takes place between them; and, of course, SCHM members are also reporting on their work to their respective classes at least on an annual basis. In the near future the SCHM intends to seek formal input from the churches on matters relating to home missions. Presently the committee is planning periodic “missions symposiums” that will bring people together (especially within a classis) for our growth in mission fervor and faithfulness.

(2.4) Publishing Financial Needs in Home Missions

For some years, the federation’s Missions Coordinator, Rev. Rich Bout, was publishing financial needs for both foreign and home mission efforts. But Synod Niagara 2022 gave the SCHM the task of informing churches of the federation annually regarding the varying financial needs of church plants and of others working in home missions. On Nov. 22, 2023, our chairman reached out to each of our home missionaries to determine year-end shortfalls. He and Rev. Bout then jointly composed a communication to all the churches of the federation regarding those financial needs – that communication was sent out by Rev. Bout on Dec. 16, 2023 (an addendum was sent on Dec. 20). This process seems to have served us well in the past, but the SCHM welcomes suggestions as to how we can better inform the churches of financial needs.

(2.5) Website for Home Missions

The SCHM believes that the federation’s missions website, URCNAmissions.org, serves a vital purpose in communicating present church planting initiatives, future planning and vision

casting. The website is designed to provide contact information for anyone interested in seeing a church planted in a particular location. We pray that God will use our website to encourage church planting efforts in North America. To that end, our committee is in the process of developing the design, content and functionality of the website. We have uploaded a Google map of our plants as well as an updated version of the church planting manual (more on this below). It is our plan to make regular updates on the status of church plants and to improve the presentation of the entries for each (pictures, current information, etc.). We are presently in communication with the Website Oversight Committee (WOC). In our communications we have affirmed that our missions website needs to have a unified design in connection with the federation's main site and that the SCHM should have direct access to the site for regular updates and development.

(2.6) Resources

The SCHM has only just begun the work of identifying resources and training programs for home missions. In its first year of operation the committee has been primarily focused on revising the federation's church planting manual, *How to Plant a Reformed Church*. It has been nine years since the publication of the first edition in 2015, which was the work of the original Missions Committee of the URCNA. Synod Niagara 2022 brought about a number of changes to the work of missions in the federation. Most significantly, one synodical missions committee was replaced with two distinct committees: a Synodical Committee on Home Missions (SCHM) and a Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions (SCFM). Synod also encouraged each classis in the federation to establish its own classical committee on home missions (CCHM).

In 2023, the SCHM revised the first edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* to bring it up-to-date with changes and new terminology introduced at Synod Niagara 2022. This revision was published electronically at URCNA.org and at URCNAMissions.org. It contains no substantive changes but only minor revisions/corrections and slightly improved formatting.

The SCHM also determined that a more substantive revision of our church planting manual was required in order to reflect lessons that we have learned over the last decade. We are therefore submitting a draft second edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* with our report to Synod Escondido 2024 for approval (note: various portions of the introduction and first four chapters were rewritten; the fifth chapter and appendices were not touched). Most of the changes in this second edition reflect a more proactive approach to church planting, as opposed to a more responsive approach that has sometimes characterized our efforts in the past. The SCHM believes that the work of missions is an essential function of a healthy church, and that each and every church should be seeking opportunities to carry out the great commission in its particular context. We also believe that the new infrastructure (which integrates classical committees on home missions with the SCHM) affords every church even more opportunities to play an active role in the cooperative work of church planting, whether or not a church chooses to oversee its own church plant. In addition to encouraging a more proactive approach to church planting, we have also sought to clarify the four phases and make general improvements throughout.

It is our committee's hope and prayer that our federation will continue to grow in wisdom and maturity in its home missions activities, and it would be our desire occasionally to augment and revise this handbook going forward, as the Lord provides opportunity to do so. While we do not

anticipate substantive revisions at every synod, we believe that once or twice every decade a new edition of the church planting manual may be presented to the churches for their approval. We invite all our churches and church planters to assist us in this effort, and welcome your input in the future for any suggested changes or revisions.

3. STATE OF CHURCH PLANTING IN THE URCNA

Since Synod Niagara 2022 five classes have at least begun planting a total of nine churches in the following cities (the overseeing consistory and its classis are noted in parentheses):

- Birmingham, AL (Christ Reformed Church, Washington, DC – Eastern US)
- Norfolk, VA (Covenant URC, Pantego, NC – Eastern US)
- Florence, KY (Westside Reformed Church, Cincinnati, OH – Eastern US)
- Ripon, CA (Trinity URC, Walnut Creek, CA – Pacific Northwest)
- Meridian, ID (Christ Reformed Nampa, ID – Pacific Northwest)
- Mitchell, ON (Bethel URC, Woodstock – SW Ontario)
- Armstrong, BC (Immanuel Covenant Reformed, Abbotsford, BC – Western Canada)
- Saskatoon, SK (Parkland URC, Ponoka, AB – Western Canada)
- Sioux Falls, SD (Christ Reformed Church, Sioux Falls – Central US)

By God's grace, the following four church plants have organized:

- East Stroudsburg, PA (Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church, NJ – Eastern US)
- Jersey City, NJ (Messiah's Reformed Fellowship, New York – Eastern US)
- Saskatoon, SK (Parkland URC, Ponoka, AB – Western Canada)
- Gig Harbor, WA (Lynden URC, Lynden, WA – Pacific Northwest)

In his wisdom, God has closed the following three church plants:

- Chicago Heights, IL (Faith URC, Beecher IL – Central US)
- Birmingham, AL (Christ Reformed Church, Washington, DC – Eastern US)
- Norfolk, VA (Covenant URC, Pantego, NC – Eastern US)

There are seventeen United Reformed church plants that have not yet organized:

- Rev. Collin Welch in Madison, IN
(Westside Reformed Church, Cincinnati, OH – Eastern US)
- Rev. Brandon Burks in northern Kentucky
(Westside Reformed Church, Cincinnati, OH – Eastern US)
- Rev. Austin Reifel in Indianapolis, IN
(Zeltenreich URC, New Holland PA – Eastern US)
- Rev. Ben Davenport in Sioux Falls, SD
(Christ Reformed Church, Sioux Falls – Central US)
- Rev. Lee Irons in Santa Clarita, CA
(First URC, Chino, CA – Southwest US)
- Rev. Yi Wang in Anaheim, CA
(Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA – Southwest US)
- Rev. Adam Kaloostian in Ventura, CA
(Pasadena URC, CA – Southwest U.S.)
- Rev. Tony Zekveld in Brampton, ON

- (Covenant Christian Church, Wyoming – SW Ontario)
- Rev. Mitchell Persaud in Scarborough, ON
(Cornerstone URC, London – SW Ontario)
- Rev. Richard Bultje in Niagara Falls, ON
(Wellandport URC – Ontario-East)
- Rev. Nollie Malabuyo in Montague, CA
(Trinity URC, Visalia, CA – Pacific Northwest)
- Rev. Chris Coleman in Vancouver, WA
(Grace URC, OR – Pacific Northwest)
- Armstrong, BC
(Immanuel Covenant Reformed, Abbotsford, BC – Western Canada)
- Ripon, CA
(Trinity URC, Walnut Creek, CA – Pacific Northwest)
- Meridian, ID
(Christ’s Church Nampa, Nampa, ID – Pacific Northwest)
- Mitchell, ON
(Bethel URC, Woodstock – SW Ontario)
- Colorado Springs, CO
(Escondido URC, CA – Southwest US)

The following twelve men are engaged in other home mission works:

- Rev. Daniel Cortez, U.S. Air Force Reserves Chaplain
(Christ URC, Santee, CA – Southwest US)
- Revs. Taylor Kern and Daniel Ventura with bilingual ministry in Ontario, CA
(Ontario URC, CA – Southwest US)
- Rev. Ernie Langendoen with outreach to migrant workers
Sheffield, ON (Immanuel URC, Jordan – SW Ontario)
- Rev. Brian Zegers with Word of Life outreach to Muslims
Ajax, ON (Salem URC, Bowmanville – Ontario-East)
- Rev. Thabet Megaly with Pathway of Peace outreach to Muslims
St. Catharines, ON (Trinity URC, St.Catharines – Ontario-East)
- Rev. Mitch Ramkissoon with Redemption Prison Ministries
Alberta, Canada (Redeemer URC, Lacombe AB – Western Canada)
- Rev. Paul Murphy, pastor of evangelism in New York
(Messiah’s Reformed Fellowship, NY – Eastern US)
- Revs. Nathan Brummel and Ken Anema with Divine Hope Seminary
Correctional Institutions in IL & IN (Immanuel URC, DeMotte IN – Central US)
- Rev. Andrew Spriensma, U.S. Army Chaplain at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii
(Faith URC, Beecher, IL – Central US)
- Rev. Elijah Anderson with Latino Mission of northwest Iowa
(Cornerstone URC, Sanborn, IA – Central US)

With firm confidence in our great God, who will save a countless multitude of sinners from every tribe and nation, we anticipate that home missions in the URCNA is only going to grow more faithful and fruitful in the years to come. Each classis now has a functioning Classical Committee on Home Missions (they do not all go by that precise name), and Classis Eastern US

continues to employ a part-time Church Planting Coordinator. In response to direction and encouragement from Synod Niagara 2022, these classical committees are striving to grow more proactive in the work of evangelism and church planting throughout North America. Moreover, some of our churches/classes are developing new ways of reaching the lost – Messiah's Reformed Fellowship of NY has installed a man as Pastor of Evangelism (Rev. Paul Murphy); and Cornerstone URC of Sanborn, IA, has hired a full-time Latino Missions Coordinator (Elijah Anderson) who will be sent to make disciples among the exploding Latino population of northwest Iowa.

(3.1) Idea for Further Development in Each Classis

The SCHM would like to pique interest throughout the federation regarding the establishment of a new position at the classis level – a Classical Home Missionary (CHM). These would be pastors with proven skill in evangelism, disciple-making and church planting; a man in such a position would serve his classis by (1) investigating new fields; (2) gathering and building core groups; (3) training churches of a classis in evangelism and outreach; and (4) helping core groups and new plants to identify church planters, and to progress toward organization. A CHM would be a huge help to each classical committee on home missions; such a man could also be a bulwark to struggling church planters (the SCHM anticipates a day when church planters actually need to work in pairs). It is our belief that Classical Home Missionaries might be necessary to enable classes to be truly proactive in church planting. We very much support discussions that have already begun on the classical level regarding this position, and yet understand that much more discussion is needed – particularly in connection with the questions of funding (for example, a man could be hired by a classis to labor part-time as CHM, while also serving as part-time pastor for a church in classis).

(3.2) Recommendation for a New Position – Home Missions Clerk

The SCHM also strongly supports the concept of our federation's hiring a church officer (or former officer) to serve part-time as a Home Missions Clerk. This man's qualifications would include the gift of administration, a zeal for home missions, and evident skills in technology and communications. Our Home Missions Clerk would help the SCHM to develop various initiatives that would benefit the churches of the federation in coordinating efforts related to home missions such as – (1) tracking seminarians and internships; (2) tracking funding to URCNA mission causes; (3) generating calls to prayer and special service; and (4) informing the churches of our various ministries. In addition, by tasking the man directly to do this work on behalf of the SCHM we would relieve our Foreign Missions Coordinator from various duties that he is still performing on behalf of the SCHM.

(3.3) A Challenge to Our Churches for Intensified Engagement

As we consider the state of church planting in the URCNA we wonder how we can be more proactive not only at the synodical and classical levels but also at the local level. Has your church ever researched an area that needs a Reformed church, and prayerfully thought about planting a church there? What would it take? Are there presently five or more families in your church who drive a long distance to church and who might be open to beginning a church plant

in their area? We encourage each church of our federation to consider how to be more proactive in church planting, and prayerfully to strive towards this end. A place to begin would be for each council to read and discuss the official church planting manual of the URCNA (*How to Plant a Reformed Church*) and to begin praying for the opportunity to plant a church.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Jody Lucero (SCHM clerk) and any other members of the Synodical Committee on Home Missions who are present during the discussion of this report.
2. That Synod 2024 receive the SCHM report.
3. That Synod adopt the church planting manual, “How to Plant a Reformed Church, second edition 2024” as helpful guidelines to assist consistories, missionaries and church planters in the day-to-day activity of home missions.

Grounds:

- a. The Church planting manual has been a helpful tool since it was first adopted and approved for publication by Synod Visalia 2014, Article 66.3.1.
 - b. Changes in our church order and in our federation’s missions infrastructure, along with the committee's developing greater focus upon a more proactive approach in church planting, render this updated edition not only helpful but also necessary.
 - c. Building on the usefulness of the original manual, the SCHM wishes this material to continue to serve consistories, church planters and others in their desire to see more United Reformed churches planted.
 - d. We should continue to assist each other as federated churches in accordance with the Scriptures, our confessions, and our church order (CO Art. 47).
 - e. Our churches and church planters will continue to benefit from the collective wisdom that is distilled in the manual’s unified plan for church planting.
 - f. The manual will continue to provide interested parties outside our federation with clarity regarding our vision, goals and methods in church planting.
4. That Synod authorize the SCHM to publish the new edition of the manual in electronic format for free distribution.

Grounds:

- a. This will continue to allow for this helpful material to remain readily available to all interested parties through our website (urcna.org) where the first edition is currently available for free download.
 - b. This is consistent with how the material was originally made available by the approval of Synod Visalia 2014, Article 66.4.
5. That Synod authorize the SCHM to have Reformed Fellowship Inc. format and print 300 copies of the new edition of the manual at a cost of \$2,500 US, which amount will not be recovered through sales revenue.

Grounds:

- a. Having the new edition of the manual available in print form will benefit those individuals and groups wanting and/or needing permanent printed material.
 - b. The cost of this limited printing is reasonable, and will serve the interests of church planting in the federation.
6. That Synod adopt the new position of a Home Missions Clerk.

Grounds:

- a. The committee, the churches, and the cause of home missions among us would be well served by having a gifted, organized brother to aid in the administrative work of this committee.
 - b. Formerly, the federation's Missions Coordinator handled most of the ongoing administrative work (communications and publications) for foreign and domestic missions. Synod Niagara 2022 established the position of a Foreign Missions Coordinator, but nobody serves in an equivalent role in Home Missions. This has placed a considerable administrative burden on the Synodical Committee on Home Missions. That burden would be relieved by our having a Home Missions Clerk.
 - c. Since the last synod, Rev. Richard Bout, the Foreign Missions Coordinator, has continued to serve in certain administrative ways for the SCHM. It would be appropriate to relieve him of this burden so that he could remain focused to the cause of foreign missions.
 - d. A Home Missions Clerk who facilitates the sharing of information and ideas more broadly, consistently and professionally would stimulate growth, cohesion and harmony throughout the federation.
7. That Synod urge the churches to give prayerful consideration to the development of Classical Home Missionaries, and submit feedback to the SCHM regarding the position.

Grounds:

- a. Praying about, and working at, this challenge will allow the churches to gain wisdom as to whether and how the development of Classical Home Missionaries can serve the cause of home missions in our respective classical regions.
 - b. The churches' feedback to the SCHM will aid the committee as it seeks wisdom for the best way to encourage development at the classical level.
8. That Synod maintain the SCHM budget for the following years at \$13,000 US per annum.

Humbly submitted in the service of Christ and His Kingdom,
Rev. Jared Beaird (Pacific Northwest)
Rev. John Bouwers, chairman (Ontario-East)
Rev. Brian Cochran (Western Canada)
Rev. Brian Lee (Eastern U.S)

Rev. Jody Lucero, clerk (Central U.S.)
Rev. Tom Morrison (Southwest U.S.)
Elder Paul Wagenmaker (Michigan)
Rev. Steve Williamson (Southwest Ontario)

Note: *How to Plant a Reformed Church* (second edition, 2024) is appended to this report of the Synodical Committee on Home Missions. The reader is reminded that the introduction through chapter four have been revised; chapter five and all appendices are untouched.

How to Plant a Reformed Church

The Church Planting Manual of the United Reformed Churches in North America

The Synodical Committee on Home Missions

Second Edition
2024

Contents

Preface to the Second Edition	
Introduction.....	X
1. Phase I: Evaluating a Mission Field	X
2. Phase II: Growing a Core Group	X
3. Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant.....	X
4. Phase IV: Organizing as a Church.....	X
5. Advice for Church Planters	X

AppendicesX

Appendix 1: What Is Church Membership and Why Is It Necessary?.....x

Appendix 2: Why Do We Need Creeds and Confessions?.....x

Appendix 3: Biblical Principles of Tithing and Givingx

Appendix 4: What Is Reformed Worship?x

Appendix 5: What about Infant Baptism?.....x

GlossaryX

Recommended Resources.....X

Preface to the Second Edition

It has been nine years since the publication of the first edition of this church planting manual in 2015. That edition was the work of the Missions Committee of the United Reformed Churches in North America. Synod Niagara 2022 brought about a number of changes to the work of missions in the URCNA. Most significantly, the Missions Committee of the URCNA was replaced with two distinct committees: a Synodical Committee on Home Missions (SCHM) and a Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions (SCFM). Synod also encouraged each classis in the federation to establish its own classical committee on home missions (CCHM).

In 2023, the SCHM revised the first edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* to bring it up-to-date with changes and new terminology introduced at Synod Niagara 2022. The SCHM has published that revised manual electronically at www.urchna.org and at www.URCNAmissions.org. This revision contained no substantive changes but only minor revisions and corrections, as well as slightly improved formatting.

The SCHM submitted this second edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* to Synod Escondido 2024. Building upon the revisions of 2022, the SCHM has also introduced more substantive changes to our church planting manual. Most of these changes reflect a more proactive approach to church planting, as opposed to a more responsive approach that has sometimes characterized our efforts in the past. The SCHM believes the work of missions is an essential function of a healthy church, and each and every church should be seeking opportunities to carry out the Great Commission in its particular context. We also believe the new infrastructure that integrates classical committees on home mission with the SCHM affords every church more opportunities to play an active role in the cooperative work of church planting, whether or not they choose to

oversee their own church plant. In addition to encouraging a more proactive approach to church planting, this edition clarifies the four phases and makes general improvements throughout.

It is our committee's hope and prayer that our federation will continue to grow in wisdom and maturity in its home missions activities, and thus it is our desire occasionally to augment and revise this handbook, as the Lord provides opportunity to do so. While we do not anticipate substantive revisions at every synod, we believe that once or twice every decade a new edition of the church planting manual may be presented to the churches for their approval. We invite all our churches and church planters to assist us in this effort, and welcome your input for any suggested changes or revisions.

Introduction

This manual is a suggested strategy for church planting in the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). The original Missions Committee of the URCNA wrote this manual in partial fulfillment of their mandate to develop helpful guidelines for the assistance of consistories and church planters in the work of missions. It is not intended to say everything that needs to be said on the vast subject of church planting. Instead, it provides consistories, church planters, and core groups with a plan for and advice on establishing a congregation in the URCNA.

At the time of the manual's first publication, churches throughout the federation were quite reactive in the work of church planting — it often happened that a consistory would look to engage in church planting in response to some group or individual within or outside of the congregation that desired to start a plant. While our churches need to remain properly responsive to such interest, the Synodical Committee on Home Missions desires to see the federation develop a far more proactive culture of evangelism and church planting for the increase of the Kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus commanded his church to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20) by proclaiming the gospel (Luke 24:46-49). Following the lead of the apostles, consistories need to commit to ongoing prayer for the local church's participation in God's mission to the world (Acts 13:1-3; 1 Tim. 2:1-7). Consistories should take initiative in church planting by identifying fields where people are in need of a sound gospel witness, and by partnering with other churches of classis to reach those people.

Why Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

All churches are obligated to pursue the fulfillment of the Lord's Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). The book of Acts reveals how this is fulfilled through the planting of churches and the ordinary means of grace. After receiving the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), the apostles preached the gospel (2:14-36), baptized believers with their children (2:37-41), and began meeting regularly with those who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). Thus, the first new covenant church was established. This same pattern unfolds throughout the entire book of Acts as the apostles went

throughout the world preaching Christ, baptizing believers and their households, and planting churches with appointed elders to oversee the new disciples (Acts 14:21-23).

The necessity of the local church for the making of disciples can hardly be overemphasized. This is our Lord's chosen means for gathering his redeemed people, feeding them with his Word, receiving their worship, nurturing their faith, and binding them together as a community rooted and established in love (Rom. 12; Eph. 4; Phil. 1:27-2:11). The local church is a manifestation of the *people* who belong to Christ; it is also the *place* where he meets them through the means that he has ordained. By gathering this people in this place, Christ grows his disciples and equips them to bring the gospel to other people in other places. It should be evident that the local church is both the goal of church planting and the means by which it continues.

Because the church must continue to fulfill the Great Commission until the return of our Lord, true churches need to be planted where few or none exist. We must be committed to the task of making disciples not only by the weekly means of grace in our congregations but also by planting new congregations. Our missionary task, as the *Church Order of the URCNA (CO)* says in Article 47, "is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted," which is often "performed beyond the field of an organized church." This vital duty is "to be carried out by ministers of the Word set apart to this labor, who are called, supported and supervised by their consistories." Since we have agreed that "the churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries," each of our congregations should prioritize church planting in the URCNA over all other mission-related endeavors.

Who Should Plant Reformed Churches?

Individuals do not plant churches. Churches plant churches. The biblical and Reformed method of church planting requires more than one gifted person launching out on his own to start a new work. It requires a large team of people gifted by the Holy Spirit and operating in different capacities. At a minimum, a church plant needs a consistory that will provide oversight and financing of the work, the advice of its classis, an ordained minister who will serve as the church planter, and a highly devoted core group of people who are willing and eager to share the ministry through regular fellowship with each other and outreach toward others.

In addition to these parties, a church plant may also benefit from involvement by the missions committee of its classis, by joint venture committees (composed of members from multiple congregations that partner together in the support of a particular mission work), and by the Synodical Committee on Home Missions. It should be stressed, however, that within our federation any church plant is to be under the oversight of one particular consistory which shall seek the advice of classis before sending a minister to the field (*CO* 47). While the overseeing consistory bears the greatest responsibility in the work of church planting, it is not alone in this effort, and should take full advantage of its classis.

When Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

We should plant more churches when God provides us the opportunity to do so. Given the fact that large parts of North America are without sound Reformed churches, the harvest is indeed plentiful and the laborers are few. Truly, we must "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out

laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37-38). But we must also pray that the Lord of the harvest will open doors of opportunity so that these laborers can be sent (Col. 4:2-3).

The book of Acts is replete with examples of how the Lord directed church planting in the apostolic era. Acts 13–14 reveals how Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of missions. The church of Antioch sent them through the regions of Cyprus, Lycia, and Galatia, preaching the gospel. This led to the planting of churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch Pisidia, where Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:21-23). When they returned to their sending church at Antioch in Syria, they “gathered the church together” and “declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27). In our day, the local church must pray that God would direct and enable as he did at Antioch — to be more specific, that he would direct consistories where to send a gospel witness, and that he would enable us to identify and train evangelists who can be sent to make and grow disciples of Christ for the establishment of new churches.

Paul’s “Macedonian Call” in Acts 16:6ff is a different example. At that point in history, the Holy Spirit prevented Paul, Silas, and Timothy from going to Asia and Bithynia, yet called them to go to Macedonia instead. This led to the planting of the church at Philippi, “a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (v.12). In our day, we should not expect God to grant us new revelation as to when and where he would have us plant churches. Nevertheless, he still opens doors of opportunity at particular times, in particular places, and with particular people. When a family or a group of people in an area where no Reformed churches exist contacts a local consistory (or one of the missions committees in the URCNA), and says, “Come over here and help us,” we should eagerly, and yet prayerfully, respond. It may not be possible in every situation to plant a church, but consistories, classes, and missions committees must at least investigate the possibility of planting a church when new opportunities arise and when new fields of gospel ministry become apparent.

Planting a daughter church is an opportunity that is rarely given adequate consideration. Many larger congregations (75 families or more) are to the point of overflowing in their present facilities. Instead of expanding the current church building, they should consider the possibility of expanding the Kingdom by planting a daughter church in another part of town. We tend to like large churches in North America, and favor the look of a full house; but by limiting building occupancy to 80% capacity our congregations will better maintain an evangelistic impulse, and will better communicate to visitors that there is room for them in the church. Indeed, it can hurt to part with beloved members of the local church family. But, following the logic of our Lord who taught that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), we should realize what blessed gain is to be found in giving up a sizable group who are sent to establish a sound gospel witness elsewhere for the making of more disciples.

Where Should We Plant Reformed Churches?

It is prudent to focus our efforts on planting where no Reformed churches currently exist. As our Lord commissioned his apostles to expand their gospel witness from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8), so we must look to expand the gospel ministry to places where there is no Reformed witness. Presently, there are huge geographical areas and many

major cities in the United States and Canada that have no United Reformed congregation — in some cases they are utterly lacking any Reformed or Presbyterian presence.

When opportunities to plant a United Reformed congregation arise, we must find answers for at least two important questions: (1) Why do the interested parties want to plant a Reformed church in this particular place? (2) Are there any confessional Reformed or Presbyterian churches within reasonable driving distance?¹

In some large metropolitan areas, there may be good reason to plant a United Reformed congregation even if some Reformed or Presbyterian congregations already exist. Population centers of over a million may need to be served by a number of congregations serving diverse communities in the downtown area, suburbs, or exurbs. When we engage in this work, it is important that we communicate with any congregations that are affiliated with the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) and work cooperatively with them.

How Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

Church planting can only be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit and the means that God has chosen to bless. The New Testament is clear that Christ uses his gospel to create his church. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). We cannot approach church planting, therefore, in the way a retail corporation approaches the establishment of one of its stores in a new location. Church planting is not dependent upon demographic studies and shrewd business decisions. It is dependent upon the Holy Spirit who uses the Word of God to draw sinners to Christ, to create faith in their hearts, and to make them disciples. We are called to go out with a humble and yet expectant dependency upon the power of God's word and Spirit so that we might be faithful in the task of proclaiming Christ. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:14-15).

Yet we must also be wise and orderly in our efforts. Our dependence upon the Holy Spirit does not mean that we should be haphazard in our approach to church planting. God is not a God of confusion but desires all things in his church to be done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). The way the apostles sought to fulfill the Great Commission was no exception. They were methodical in their approach to making disciples. When Paul preached the gospel in synagogues or in crowds of Gentile unbelievers, his goal was always to establish a congregation with its own elders and deacons so that disciples would be made through Word and sacrament, and Christ would

¹See the helpful discussion on this topic in *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008), p. 21 ff: “One of the most basic questions asked of anyone who is involved in church planting is, ‘Why are you starting a new church?’ Implied is the question: ‘Aren’t there already enough churches here?’ It is neither biblically correct nor wise to answer, ‘Because these folks can’t get along with others in their present congregation,’ or, ‘Because they just don’t like the other churches in town.’ ...There are, however, at least three examples of Biblical justification for starting new churches which can help to clarify and direct our church planting efforts... (1) There is a special opportunity to plant this church in this place at this time... (2) This center of population and influence needs the ministry of the new church we will plant... (3) These fellow believers need our help to carry on what Christ has begun among them.”

be formed in them (Gal. 4:19). It is wise, then, for us to be strategic and orderly in our attempt to plant churches.

To that end, this manual recommends a four-phase plan for church planting, in which each phase provides the opportunity to evaluate God's provision and to deliberate the wisdom of proceeding to the next phase. The following four phases make up the next four chapters of this manual.

1. **Phase I: Evaluating the Mission Field.** In the first phase, a consistory initiates the process by identifying and assessing a potential field, exploring interest, developing a vision, obtaining advice and support from its classis, and consulting with neighboring NAPARC churches regarding the plans to launch a new work.
2. **Phase II: Growing a Core Group.** In the second phase, a core group begins to meet under an overseeing consistory to study the Bible and to pray so that they would grow in love for each other and in gospel partnership.
3. **Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant.** In the third phase, the consistory calls worship services every Lord's Day at the church plant, and continues to supervise its development.
4. **Phase IV: Organizing as a Church.** Once the church plant possesses sufficient size, financial stability, and qualified men for office, it is ready to begin the process of organization. In this fourth and final phase, the church plant organizes as a particular church in the URCNA with its own officers.

It is our prayer that this manual will be of benefit to consistories, councils, classes, missions committees, joint venture committees, church planters, core groups, and every Christian who longs for a Reformed church to be planted in a town where no such church exists. May the Lord of the harvest continue to strengthen us and give us wisdom and courage as we seek to join in his mission by bringing the gospel to all peoples for the making and growing of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1

Phase I: Evaluating a Mission Field

Since the church's missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted, consistories should always be seeking new mission fields in which to fulfill this task. While a general desire to plant churches is praiseworthy, it can be useful for a consistory to be aware of specific avenues by which a church planting opportunity may present itself.

How Does a Consistory Begin the Planting Process?

There are a number of different scenarios which may lead a consistory to initiate the church planting process.

- *Scenario 1: Parachute*
 A consistory or classical committee on home missions (CCHM) identifies a town or city in which there are few or no churches belonging to NAPARC, and decides to drop a planter into the region for the purposes of developing a core group (hence the name, “parachute”). In this approach, the church planter or planters attempt to start a church from scratch. The key element to such an approach is to focus primarily on evangelism and, secondarily, on making contacts with people who may desire a Reformed church. In towns or cities where there are colleges, the planters may decide to link planting efforts with campus outreach. Given the challenging nature of the parachute model, strong support and a long-term commitment from the consistory or classis is essential.
- *Scenario 2: Member Relocation*
 A member family of a United Reformed congregation relocates to an area where there is no church belonging to NAPARC. They contact the nearest consistory and/or CCHM, and ask about the possibility of planting a church in their new hometown. This contact initiates the evaluation process.
- *Scenario 3: Grass-Roots*
 A number of Christians in a particular location discuss the need for a Reformed church in their area. This group of people may already be meeting on a weekly or otherwise regular basis. Similar to the previous scenario, these people contact the nearest consistory and/or a CCHM, and make their desires known. In response to this query, a consistory or missions committee may begin to investigate the circumstances, and determines if planting a church in the area is feasible.
- *Scenario 4: Daughter Church*
 A consistory identifies a sizable number of members in their congregation who live some distance from the church. If this particular location presents opportunities for new growth and evangelism, they may consult with these members to determine if there is adequate interest in, and proper motivation for, starting a church in this location. The initial interest may also arise from the members themselves, in which case they should bring their thoughts to the attention of consistory as soon as possible. The consistory can then investigate this possibility and make inquiries of the congregation. This may include informational meetings open to members and visitors who are interested in being part of the core group. Such a church plant is often called the “daughter” of the overseeing “mother” church. Daughter churches, especially when blessed with spiritually mature members and/or elders and deacons, often have the benefit of organizing more quickly.
- *Scenario 5: Planter-initiated*
 A minister or seminarian within the URCNA, having identified a field that he believes is ripe for mission work, prayerfully begins to pursue the possibility of planting there. He first approaches his consistory or a CCHM and proposes his idea to them. If the consistory or classical committee is convinced that the idea is wise, they begin to investigate the possibility of planting a church. Consistories and CCHMs would do well to connect with

seminary students in their classis and in nearby Reformed seminaries to encourage them to consider planting a United Reformed Church.

How to Evaluate a Potential Mission Field

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, the investigating body, either a consistory or a classical home missions committee, should determine several important matters before moving to Phase II.

1. *How many people and/or families appear interested in being part of this new work?*

In some ways, the urgency of the consistory's investigation will depend upon the number of families and individuals that have informed the consistory of their desire for a church plant. For example, if only one family has contacted the consistory, and made known that they are praying for a Reformed church in their area, the consistory should discuss this information, but may choose to wait before acting further. On the other hand, if five families have approached the consistory, the elders should expedite their response.

2. *Why does this group want to plant a Reformed church?*

If a consistory is approached by a potential core group, they should first seek to determine why this group is interested in planting a United Reformed congregation. The goal of church planting should always be not only to care for the sheep but also to reach a new community with the gospel. It is critical that evangelism and disciple-making be a part of the plant's DNA from the outset. The following are some questions which the consistory should seek to answer early in this process:

- Does this group have genuine concern for the lost as well as a strong desire to reach them with the gospel?
- Is the group dissatisfied with the churches in their area? Why?
- Has this group recently left another church? Why?
- Do other NAPARC churches exist within reasonable driving distance?
- What is the ecclesiastical background of the members of this group, and is there reasonable expectation that they can work well with one another?

3. *Will the demographics of this particular area be an asset or a liability to church planting?*

Demographics alone should never be the driving motivation for planting a church, but a consistory should nevertheless consider demographic factors in their evaluation of a mission field. What is the size and composition of the local population in this area? Is the area growing in population, or in decline? Does the population have a high degree of transience, or are they more stable? How accessible is this city to neighboring communities? All of these factors could make the work of church planting more or less feasible, humanly speaking.

4. *Where would the core group meet for a weekly Bible study in Phase II?*

Local geography is an important and often-overlooked factor in church planting. A consistory should prioritize consideration of the specific location of the church plant as soon as possible, and find a location for the Bible study that supports this ultimate goal. Often, a member of the initial core group is willing to host this study in their home, and there are many benefits to this scenario. However, if the location of this home is not near the ultimate target location for the plant, it may be wise to rent a facility in a more desirable location.

5. *What is the feasibility of overseeing an initial weekly Bible study?*

It is optimal for the teacher of the Bible study to be an ordained United Reformed minister. Where this is not possible, he should be a licensed exhorter, an elder, or a male member of the sending church who is competent to teach, and does so under the direction and oversight of his consistory. While it may be tempting to begin with a local volunteer, there may be serious tradeoffs to this scenario. Consistory should prioritize the quality of this teaching. Whoever the teacher is, the council must determine if he is to be paid a stipend and, if so, the amount.

Furthermore, consistory should seek to have one or two elders present at each meeting. If distance or other circumstances do not permit this level of oversight, the teacher of the study should provide audio recordings and/or regular reports to the consistory which can be evaluated at their monthly meeting. Proper oversight of a study entails a serious commitment from the consistory, and the feasibility of providing oversight should be carefully considered in the evaluation stage.

6. *What is a reasonable estimate of the financial cost of this plant?*

Planting a church ordinarily requires a significant financial commitment. The consistory must call a church planter, that is, an ordained United Reformed minister dedicated to the weighty task of establishing a new congregation. The council must see to it that the church planter's material needs are fully met so he can focus on the work of the kingdom without the hindrance of worldly concerns. There is also the considerable cost of a rented or purchased facility where the church plant can meet for worship on the Lord's Day, along with all the incidentals needed for worship (chairs, Bibles, songbooks, etc.).

The financial cost of a church plant, however, should not immediately deter a consistory in their consideration of planting a church. First, investments made for the kingdom of God are *never* a loss if faithfully done in accordance with God's Word. Second, as a federation of churches that have covenanted with one another, we have formally agreed to help each other in the support of our missionaries. Third, over time a growing portion of the cost will not be borne by the overseeing church but by the new members who join the group. Church planting is not only a spiritual mandate but also a wise investment in the future vitality of our federation.

When counting the cost of planting, we should remember that there is strength in numbers. Article 47 of the *Church Order of the URCNA* expresses the commitment of every church in the URCNA to support our missionaries. A local consistory that requires financial assistance in order to fulfill its missionary mandate should work with their classis and, if necessary, form a joint venture committee to share the burden and ensure funding for the church plant.²

Informational Meeting

Early and regular communication with all interested parties is key to the success of the church plant. Early in the process, the consistory should hold an informational meeting open to anyone interested in participating in the church plant. At this meeting, complete information about our federation should be given to those in attendance who are new to the URCNA. A member of the consistory should explain in detail our history, confessional standards, and principles of worship, as well as the process of how a new United Reformed church comes into existence. If a consistory requires assistance in presenting this information, they may invite a member of their CCHM to attend the meeting.

Involvement of Classis

Wisdom is found in a multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14). Therefore, a consistory should seek the advice of its classis as early as possible in any church-planting effort. Classis can then review the consistory's proposal, offer helpful feedback, connect the consistory with a classical home missions committee, and in some cases begin to assist the mission work financially. CCHMs offer the flexibility of offering consistories advice between regularly scheduled classis meetings.

Changes to our Church Order at Synod Niagara 2022 have made seeking classical advice in church planting a necessity. Since the United Reformed Churches are not independent of one another, the calling and sending of missionaries is to happen only after a consistory has sought the advice of its classis. Article 47 of the *Church Order of the URCNA* (ninth edition, ratified 2023) states,

The church's missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted. When this task is to be performed beyond the field of an organized church, it is to be carried out by ministers of the Word set apart to this labor, who are called, supported, and supervised by their consistories. A local consistory shall seek the advice of classis before sending a foreign or home missionary to a field or removing a foreign or home missionary from a field. The churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries.

Chapter 2

Phase II: Growing a Core Group

² *Church Order of the URCNA*, Article 47, "...The churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries." Joint venture committees are encouraged by the URCNA 2001 report, *Biblical and Confessional View of Missions*.

The purpose of Phase II is to develop a mature core group and prepare it for worship services. The mechanism for this development is ordinarily a weekly Bible study.

The Importance of the Weekly Bible Study

The most important step in gathering, establishing, and developing a mature core group is to hold a weekly Bible study. This meeting helps the group not only to grow in their knowledge of and love for God and His word but also to grow in their knowledge of and love for each other, as they learn together about the URCNA, its beliefs, and its approach to worship. Studies of this sort are usually held on a weeknight and run for several months, but in some cases they may continue for a year or more. Among the wise choices of subjects for the group to study are Paul's letter to the Ephesians (which focuses on the doctrine of the church), his letter to the Romans (which unfolds the beauty of the gospel), and the Three Forms of Unity (which familiarizes the group with the confessional standards of the URCNA).

Whether the weekly Bible study takes place in a private residence, in a church building or in some other public space, the core group should be very intentional about being hospitable people and practicing hospitality. Participants in the group will need to do much studying, learning and planning with each other; but for them to be knit together in genuine love, they must also learn of one another's needs and strengths, pray with and for each other, sacrificially serve each other, and help each other in serving people outside the group. As Christ has welcomed them for the glory of God (Rom. 15:7), so also they should welcome one another, and look for every opportunity to extend a warm welcome to people from outside the group. Hospitality is a key ingredient for the core group to grow into a church plant that functions as a healthy body.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Spiritual Maturity

The teaching of the Bible study should aim to edify believers through instruction in the Christian faith. Some of the indicators by which the consistory can measure the spiritual maturity of the core group are as follows: their growth in knowledge (1 Cor. 1:4-5; Eph. 1:17; Phil. 1:9-10; Col. 1:9-10); their love for the saints (Rom. 12:10-13; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4); their evangelizing others (Col. 4:5-6; 1 Pet. 3:15-16); their willingness to give financially (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9); their possession of potential future leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9); their practice of hospitality (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2); their compassion towards those in need (Luke 10:25-37; Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:10). In time, if it is feasible, the members of the Bible study should be encouraged to worship with the overseeing church in order to grow in their understanding of the URCNA.

The Bible Study Should Foster Numerical Growth

As with spiritual growth, the numerical growth of the church plant is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is God who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Nevertheless, he uses our efforts to that end. For this reason, the consistory and core group should consider the many ways in which they can spread the word about the Bible study and the plans for a future church plant.

1. *Word of Mouth*

Word of mouth is the most effective and time-tested method of growing a Bible study, and it is also the easiest to start immediately. The core group as well as the members of the sending church should do all they can to let their friends and neighbors know about the new work through personal conversation. Indeed, the desire and willingness of the core group participants to invite friends and family is absolutely integral to the health and success of the church plant. It should be pointed out, however, that members of the sending church who live in the geographical area of the Bible study may be encouraged to participate with the core group, but under no circumstances should they be pressured to do so. The numerical growth of the Bible study must be organic in nature, increasing by means of the Holy Spirit's gathering together people who desire to participate.

2. *Internet and Social Media*

Having an attractive, user-friendly and up-to-date website is vital in our day and age. It is important to make a good first impression by means of a website, which is often the first glimpse that many people will get of the church plant. Developing a website that advertises the weekly Bible study and indicates plans for a future church plant is an indispensable means of informing the public and establishing contacts in the targeted area. The website should be linked to the sending church's website. It is also recommended that one or two email contacts be referenced on the website, and that those receiving emails send an appropriate reply in a timely fashion.³

Social media is also an effective means of getting the word out today, and provides the simplest way for a new church plant to tap into existing relational networks throughout the URCNA. Those in the core group can use various social media platforms for easy sharing of information about the church plant with others in the community, including audio and video, or event notices. One can also run paid advertisements on social media that are affordable and can be targeted to particular audiences within a specified driving distance of the church plant. Social media sites and platforms also provide tools that help to measure and improve advertising effectiveness.

3. *Radio Advertisements*

The consistory should consider making use of local Christian radio stations, especially those that air popular programs with Reformed teaching such as *Renewing Your Mind* or *The White Horse Inn*. A thirty- or sixty-second advertisement placed before or after one of these programs can be costly, but in many cases it has proven to be a superb method of reaching people in the targeted area who are interested in Reformed Christianity. Radio stations are often willing to offer reasonable rates to churches, and usually provide professional services in producing the advertisement.

³ The council of the sending church may even consider hiring a professional not only for developing a website but also for improving Search Engine Optimization (SEO) so that the website will rank higher in the Search Engine Results Page (SERP), and thus receive more traffic when people search for a Reformed church in the area.

4. *Fliers in Public Places*

A method less costly than radio advertisements is the placement of fliers in strategic places, such as local Christian bookstores, libraries, community centers, and coffee shops. Many of these establishments are happy to grant permission to churches in the community for the posting of a flier. This is an easy way to get information about the work to the public. And with the advancement and accessibility of publishing software, creating attractive leaflets and fliers has become very simple.

5. *Conferences*

A one or two-day conference on Christianity is another way of introducing the church plant to both believers and unbelievers in the community. The consistory might consider bringing gifted speakers from Reformed seminaries or from the pool of ministers within its classis to teach on a particular subject of interest. At the conference, plenty of information about the church plant and its regular meetings should be available in print for distribution to the attendees. Moreover, follow-up contact should be made with every attendee, which is possible through registration rosters.

There are many ways to get the word out about a church plant today. It is important to cast a wide net and to try all kinds of methods, remembering that what works in one field might not work in another. Be willing to experiment, and don't put all your eggs in one basket. You cannot know what will work best in your area unless you try the various means of advertising.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Financial Commitment

Before the consistory launches a public worship service (Phase III), they should determine the amount of financial support required to call and pay a minister (*CO Arts. 2 and 47*) and whether or not sufficient funds exist. The consistory should clearly communicate budgetary needs to the study participants and inquire of the core group concerning their commitment to support a minister and to work toward financial self-sufficiency. They should also notify their classis of any need they might have for assistance.

No two church plants are the same. Some core groups will have a depth of financial resources that enables them to shoulder a large portion of the burden. Others will begin with fewer resources and therefore require greater support from the overseeing church and classis. Either way, the consistory should communicate the needs to the group and encourage them to join them in prayer for the Lord's provision.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Leadership

The consistory should also form a steering committee that operates under its direct oversight in the development of the church plant, and in assisting the teacher or church planter as needed. The steering committee should report to the consistory at its monthly meeting in order to provide updates on the progress of the work. Members of this committee should consist of the appointed teacher (or the church planter), at least one elder from the consistory, one deacon, and three or four

male members who are regular attendees of the church plant. If the sending church is a good distance from the church plant and its regular attendees are not members of the sending church, it will take extra time to bring the local attendees into church membership and to discern who is qualified to serve on the steering committee. Service on a steering committee can provide lay members of the group the opportunity to grow their leadership skills and demonstrate giftedness for serving in the office of elder or deacon.

If there are insufficient resources to form a steering committee in the core group, the consistory should assign an elder and deacon to serve the church plant and help identify potential leaders.

Identify and Secure a Location for Worship Services

As the core group grows in size and maturity, the consistory should enlist its assistance in seeking to identify the location of an adequate facility for worship services on the Lord's Day. Such places might include a local school, a Seventh Day Adventist or other available church, a synagogue, a community center, a theater or playhouse, or any other vacant building available for rent. Another option is to rent the building of another Christian church and to work out a system of staggered meeting times in the shared space.

This is an important decision in the life of a church plant, and it should be thoroughly and prayerfully discussed and deliberated. Whatever the venue, several things should be considered:

- Is this building adequate for worship services?
- Is this a good location for the targeted area? Is it well-known in the community, visible, and in a highly-trafficked area?
- Is the rent within the sending church's budget for the plant? While frugality is a virtue, the consistory should avoid prioritizing short term savings for an inferior venue. How long will this facility be available, and will it be a source of stability for the group over time? The consistory should avoid moving the location of the church plant too many times.

Call a Church Planter or Secure Pulpit Supply

Before calling public worship service, the consistory must either call a church planter or secure pulpit supply. It is crucial to call a dedicated pastor to serve as a church planter as soon as possible. In most cases the success of a plant greatly depends on a good church planter. While church planting requires the involvement of an entire sending church and its leadership, the church planter serves as the public face and representative of the new work. Recruiting guests and visitors as new members of a core group requires the consistent presence of a church planter who faithfully proclaims the gospel, conducts follow-up meetings, and projects confidence that this fledgling work can be considered a reliable source of Christian nourishment.

If hesitant to call a church planter for fear that the plant may fail, a consistory might prefer to hire a man who can regularly serve as a preacher ("stated supply") in the absence of a full-time pastor. But this reasoning can backfire by drawing out the planting process, leading to weariness and exhaustion among the members of the core group. At the beginning of the planting process, the overseeing consistory should recognize that a dedicated church planter is an integral part of moving to Phase III, and should ensure that adequate commitment to the work and to its financing

are in place when the time comes. Consistory should also remember that, though a plant might fail, no work is a failure where the gospel was proclaimed for the making and growing of Christian disciples.

If sufficient funding for a minister is a concern, an overseeing consistory should seek to secure assistance from other churches within classis or from a classical fund as early as possible. While the calling and oversight of a man are duties belonging to a single consistory, his financial support from the beginning of the process may and often should come from numerous places, especially from the classis to which the overseeing consistory belongs. By adopting this model of broad financial support, we may ensure that church planting is not merely the responsibility of our federation's large and wealthy churches but can be undertaken by any local congregation with the requisite vision and passion for the work.

Since a core group or church plant may dissolve, it is prudent for a church planter's letter of call clearly to articulate the overseeing consistory's plan to provide for the planter should the work not develop into an organized church. For example, the consistory may stipulate a duration of financial support to be provided until a new call is secured, or they may stipulate a planned deployment into a different field of ministry.

What Are the Qualities of a Good Church Planter?

As the consistory considers calling a church planter, they must look for the right man. It is not as simple as looking for a pastor or seminary student who is searching for a call. The difficult labor of church planting is not for everyone. It is a specialized work of ministry that demands certain qualities and strengths. In addition to the characteristics of godliness listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the church planter should possess, at a minimum, the following eight characteristics. While every United Reformed minister should exhibit these characteristics to some degree, they will be of particular import for the man called to church planting.

1. He has a passion for the gospel.

The church planter must have a passion for the gospel and clearly marked by such zeal. He should be a man who is confident that the gospel is the means the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain the church of Jesus Christ. He should be so gripped by the gospel that he loves to proclaim it every week, firmly believing it to be the message that most glorifies God. He should have a deep conviction that the message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is not only for the conversion of the sinner but also for the sanctification of the saint. He should be convinced that the gospel is the means for motivating people to do good works and live godly lives. He should be committed to preaching that makes the person and work of Christ central to every sermon.

2. He is firmly committed to the Three Forms of Unity.

The church planter must be a man who loves the Three Forms of Unity and is passionate about teaching them to others. The confessions form the theological basis upon which the church plant is established, and help protect the unity of its members. Because the URCNA

are confessional churches, the church planter must be willing and able to help the core group understand why we believe and confess them.

3. *He has a passion for church planting.*

The church planter must be a man who is not put off by “the day of small things.” He must have a missionary mindset and enjoy the challenge of laboring for the establishment of a new church. He should be a man who understands deeply that church planting is spiritual work from beginning to end (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

4. *He has strong leadership skills.*

The ordinary challenges of an established church are usually intensified in a church plant. The church plant is small, fragile, and underdeveloped, and therefore it requires a strong leader.⁴ The church planter must be a good communicator, and able to work with a wide variety of people. He must be a networker who develops new relationships. He should be able to handle stress and disappointment. He should also exhibit a firm grasp of and devotion to biblical ecclesiology and church polity. Given his responsibility to guide and nurture this new work, he should be well-versed in the doctrine of the church and in the *Church Order of the URCNA* .

5. *He has a vigorous work ethic.*

Although the church planter should receive proper oversight and plenty of help from his consistory and sending church, he will inevitably serve in many different roles. The church plant does not yet have the luxury of its own local elders, deacons, committees, or secretary. Church planting inevitably requires a lot of hours and thought. It is imperative, then, that the church planter be an energetic, self-motivated man who is able to manage his time well. He must have the patience and endurance to labor like a soldier, athlete, and hard-working farmer (2 Tim. 2:1-6), while properly prioritizing time for his family and for his own rest and refreshment.

6. *He has exceptional gifts for preaching and teaching.*

In most cases the church plant will not survive if the preaching is poor. Few people will be willing to commit to a struggling new mission work if the preaching is weak. While it is the Holy Spirit who makes the preaching of the Word effectual, he also equips men with certain gifts, and does not equip them equally. The consistory must be honest and loving in their evaluation of possible candidates for the work. They should find a man who is, among other things, a strong and gifted preacher. But he must also be a gifted teacher, capable of making complicated doctrines clear and easy to grasp. He must be able to answer with patience and skill the many theological questions that people raise. He must be able to help the core group understand why we believe and confess the Word of God as summarized in the Three Form of Unity, why we regulate worship according to Scripture, and why we follow Reformed principles of piety and practice. It often proves to be

⁴ For some good books on leadership, see “Recommended Resources” at the end of this manual.

particularly helpful if the church planter has some background in or exposure to non-Reformed churches and is able to sympathize with those coming to understand Reformed theology for the first time.

7. *He has a genuine love for people and a servant's heart.*

The church planter must genuinely love people and serve them in a manner which displays that love. A church plant is not well served by a planter who is unable or unwilling to invest time and energy into the people. A consistory should ask the following questions and observe the candidate to see if they are true: Does he initiate conversations and enjoy speaking with people? Does he remember their names and life circumstances? Does he spend time with his congregants? Does he have empathy and take into account the perspectives of his audience? Does he interact well with the youth and the elderly? Does he welcome, appreciate and sympathize with people from various cultural backgrounds? Does he encourage others with his words? Does he serve those in need?

8. *He must be a man of prayer.*

Last in our list, but certainly not least in importance, is prayer. Is this man notably committed to the practice of “continuing in prayer” (*CO* Art. 2)? Does he understand that church planting is spiritual work from beginning to end, and thus requires him to labor in prayer? Does he share the apostle Paul’s passion to pray for mission works and the spread of the gospel (Rom. 1:10; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 1:16-21; 3:14-19; 6:18-20; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-10; 4:2-4; 1 Thess. 5:17; 2 Thess. 3:1-2)? Understanding the indispensability of prayer, a church planter will not expect God to bless his labors apart from continually asking God for the grace of the Holy Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116; Luke 11:5-13).

Sending Two Church Planters

Throughout the modern history of the Reformed church, the expectation in most congregations has been that one gospel minister, aided by a lay team of elders and deacons, will suffice for the work. The corresponding expectation has been that the task of church planting can also be managed by one pastor, even though the man often labors without the aid of a local team of elders and deacons. Given the difficulty of the church-planting task and all that is required of the church planter, it would be wise for consistories to consider the wisdom of sending a team of two men to do the work. While the practice is not prescribed in the Bible, it is the clear pattern that we find in the apostolic church (Matt. 21:1, Mark 6:7, Luke 10:1, Acts 13:1-3, Acts 15:39-41).

Many ecclesiastical bodies will naturally deem the sending of two men as cost prohibitive. But before reaching that conclusion, they should consider not only the liabilities of sending one man (unaccountability, egocentrism, loneliness, burnout) but also the benefits of sending two. The two men may have complementary giftedness that is well-suited for an effective division of labor; they may regularly encourage one another, pray with and for each other, hold each other accountable and challenge one another; their teamwork would render each man less vulnerable to attack by seen and unseen adversaries. Many other things would need to be considered in assessing the

feasibility and desirability of sending two church planters, but in some cases the benefits of the practice may outweigh the cost.

Chapter 3

Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant

In Phase III the church plant begins to hold public worship services, and continues to grow spiritually and numerically under the oversight of its consistory until it is ready to organize as a congregation within the URCNA.

Call Worship Services

Once the consistory has secured a location for Sunday worship services, called a church planter or acquired pulpit supply, and is convinced that the core group possesses adequate spiritual maturity and the numerical stability that are essential to the healthy operation of the ministry, they are ready to call worship services on the Lord's Day.

The consistory must decide how many worship services it will initially convene on the Lord's Day. The *Church Order of the URCNA* mandates that "the consistory shall call the congregation together for corporate worship twice on each Lord's Day" (Art. 37), and many consistories will determine that it is best to begin with such a schedule from the start.

However, the Church Order does not prohibit a consistory from calling only one service for a church plant. In some cases, it is necessary for the plant to have only one worship service due to building and scheduling limitations. In other cases, it may be wise because it allows the plant to maintain a consistent focus on hospitality and outreach while easing into its more public life. When the sending church is geographically close enough to the participants of the plant, the overseeing consistory may wish to consider calling only one service for the church plant so that participants can attend a service of the sending church each Lord's Day; this will give them opportunity to witness and participate in the operation of a mature Reformed church, and to become more familiar with the overseeing consistory.

The consistory must also approve the liturgy of the worship services. It is not necessary that the liturgy of the church plant be identical to the liturgy of the sending church. Provided that the liturgy is in accordance with the regulative principle of worship and within the bounds of the Church Order, there is room for some variance. The church planter, perhaps after consulting with the steering committee, should bring to his consistory the liturgy he would like to use, and ask for their advice and permission. The consistory should keep in mind the circumstances of the church plant and the desires of the steering committee.

Consistorial Presence

It is the consistory that calls and regulates worship services (*CO Arts. 37-38*). It follows that a consistory cannot exercise proper oversight of its church plant unless it regularly observes the plant's worship services. Therefore, an overseeing consistory should make sure that at least one elder either attends each worship service of the plant or views the service through a video feed.

This may be accomplished in a number of ways. One option is for the consistory to create a schedule in which the elders rotate in attending services of the church plant. This has the advantage of allowing all of the elders on the consistory the opportunity to participate more intimately in the oversight and shepherding of the church plant. This scenario may only be realistic, however, if the church plant is a reasonable driving distance from the sending church. Another option is to assign one or two elders of the consistory to the church plant who are always present at its worship services. These elders would become familiar with the people and trusted by them, which would enable more effective shepherding. This scenario may work particularly well when an elder who desires to be a permanent part of the new congregation lives close to it. Of course, there are instances when the consistory as a whole is too far from the church plant to practice oversight through regular physical presence. In such cases the consistory should arrange to have at least one elder viewing live or recorded video of worship services.

When possible, the overseeing consistory should encourage other members of the sending church to visit the plant. This practice will be a great encouragement to church plant participants, not only aiding their singing but also strengthening their fellowship. It also benefits the sending church, whose members get to witness what the Lord is doing to advance his Kingdom through their church planting efforts.

Offerings

Offerings should be collected from the very first worship service, providing the core group with the opportunity to participate joyfully in biblical giving. The council of the sending church should determine from the beginning how the offerings will be handled at the church plant. A transparent and consistent procedure should be followed for collecting and counting the money.

The council must also decide how the collected funds will be processed. Should the money received from the offerings at the church plant be placed in an account separate from the sending church's general fund? Would it be better to put that money toward the sending church's general fund which includes a budgeted line item for the support of the church plant? Will the money from the offerings be transported immediately to the sending church each Lord's Day or deposited at a nearby bank? The council should decide what is best for their church and church plant.

For this reason, it may be wise to have a deacon present at the church plant during worship services. This deacon can be made responsible for collecting and processing the offerings received at the plant. The deacons should also train selected men from the core group (perhaps those on the steering committee) on their procedure for collecting and counting. If no deacon from the sending church can be present for the plant's worship services, trustworthy men belonging to the plant must be selected to handle the collecting and processing of offerings.

Membership in the Church Plant

Because the church plant is not yet an organized congregation within the URCNA, there is no official membership in the church plant itself. When we speak of membership in the church plant, we are referring to those who attend the church plant but have membership in the sending church. Such membership creates a covenantal relationship between the consistory and the members of the church plant. It is necessary for the consistory to shepherd and govern these members, as well as exercise discipline when necessary. Without this membership, the consistory has no official authority over or pastoral obligation to those participating in the church plant. The consistory should realize that they have just as much responsibility for their members at the church plant as they do with respect to their members in the local congregation of the sending church.

As attendance increases at the church plant, it is likely that many of the gathered group will come from a variety of ecclesiastical backgrounds. Some will be completely new to the concept of church membership. Brought up in the radical individualism common to North American Christianity, some may even find the idea of formal membership in an established church to be antiquated, unnecessary, and legalistic. The church planter and consistory must exercise great care for these sheep and patiently help them come to a biblical understanding of belonging to Christ's church (see Appendix 1).

The church planter, then, bears great responsibility in educating people about church membership and proper oversight. It is critical that he and the consistory make clear that the church plant is under the spiritual oversight of the body of elders at the sending church. This is important for helping those in attendance to avoid the mistake of thinking that the church plant is an independent work or the sole endeavor of the church planter. To that end, the church planter or an elder might consider practices such as stating before every worship service, "Welcome to ___ Reformed Church. We are a church plant and mission work of . Reformed Church." Similar verbiage should be printed in the bulletin and posted on the church plant's website. Another helpful custom is for the visiting elder to accompany the church planter to the pulpit just before the worship service begins, and then for the two men to shake hands in order to demonstrate fellowship in an official manner. Such practices are not trivial, for they help communicate to those in attendance that biblical oversight is in place, and membership is with the sending church.

It is also imperative that the church planter ensures that those desiring membership fully understand the binding nature of their membership vows before they take them. Ideally, this instruction will occur in a new members' class conducted by the church planter or the pastor at the sending church, and will be reiterated by the elders during the membership interview. It should be explained that, while bylaws vary from church to church, there are only seven ways membership can be terminated in a United Reformed congregation:

1. by transfer of membership to another Reformed or Presbyterian church within NAPARC with whom the URCNA has some ecclesiastical affiliation;
2. by non-disciplinary dismissal to affiliate with a different Christian church;
3. by death;
4. by excommunication of a professing member (*CO* Article 55);
5. by exclusion of a mature baptized member (*CO* Article 59);
6. by exclusion of a member due to resignation (*CO* Article 56);

7. by erasure of a member due to loss of contact (*CO* Article 64).⁵

The church planter must explain these details carefully to those pursuing membership. This helps new members understand more fully what they are doing when they take vows and join the church.

The church planter should do all he can to encourage the members of the church plant as they submit themselves to the consistory, and await the day when elders will be ordained in their own church. He should be sensitive to the fact that they have taken some risks in committing to the church plant, and are in a somewhat irregular situation. A wise church planter will keep a shepherd's eye on the needs of his parishioners, and stay in close contact with his consistory until the time comes for the plant to organize as a church.

Sacraments

The sacraments are very helpful as instruction to the members of the church plant. The believer's faith in Christ is strengthened by witnessing baptisms and celebrating the Lord's Supper. Moreover, since the sacraments at the church plant are to be administered by the overseeing consistory, the attendees of the church plant are able to see proper oversight taking place during worship.

The consistory must decide how the sacraments will be administered in the church plant. They determine the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, the policy for fencing the Table, and the kinds of elements to be used. It may not be necessary for the consistory to insist that the church plant completely conform to the sending church in these practices, provided everything falls within the bounds of Scripture and the Church Order and has received the permission of the elders. In deciding on its sacramental policies for the church plant, the consistory should seek to do everything in "a manner as is most conducive to the edification of the congregation" (*CO* Art. 46).

Necessary Criteria for Organizing as a Church

Before a church plant can proceed to and organize as an official congregation within the URCNA (Phase IV), there are three main criteria that must be satisfied:

1. *Sufficient Size*

While "sufficient size" is not defined as a particular number of souls, it is fair to say that the church plant should at least be larger than a few families before it organizes. If it organizes prematurely, it runs the risk of failure. For example, if a newly-organized church consists of only three or four families, what will happen to it if one or two of the families move away? Unless the Lord is pleased to add more families to the work, the church will in all likelihood collapse for lack of financial viability. On the other hand, a new church with at least ten committed families is more capable of sustaining unforeseen reduction in their numbers.

Care should be taken by the consistory, church planter, and steering committee not to push too quickly for the organization if the numbers are still very low. Pray that the Lord will

⁵ See *Church Order of the URCNA*, Articles 55-59 and Appendix 8.

provide more families, and wait patiently for him to give the increase. Remember the words of the apostle Paul: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). At the same time, the church plant should continue to reach into its community with a gospel witness.

2. Financial Stability

It is ideal for a church plant to be self-sustaining before it organizes. If the people are to mature as a congregation, they must be committed to the biblical practice of giving, and able to support their pastor, pay the rent or mortgage on their meeting place, and provide for the poor within their congregation apart from assistance from outside sources. The church plant, therefore, must begin working toward financial self-sufficiency as soon as possible.

3. Suitable Men for Office

A church plant cannot organize as a church until the Lord provides qualified men for office. From the beginning, the consistory, core group, church planter, and sending church should commit to praying that God would supply such men. Potential leaders should be identified, encouraged, and nurtured by the church planter and consistory. As noted above, the steering committee is often where some of this development takes place. It provides the church planter and consistory with an excellent opportunity to witness the character and competence of potential officers. In addition to this, the church planter and/or consistory should teach an officer training course that provides solid instruction in biblical leadership, basic theology, the ministry of the church, confessional standards, spiritual care, worship, discipleship, etc.

Once the consistory, along with the church planter and steering committee, is convinced that the church plant possesses sufficient size, financial viability, and suitable men for office, it is ready to proceed to Phase IV.

Chapter 4

Phase IV: Organizing as a Church

The purpose of Phase IV is to transition from church plant to organized church in the URCNA. This process will ordinarily require the completion of the following eight steps:

Step 1: Request Advice from Classis

In accordance with Article 22 of the *Church Order of the URCNA*, the consistory must receive the concurring advice of its classis before proceeding to organize the church plant into a particular congregation. The advice of classis will have already been sought before the sending of a home missionary to the field, and the classis should be kept aware of the spiritual and numerical growth of the church plant throughout its journey to organization. Nevertheless, the consistory will need

to seek the advice of classis when it believes the time has come for organization. If the classis concurs with the consistory's desire to organize the church plant into a United Reformed congregation, the consistory may proceed to the next step.

Step 2: Nominate and Train Men for Office

In accordance with Article 12 of *Church Order of the URCNA*, the council of the sending church must nominate male confessing members of the church plant who meet the biblical requirements for office and indicate their agreement with the Form of Subscription. The council may give members of the church plant opportunity to direct attention to suitable men — an announcement inviting them to do so should be coupled with instruction from the Bible on the spiritual qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon and instruction from the Church Order on the duties of these offices. If the identified men have not been trained for office, such training should take place before they are nominated by the council.

Step 3: Elect Elders and Deacons

The consistory will hold a special congregational meeting for those in the church plant who are members of the sending church. At this meeting, the men nominated for office will stand for election. Electing its own officers is an encouraging and vital step in the maturation of the new congregation.

Step 4: Transfer Memberships to the Newly Organized Church

Those in the church plant who are members of the sending church must request that the consistory transfer their memberships to their newly organized church. This can be done in one act by producing a list with all the members' names, having the members sign the list, and attaching this list to a letter requesting transfer of membership, addressed to the clerk of the overseeing consistory. The church planter and consistory should explain this process to the members who are being transferred so that everyone fully understands what is happening.

Step 5: Hold an Organization Service for the Ordination of Officers

After the new officers have been elected and the overseeing consistory has acted on the transfer of memberships, an Organization service should be held in which Elders and Deacons are ordained. The overseeing consistory should be present at this service during which their oversight officially ends. This is an important opportunity for the new congregation to hear the ordination vows of and charges given to their newly elected leaders. They will also receive a charge as a new congregation and give thanks to God for his faithfulness.

Step 6: Establish Bylaws

The newly-formed consistory must establish bylaws for the newly-organized church as soon as possible, for bylaws stipulate numerous matters of the local ministry that are integral to the life and peace of the church but are not determined by the Church Order (bylaws help the consistory apply many of the principles of the Church Order to its congregation in its particular setting). In

most cases bylaws also serve as necessary documentation for a church that seeks to incorporate with the government (in most states this is not necessary for the church to be recognized as a non-profit organization). The consistory of the sending church should assist the new officers in writing bylaws as needed; but it is ideal for this to have been done before the organization of the new church.

Step 7: Establish Bank Accounts and File as a Non-Profit Organization

The newly-formed council should set up a bank account for the church if one does not yet exist. Churches should consider if they want or need to file as a non-profit organization with the government. In the United States, it is called 501(c)(3) status; in Canada it is called TC3010 registered charity. The consistory of the sending church should assist them in these tasks as needed.

Step 8: Call a Pastor

The newly-formed council has as one of its first tasks the calling of a minister. It is often the case in the URCNA that the man previously called by the overseeing council as the church planter will now be called as the pastor by the newly formed council. This is an important opportunity for the local congregation to confirm the church planter in his local call, and for the council to establish a financial package and its own terms of call (*CO* Art. 10). The sending church should assist in this process as needed. If it is necessary or desirable for any reason to search for a new pastor, the newly-formed council may conduct their search according to *CO* Arts 6-8.

In some sister NAPARC churches, men have developed gifts uniquely suited to developing church plant core groups to the point of organization, at which point they ordinarily move to a new church planting call. One potential advantage of this practice is that it enables the specialized gifts and experience of church planters to be used repeatedly in the church. While this is not currently a widespread practice in our churches, we may wish to consider the wisdom of this practice, and apply it more frequently in our circles.⁶

The Organization Service

The organization service discussed above in Step 5 is an important moment in the life of the church, presenting an ideal opportunity for the new church to celebrate the Lord's gracious provision over the long course of missionary labors. As already indicated, the overseeing consistory should plan to be present, and, of course, the rest of the members of the sending church should be invited to attend the organization service. This is also a wonderful opportunity to invite all of the churches of classis to join in the celebration and bear witness to the missionary calling shared by all our churches. For this reason, this special worship service is not usually called on the Lord's Day, in order to provide an opportunity for representatives from the churches of classis to attend.

Due to the presence of many guests from sister churches, this service is often one of the largest gatherings in the short life of the new congregation, and therefore also presents an excellent

⁶ Regional Home Missionaries in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church typically serve this function. Called by a local presbytery, they shepherd core groups to the point of organization, and assist them in the search and call of a permanent pastor.

opportunity to promote the church to the community and invite fellow believers from other churches to come and bear witness to their ecumenical unity. It represents a date that should be remembered in the life of the church, and celebrated for years to come.

Chapter 5

Advice to Church Planters

The work of church planting is an exciting and joyous endeavor. Those engaged in this work have the special privilege of seeing a new congregation of Jesus Christ take shape in a particular place so that the Kingdom of God expands in this world for the salvation of sinners, for their worship of God, and for their discipleship under the Lord Jesus. A church planter will be continually getting to know new people (some of them new believers), and he will be constantly developing new things in the mission work — all of which adds to the excitement. But it is imperative that he not allow these many blessings to make him unrealistic about the great difficulty, potential dangers and many disappointments that are almost always a part of this work.

Church planters are pastor-teachers who labor in a ministry that has much in common with the work of the average local pastor of an established congregation — praying, studying, teaching, evangelizing, discipling, administrating, worshiping, etc. But he must do all of that very demanding work of the ministry while at the same time working on a host of things that the average pastor of an established church may rarely, if ever, have to consider — e.g. laying the foundation of a new congregation; shaping its infrastructure, policies, worship services, ministries, and congregational life; identifying and training its first set of ordained leaders; and tending constantly to numerous practical and administrative matters (from the janitorial to the technological, and everything in between). His overseeing consistory will guide and help him to some degree, and the Lord will provide him with some helpful servants within the church plant. The vast majority of the work, however, will fall to the church planter, who will quickly find that the difficulty of pastoral ministry is virtually doubled in this calling.

Of course, there are also unique dangers that a church planter must be prepared to face. The small group of believers that gather around his teaching and preaching will be especially vulnerable to attack and corruption. Wolves and hypocrites will come, and their purpose will not be to build up the fledgling body of Christ. The church planter himself may become so consumed with his work that the evil one will have no difficulty in sowing seeds of discord and bitterness in the man's family. Because of the relative smallness and immaturity of the plant itself, in addition to the extreme difficulty of the work, there are real dangers involved in church planting.

Finally, there are usually many disappointments that go with this work. After attending for some time, certain people will just stop coming. Not once, but perhaps numerous times, financial support may dip to an alarming level. Certain efforts will simply fail to materialize. The church planter will never see in the sheep as much fruit as he wants for the praise of his Lord. Moreover,

it is possible that the church plant will only last a couple of years, and then have to close its doors. On the other hand, it may take quite a number of years before the plant can organize, and when it does so, the church planter may have to leave, making way for a new pastor.

Given the great difficulty and disappointment often involved in this work, it is vital that the church planter be a man not only of exceptional gifting and stamina, but also of abiding faith and humility. Each and every day he will humbly need to embrace his calling to be a servant, trusting Almighty God to regenerate sinners, to preserve and sanctify his sheep, and to give increase as he determines. But if the church planter is truly humble, he will also carefully consider advice about church planting from those who have gone before him and who labor with him. The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to share some advice with church planters about the kind of men they will need to be and the sort of work they will need to do in order to be faithful and effective in their calling. Church planters, take heed!⁷

Maintain a Vigorous Commitment to the Mission of the Church

There are few things more detrimental to a church plant, or to the church planter himself, than confusion about the church's mission, or lack of focus in maintaining it. Without maintaining this clarity and commitment throughout the development of the plant, the church planter can very easily lose his way, so that he begins to neglect what is essential, spends time and energy where he should not, and potentially gives a distorted identity to the future congregation, if one is established at all.

As a church planter, you need in the first place to be clear in your own mind as to the mission of the church of Christ. In whatever terms the church plant will verbalize its own particular mission statement, make sure it is not a mission other than, or even supplemental to, the mission that the risen Lord Jesus gave his church! Your mission is to make disciples by the faithful and prayerful use of the divinely appointed means (Matt. 28:18-20). This is the mission that our Lord gave to his church, and it is the mission that must define and drive every church plant from the very beginning. If your goal is merely to lead worship until enough disciples have gathered and committed themselves to the establishment of a self-sustaining congregation, you will likely have a very unhealthy congregation, if one ever forms. Remember that a church plant, like any true church, exists to offer God joyful and biblical worship (1 Pet. 2:4-10). It serves as God's ambassador in calling sinners to be reconciled to him through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21). It builds up these disciples in their Christian faith and in their love for God and each other, until each member of the body attains to that maturity that is in Christ Jesus, its head (Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 1:27-29). The church planter must remain clear about the identity and mission of the church.

But you must see to it that you also maintain a vigorous commitment to that mission of the church in everything you do *and* in everything the church plant does. This mission of making and growing disciples of Christ will be fulfilled by the church plant, and then continue to be fulfilled in an established congregation, only if it is your expressed mission statement,

⁷ Much of the material in this chapter was inspired by "Doing the Work of an Organizing Pastor," chapter 4 of *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008), 49-70.

constantly held before your people, normative for all your labors as church planter, owned by the leaders you seek to train for church office, and evident in everything that happens in the life of the church plant. If your daily work as a church planter does not contribute to this mission, you probably should not be doing it. If you cannot see how your work contributes to this mission, you will probably be executing it poorly.

Because this mission of the church is so important and yet so very difficult to fulfill with faithfulness, it is imperative that you recognize not only your inability to carry it out alone, but also your need for accountability in doing your part. For this very reason, God gave you the elders of the overseeing consistory (Acts 13:1-3), and he will provide you with new elders in the church plant, should it please him to grow and establish one (Acts 14:23). The elders in the sending church must be continually engaged in this work with you — even from a distance. From the beginning, make sure that they share with you a clear commitment to the mission of the church, that they are willing to hold you accountable to that mission, and that they maintain a personal involvement in the discipleship of those who are gathering around your ministry. Finally, do not wait for previously ordained servants to arrive at the church plant, ready to be installed as officers. From the start, you should search for mature men who manifestly love Christ and others. You do not want elders (or deacons) who view themselves primarily as board members. Such officers will only help you execute board meetings! As soon as possible, identify spiritually qualified men who are gifted for serving as church officers, challenge them to aspire to ordained service, and seek to train them for the very personal and spiritual work of elders and deacons. But begin early to enlist them in helping you maintain the mission of the church plant. Having a plurality of local leaders is essential to an established congregation, but it is also a great benefit to the hard work of planting a church in preparation for the day of its organization.

Devote Yourself Daily to Growth as a Man of God

Making disciples and growing them up to maturity is a task that will elude you if you are not personally holding fast to Christ, and seeking continually to grow more mature in him. Your serving God and others as a church planter will very quickly become stale, potentially false, and dangerous to you and others apart from your daily feeding upon Christ through his Word, resting in who he is and in all he has done, and prayerfully savoring your Triune God. Remember that the first thing every minister of the Word is called to do is pray (Acts 6:4; CO Article 2).

But you must not think of your devotion to God as a useful means to achieving the goal of successful church planting, which is an idolatrous exchange of loving the true God for loving your work. Your fundamental calling is to grow in faith as a disciple of Christ and a child of God. It is in Christ alone that you must find your true identity (not in being a church planter). It is in the Lord God that you must find your strength (not in your skill set). It is in the grace and love of the Triune God that you must find your joy (not in the success you will long to achieve).

Men are qualified for this calling as church planters only if they remain above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2). However, your ordination does not somehow guarantee your being or remaining a blameless man of God. “Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). By an active faith in Christ, and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, seek at all times to walk in godliness, and

to have integrity as a man of God who bears a consistently godly character in the entirety of your life. “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22), and “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Rom. 12:17). This is not only about your qualification for office — it is ultimately about the honor of God’s holy name and the well-being of the church plant. Remember, as goes the shepherd, so go the sheep.

One particular area of integrity for which you must strive throughout your ministry is time management. This is essential not only for avoiding burnout from the massive amount of work you will have to do each week but also for maintaining balance in life for your own well-being and for the health of your relationship with others. With the help of your overseeing elders (and, if you have one, your wife), figure out what amount of time is typically needed each week for the following: your work (all duties that directly affect the plant and those who are part of it), your rest (relaxing, reading, exercising, and adequate sleep each night), service (some time devoted each week to serving people in the community who are not part of the plant), and last, but certainly not least, family (who are entitled not only to a good deal of your day off and the vast majority of your vacation time but also to a couple of uninterrupted hours each day). If any of these areas of life are neglected for long, you, your family, and your ministry will suffer. Try to plan out your year, month, week, and each day, in order to manage time according to a balanced, workable schedule. And of course, you must always maintain the humble recognition that God alone controls your time, and he will invariably allow countless interruptions.

Church planters have to be committed to a continual process of learning and growing as disciples of Christ. Make a practice of regularly sitting at the feet of those whose teaching (through print and audio, or in person) will help you grow as a godly man and as a church-planting pastor. Always bear in mind that you are not the first church planter! Between your own federation and a number of other denominations, there is an abundance of resources. Be humble and wise enough to make good use of them. Moreover, your wife (if you have one), your overseeing elders, and a couple of mature men in the church plant should all be enlisted in helping you see where you need to grow and how you interact with others. However, a pastoral mentor who knows you well, and has already done this work of church planting, is truly invaluable. As busy as you will be in the care of your family and your fledgling flock, be careful to keep in contact with a few close colleagues in the ministry, and be humble enough to identify one (preferably your senior in years, maturity, and experience) who will help and counsel you in a way that few others can.

If there is one area of your life that requires special attention, it is your loving service to your own family and fellowship with them. You are the Lord’s under-shepherd in the care of souls in the church plant, but can any of them be as precious to you as the souls of your own wife and children? Make sure not to give the cold leftovers to this precious little flock. Often ask your wife (and arrange for others to ask her) if she feels you are married to her or to the church plant. The demands of your work can lead you to feel that you must sacrifice time with your family in order to give just a little more attention to your work. It will happen on occasion, but you must not let it become the norm. Your service to Christ and his church can never be any better than your loving service to your own family. “If someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:5). Shepherd your family each day by teaching and directing them by God’s truth, by leading them in the joyful worship of God,

and by creating a godly and loving aroma in your household. Realize that your most powerful teaching, among your family especially, will come through your way of life. You must always bear in mind your duty to model before them a consistent faith in God and love for others. Be sure to schedule adequate time with your family, vigorously guard it, and make good use of it by loving and serving them, enjoying your time with them, and lavishing upon them affection, gentleness, and mercy.

Shepherd Your People by Knowing and Serving Each One of the Sheep

There is a special intimacy and affection that you should have with your wife and children, but the pastoral care that you give to them really is of a piece with that care that you are to give each soul in the church plant. You have the unique calling to establish a new congregation of Jesus Christ, which will require you to focus a great deal of your attention on evangelizing, organizing, studying, teaching, and preaching. But remember that you are also the pastor of each soul that the Lord is pleased to gather around your ministry, and with each one of them, you need to strive to be “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” and “like a father with his children” (1 Thess. 2:7, 11).

Your people need to know that you genuinely love them not only by your working hard to give them sound nourishment from the pulpit but also by your declaring to them the whole counsel of God from house to house (Acts 20:20, 27). For that personal teaching to be effective, you have to be a shepherd who knows his sheep, and they have to know that you care deeply for them because of the interest, compassion, and service that you devote to each one. In addition to the friendliness that you show to all attendees on the Lord’s Day, also strive to get to know each one of them by inviting them into your home, and making it your custom to visit them where they live and work. This will take continual and very deliberate planning, scheduling, and execution, but it will be well worth it. You can shepherd the people well only if you work to know each one personally, and demonstrate timely compassion to them when they are in need. With most of them, you will eventually become a trusted friend and counselor to whom they look for guidance, and from whom they more willingly receive correction. Of course, this personal knowledge of, and connection to, each person in the church plant will also greatly increase the effectiveness of your preaching.

Being a loving spiritual parent to each one of those people who attend or become part of the church plant will also require that you make sure that they are enveloped into the life of the church family, that they are loved and served by others, and that they find a way to use the gifts God has given them for the good of others in the church. But in addition to all of these very practical matters, you must be especially devoted to an activity that can seem impractical and rarely yields immediate results — prayer. A critical part of your calling is that you pray for each soul; but for the pastor who would rather spend time with his books than with his people, these prayers will be infrequent, perfunctory, and vacuous. Make time to pray much for each of the people that become part of the plant. And in order that those prayers would be regular, personal and specific, reach out to your people, take a real interest in each one, and pray often with them.

Love Lost Sinners Enough to Serve and Evangelize Them

As a church planter, you are a pastor–teacher and evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Your calling is not only to be God’s ambassador in urging sinners to be reconciled to him through Christ but also to equip the saints to be witnesses for Christ in their own lives (Phil. 2:14-16). In addition to preaching the gospel with regular and explicit exhortations for sinners to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, you must also train your people how to be witnesses for Christ by defending the faith, by commending it to others through loving service, and by sharing the truth with their neighbors in a winsome manner.

However, as important as all your preaching and teaching will be in this connection, you must also make it your common and evident practice to be involved in your community, to reach out to unsaved people, to befriend and serve them, and to share the gospel with them. This way of life should be a model for your people to follow, and an indispensable means of adorning the gospel and spreading it to others because of your love for them, which flows from Christ’s love for you. The church plant that you serve cannot ever adopt the attitude that it exists primarily to be a new church home for believers who could not remain at some other church. Numerical growth will happen in this way to some degree, but your people must know that the church plant, like any congregation, is called by God to go and make new disciples, not to attract old ones. We should expect the Lord Jesus to increase the numbers of the church plant as it practices being a community that lovingly serves and witnesses to lost sinners.

It will be important for you to instruct your people continually about church growth. Concern that a church will grow in numbers can be a sinful preoccupation rooted in greed and competition. On the other hand, concern for numerical growth can and should be rooted in a godly desire to see the Lord glorified through the increase of redeemed worshipers! Teach your flock that its concern and preparation for growth in numbers, and its practice of witnessing to others, are integral to their own growth in Christian maturity and faithfulness to God. If he “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), then his children should share that desire, and demonstrate it through loving service toward neighbors and through courageous and compassionate witnessing to the lost. Model this before your people as a matter of your own faithfulness. And teach them to leave the results to our sovereign God and Savior, who is pleased to bring others into his kingdom through our imperfect love of our neighbors and our feeble witnessing to them.

Strive to Be an Effective Servant of the Word

The church planter is a pastor–teacher, a minister of the Word who says with Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). He knows that he is accursed if he preaches anything other than the one true gospel (Gal. 1:8-9). And while he is under obligation to preach it, he is also very happy and eager to do so, for it is his privilege to proclaim that good news which is the power of God for salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:14-16). Consequently, as a church planter you will have to spend a great deal of your time and energy studying the Scriptures so that you might faithfully communicate the truth to others. But do not imagine that you have fulfilled your calling by adequate study and clear communication of the truth.

To be an effective minister of the Word, you must always take care that God’s Word is actually reaching people and renewing their minds for the transformation of their lives (Rom. 12:1-2).

For an effective ministry, you must strive for your labor in the Word, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to equip the saints, “until we all attain 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” (Eph. 4:12-13). Watch yourself and your teaching, but pay attention to the sheep, and see to it that they are being fed and growing, that the word of the kingdom is bearing fruit in their lives for God’s pleasure (Matt. 13:18-23). Here are a few things that will help you effectively teach the sheep of Christ to believe and walk in the truth.

You are to declare to the saints the whole counsel of God, denying them nothing in his Word that is profitable for walking in faith and repentance (Acts 20:20f, 27). But if God regenerates sinful hearts and brings them to faith through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17), and this faith is then nourished and sustained by that same word (1 Cor. 2:2-5; Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:11-16), it is absolutely critical that you preach Christ and his gospel from all Scripture (Luke 24:27). This task will require that you carefully plan out a preaching and teaching schedule in advance so that you may provide the sheep of God with a balanced diet in the Word. You ought to teach through your favorite doctrines and books of the Bible, but avoid an unhealthy preoccupation with your interests. God’s children will grow up to maturity only if they are fed with the regular and robust preaching of the gospel, and trained under the whole counsel of God.

Most helpful in this connection will be your firm commitment to the practice of being a confessionally Reformed minister of the Word who continually labors to commend our doctrinal standards to the people involved in the church plant. Whether or not you begin with two services on the Lord’s Day, make sure to incorporate the Three Forms of Unity into all of your teaching and preaching — even into the very life of the church plant. It would be foolish to expect all new converts and visitors to take up and read the Three Forms of Unity with adequate understanding, but find helpful ways of commending the confessions to them as well. Provide all the people with their own copies of the confessions, and encourage the use of them in their homes. Indeed, these documents are old, but they are not boring or intellectual. By your wise and winsome use of our doctrinal standards, convince your people that our confessional Reformed identity is not about being traditional or intellectual, but rather about being a true church of Christ that is captive to the all-sufficient Word of God. Make good use of these treasures in all that you do not only to give the church plant a confessional Reformed identity but also to give your people a steady and healthy diet in the whole system of God’s truth.

Finally, make it your ambition every week to prepare a delicious feast in the Word for God’s sheep to enjoy each Lord’s Day. Do not think that they are going to come in droves and stick with you to the end on account of good sermons alone. They will not! But you must prioritize your preparation for and delivery of sermons in such a way that the people will know this is the single most important means of God’s grace for their nourishment and growth. Seek to be a servant of the Word in a very practical way each day of the week, opening up and applying the Scriptures at every opportunity. But guard your time for sermon preparation, study thoroughly, soak the whole process of sermon writing in prayer, and give as much attention to how you will deliver the sermon as you give to studying the sermon text. Christ Jesus is the manna from heaven, but you will have to do more work than Moses in providing God’s people with this true food. Preach the Word, but pray much and study hard to preach it well. Moreover, remember that you are a minister of the Word not only during the sermon but in the way that you lead the

congregation through the whole worship service. Do the work that is needed to craft a service that is rich in the use of Scripture, that is intelligible to the people, and that moves smoothly from beginning to end. Your leading the saints in the worship of God is a crucial aspect of an effective ministry of the Word. Remember, *lex orandi lex credendi* — the law of praying (through the church’s liturgy in public worship) is the law of believing.

Make Sure That All Things Are Done Decently and in Good Order

While Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 14:40 apply most directly to the public worship of God, the church planter will have integrity in his ministry and peace among the people only if he gives constant attention to the many details of administration and communication. In an established congregation these details naturally receive the pastor’s attention to some degree, but in the early phases of church planting you will be required to do almost all of it yourself. This may not be what you consider the most enjoyable aspect of the ministry, but make no mistake — it most definitely is a major part of church planting. The church plant will suffer if you are careless here; but careful attention to detail will make for order and peace, all to the glory of God who “is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33).

Give thought especially to worship services, but also to every other meeting of the people, whether for study, fellowship, planning, outreach, evangelism, or leadership training. With a clear purpose in mind, carefully plan out what should take place at each meeting, so that it might be most productive and honoring to the Lord. But do not neglect your personal decorum. Good content should have good packaging and delivery. Be thoughtful about your mannerisms, your attire, your voice, and even your mood. In every way, you should strive to be a servant who honors the Lord and reflects well upon him. Of course, these things must also be a concern for all those in the church plant who are appointed to greet or serve in a similar capacity.

Communications within the congregation and to those outside of it are also a matter of great importance for a church plant. In addition to the weekly bulletin announcements, church planters will want to develop the use of a website, email, and possibly social media, as well as a number of printed forms of communication (brochures, newsletters, etc.). Be clear in your own mind, and make it clear to your people, what the purpose of each form of communication is and how it is to be used, received, and processed. Do not be haphazard with any of your words that are sent through electronic or printed means, but choose and use them carefully. Also, be sure to give adequate opportunity for the people to communicate with you, with their other leaders, and with each other. The people need to be kept informed, and deserve to know how decisions affect them; but they also need a way to practice healthy communication with others, everyone speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:16).

Another key element in administration is orderliness and soundness in the church plant’s meeting place. Always remember, and look to impress upon others, that the church is not just a place. It is where God’s people gather to serve him. Cleanliness and functionality, safety and comfort, bathroom accessibility and supervision of children, food and drink, tasteful and appropriate décor, sound and lighting, as well as any set-up and clean-up are all important concerns. In many instances, these items will not be all that you would like them to be or even what you need, but be sure to attain an adequate measure of good order in these details. In a

word, virtually everything about the church plant, its being and doing, should communicate as much as possible that you are the church of Jesus Christ, engaged in the worship of the Great King and the discipleship of His royal children.

Introduction to the Appendices

The following appendices are included for the benefit of church planters and new members. Frequently, new members come into a church searching for answers to important questions that many people in our Reformed churches have not necessarily raised. For example, “Why must I become a member?” “What is tithing?” or “What is Reformed worship?” We have included these five appendices to assist the church planter in providing answers to these common questions. We recommend that these appendices be published into separate booklets to distribute to visitors, or that this material be used in an inquirer’s or new members’ class.

Appendix 1

What Is Church Membership and Why Is It Necessary?

“What is the point of church membership? I am already a Christian and have a personal relationship with Jesus. Why do I need to become a member of a church?” Chances are, we asked these very questions when we first encountered a Reformed church. Church membership is a foreign concept to many. Due to the radical individualism common to American Christianity, many today find the idea of formal membership in an established church to be antiquated, unnecessary, and maybe even legalistic.

Church membership also goes against the popular notion in our culture that “organized religion” is inferior to “spirituality.” The former is disparaged as passé at best and hatefully intolerant at worst, while the latter is readily embraced as chic and healthy. Organized religion is viewed as something very particular that manifests itself in narrow doctrines, liturgical customs, and exclusive tradition. Spirituality, on the other hand, is seen as something universal that can express itself in a wide variety of personal faiths and individual practices that generally seek one common goal: self-improvement. Influenced by this mode of thinking, many professing Christians believe they can have membership in the invisible church while opting out of membership in the visible church.

Sadly, things do not appear to be improving. According to some market research gurus, established churches are becoming a thing of the past. Some of the so-called experts project that in the future many Americans will derive all their spiritual input through the internet. If this is true, some may not see the point in being inconvenienced by attending (let alone becoming a

member of) a church when they can get the same spiritual benefits in private. Why then do Reformed churches require membership? What exactly is church membership anyway?

What Is Church Membership?

Church membership is a formal and binding covenantal relationship between a family or individual and Christ Jesus, the Head of the church, through incorporation of this family or individual into the visible body of Christ in this world, namely the church. It begins with the understanding that Christ, who possesses an invisible church composed of all those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 13:8; 20:15; 21:27), established a visible church on earth, that community where the elect of God are normally gathered, protected and preserved (Matt. 28:18-20; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54).

God first instituted the visible church immediately after the fall, when he separated the seed of the woman from the seed of the serpent and established them as a people united by his promise of salvation (Gen. 3:15). He further established his community when he made his covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12, 15, 17). He fulfilled his promises to Abraham

first in the nation Israel and the land of Canaan but then more fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16, 29). Throughout the unfolding drama of redemptive history, from Abraham to Christ, God kept his people as a visible covenant community marked by the covenantal sign and seal of circumcision.

With the completion of Christ's earthly ministry and the inauguration of the new covenant, however, God no longer confined his visible church to one people (national Israel) and one place (the land of Canaan). Having satisfied God's Law by his life, death, and resurrection, Christ commissioned his apostles to preach the gospel, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, and make disciples of all nations. As the book of Acts reveals, the apostles fulfilled this commission by planting churches (Acts 2:42). Beginning in Jerusalem, Christ added daily to his church those who were being saved (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4). The visible covenant community became a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6), made up of people ransomed "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

After the apostles died, the visible church did not cease to exist. The New Testament makes very clear that Christ intended for his visible church to continue until the end of the age. He ordained the office of pastor to feed his flock with the preaching of the gospel so that his sheep will be healthy and grow to maturity (Rom. 10:14-17; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Titus 1:5-9). He has supplied his church with the tangible elements of ordinary water, bread, and wine in the sacraments, which the Holy Spirit uses to nourish our faith (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:17-34; cf. John 6:41-58). He gave the office of elder so that his people will have guardians over their souls and governors who keep order (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). He maintains the purity and peace of his church through the exercise of discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Titus 1:10-14; 3:9-11). He has provided the office of deacon for the care of the poor and needy in the congregation (Acts 6:1-7; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13; 5:3-

15). He pours out gifts upon his church so that each believer will use them for the benefit of others (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:15-16). The New Testament reveals that Christ established His church to be an observable, identifiable society with its own organization and structure, and composed of real flesh and blood members.

Church membership, therefore, is about belonging to this visible community as manifested in a local congregation. The church is not a store frequented by loyal customers. Nor is it a voluntary association of individuals who are loosely united by consumer preferences or cultural practices. Rather, the church is the *people* who belong to Christ, and the *place* where Christ meets them through the means he has ordained.

When a family or an individual pursues formal church membership, they are saying, “We are Christians, and therefore belong to Christ and his body.” They and their children pass through the waters of baptism, acknowledging that they are part of something much larger than their own private, spiritual experience. They recognize that Christ has set them as living stones in his one temple (Eph. 4:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5) and has gathered them as sheep in his one flock (John 10:1-29; Acts 20:28). They take public vows in the holy assembly of God’s people, in which they profess their faith in Christ and their willingness to submit to his Lordship and the government of his church. Likewise, the congregation receives these disciples of Christ, and acknowledges their own obligation to these new members as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Why Is Church Membership Necessary?

“All of this sounds great,” one might say, “but I just want to *attend* this church. Why is it necessary that I become a member?” Some people recognize the visibility of Christ’s church and enjoy attending worship services, but view membership as little more than an unnecessary formality. The Bible, however, gives us at least three reasons why membership in a local congregation is essential.

Spiritual Nurture through the Word

Christ is the Head of his church (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15), the King of his kingdom (Matt. 28:18; Heb. 2:8-9; 1 Cor. 15:25; cf. Ps. 110:1). He was not only crucified and raised from the dead, but also exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus saves but also rules. And the way he rules his citizens is through his Word and Spirit, chiefly through the officers he has appointed at the local congregation. Consider the exhortation the writer to the Hebrews gives at the end of his sermon-letter: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17). This is Christ’s design. As his subjects and possession, we must submit to what *he* has ordained.

This can only be done through church membership. Membership in a local congregation creates a formal relationship between the elders and the congregants. This formal relationship is a covenant that obligates the elders to watch over the souls of those who belong to Christ. It is part of our submission to our Lord. We never mature beyond the nurture of the church. No Christian can sustain himself as a self-feeder. We cannot be our own pastors. Rather, God has commanded

us to submit ourselves to the preaching, teaching, and oversight of those shepherds whom he has placed over us in his love.

It has been the historical practice of Reformed churches to require a public vow to that end. For example, the fourth and final vow of Public Profession of Faith, Form Number 1, in the *Liturgical Forms and Prayers* of the United Reformed Churches in North America asks: “Do you promise to submit to the government of the church, and also, if you should become wayward, either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline?”

According to the command of God, elders are responsible to care for the souls over which they have been appointed (Heb. 13:17). One of the ways that elders care for church members is through family visitation, the historic practice of ministering the word to families in their homes (Acts 20:28). Family visitation is a blessed opportunity for Christ’s servants to bring his word close to the hearts of his children, and for the elders to help bear some of the burdens of the family which are communicated in the personal setting of the home. Surely, elders will do their best to care for occasional or even frequent church attendees. But they are bound to care for those church members who have been entrusted to them. Those who absent themselves from God’s plan for the spiritual nurture of themselves and their family take great risk in doing so.

Spiritual Nurture through Accountability and Discipline

One of the ways in which Christ watches over our souls through the leaders in the local church is by the exercise of church discipline. Church discipline is the practice of applying the Word of God to members of the congregation who are in rebellion (i.e. unrepentant of a particular sin) or involved in some public scandal that affects the health of the church as a whole. The purpose of church discipline is the restoration of wayward disciples, the preservation of the church’s doctrine, the peace and purity of the congregation, the protection of the church’s reputation in the eyes of the unbelieving world, and the honor of God’s holy name.

Christ gave his church the authority to exercise formal church discipline when he said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). Reformed churches have understood these keys to be the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it like this:

Q. 83. What are the keys of the kingdom?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

Q. 84. How does the preaching of the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?

A. According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to each and every believer that, as often as he accepts the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives

his sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God's judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

Q. 85. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ: If anyone, though called a Christian, professes unchristian teachings or lives an unchristian life, if after repeated brotherly counsel, he refuses to abandon his errors and wickedness, and, if after being reported to the church, that is, to its officers, he fails to respond also to their admonition — such a one the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from him, and God himself excludes him from the kingdom of Christ. Such a person, when he promises and demonstrates genuine reform, is received again as a member of Christ and of his church.

Reformed churches confess this because it is what the New Testament teaches. Jesus gave instruction on discipline and public excommunication in Matthew 18.15-20. Paul wrote a whole chapter to the church in Corinth describing how sexual immorality amongst Christians defiles the church, and that the offender, if unrepentant, is to be excommunicated and delivered to Satan (1 Cor. 5). See other examples in 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:14-18; and Titus 1:10-14; 3:10-11. Without church membership, however, the church cannot fully use the keys which Christ has given to her. The elders cannot excommunicate an unrepentant offender who was never in communion with the church in the first place. Church membership, therefore, provides every member of the congregation — including the minister and elders — with accountability. It allows the elders to fulfill their duty of ensuring that purity of doctrine and holiness of life are practiced (Titus 1:9; Heb. 1:17); it permits the deacons to care for the needy within the church (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 5:9); and it makes every member in the congregation responsible for his doctrine and life.

Spiritual Nurture through the Sacraments

Church membership allows a disciple to participate in the sacraments and thereby receive the spiritual benefits which the Holy Spirit provides through them (1 Cor. 10:16). A person who does not join a true congregation of Christ's church, however, does not have this privilege. Christ's sacraments are inseparably related to membership in his church.

For example, one does not have the right to be baptized without joining the visible church. Christ instituted Christian baptism as a one-time, initiatory sacrament that not only signifies the washing away of sins with his atoning blood, but also identifies the baptized person as a member of God's visible covenant community, much as circumcision did in the old covenant (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:39). Thus, one is to be baptized *into* church membership, and in this way placed under the oversight of a local body of elders. Baptism cannot be separated from church membership (Eph. 4:4-5).

Likewise, one does not have the right to partake of the Lord's Supper without church membership. Christ established the Supper as a holy meal for the members of his church. It not only signifies his body and blood offered on the cross, but also nourishes the faith of repentant sinners (1 Cor. 10:16; John 6:22-60). As the governors and overseers of the church (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7), the elders have the responsibility of supervising participation in the Lord's Table, and ensuring, as much as possible, that people do not partake in an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11:17-34). The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the New Testament's teaching in this way:

Q. 81. Who are to come to the Lord's Table?

A. Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Q. 82. Are those to be admitted to the Lord's Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore, according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.

In the URCNA, we have sought to apply this teaching by requiring a public profession of faith and membership in good standing for all who come to the Lord's Table.

The bottom line is that participation in the sacraments requires biblical church membership. While Christ has appointed the sacraments as visible signs and seals of the gospel for the nourishment of our souls, he did not design them to be individualistic practices. The sacraments are acts of divine service to his assembled people on the Lord's Day. He condescends to his flock so that he can feed them with his means of grace.

Thus, we confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, "We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself." The fact that in this life the visible church is imperfect and mixed with hypocrites gives no Christian the right to depart from it. Except in otherwise extraordinary cases, a person cannot belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church without also belonging to a visible manifestation of the same, which, according to the New Testament, is the local congregation that preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises church discipline.

If we profess to be Christians, we must practice the Christian faith according to the Word of God, not according to our opinions. The New Testament makes it clear that every Christian is to be baptized into the body of Christ and held accountable for his doctrine and life. It tells us that for

our good God has provided us with pastors, elders, and deacons, as well as the communion of saints in the local church.

If you have been baptized but you are not a member of a true congregation of Christ's church, you are living an irregular life that the New Testament does not recognize as Christian. The Lord calls you to repentance. He calls you to come home to the safety and benefit of his sheepfold. We urge you to join a true church, a body of believers that confesses the truth, submits to the authority of Christ as delegated to elders, and meets each week to worship God and receive Christ through Word and sacrament. You are not free to roam as a spiritual drifter on the internet or as a perpetual visitor from church to church. Find a good church and join it, for in this life we can do no better than to take up our place in the body of Christ, receive the means of grace, and enjoy the communion of saints.

Appendix 2

Why Do We Need Creeds and Confessions?

A Reformed church is a confessional church. That is to say, it stands with the historic Christian faith and Protestant Reformation by confessing certain doctrines to be true. Those doctrines are summarized in ecclesiastical statements known as creeds and confessions. Without those creeds and confessions, a Reformed church loses its identity. Indeed, without creeds and confessions, no church can avoid an identity crisis.

For some, such an emphasis upon creeds and confessions might seem a little strange, perhaps even alarming. Why should a Bible-believing church hold so firmly to uninspired and fallible documents written by men? After all, we have the Bible, which alone is the inspired Word of God and only rule for our faith and life. Why should Christians bother with things like the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort?

Those are fair questions. What follows is a brief explanation of why we use creeds and confessions in the URCNA. In short, we do so because they serve Christ's church by preserving, protecting, and providing: They *preserve* the church's unity in the truth, *protect* the church from heresy (false teaching), and *provide* the church with instruction.

Creeds & Confessions Preserve the Church's Unity in the Truth

It is often said, "doctrine divides, but love unites," or "doctrine divides, but practice unites." The idea behind both of these statements is that an emphasis upon theology will cripple Christ's church by leading her into debates over theology. Instead, the church should focus on loving each other and doing good works. In fact, one of the most popular evangelical leaders in America recently said, "The first Reformation was about doctrine; the second one needs to be about behavior... We need a reformation not of creeds but deeds."

To pit doctrine against love or practice, however, is to create a false dichotomy. Paul repeatedly commends the churches for their faith in Christ and love for one another (Eph. 1:15; 3:17; Col.

1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3; 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:3; Titus 2:2; 3:15; Phlm. 1:5). Our unity as Christians is based on the truth we confess (i.e. doctrine). Our responsibility to love one another and perform good works is always to be done in response to that truth. To divorce doctrine from love and good works is to profess a religion different from Christianity, for Christianity is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, our love for one another and duty to perform good works are commanded of every Christian (John 13:34f; 15:12; Eph. 2:10; Titus 3:8; 1 John 3:10-23; 4:7-5:3). But the gospel is a message to be believed, not a mode of behavior. The gospel is the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who alone saves sinners from the wrath of God. This message is received through faith alone in Christ alone. When that message is believed with true faith, a change in behavior will be the result. To elevate deeds above creeds, however, is to distort Christianity into mere pietism and moralism. Indeed, it is to base our unity on something *other* than the truth.

This is why we must confess essential doctrine. To neglect essential doctrine is to neglect the foundation of our unity. In the church, our unity is not based on our ethnicity, political party, or consumer preferences. Our unity is based strictly on the gospel and the biblical truths we confess. That is why we call our confessions the Three Forms of *Unity*. We stand as a diverse people from every tongue, nation and tribe, but united in our confession.

Moreover, unity is not something we can produce artificially. Only God can create this unity, and he has done so in Jesus Christ. We are simply called to maintain this unity. Writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells Christians to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). In the very next verse he says, “there is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4-6). He states these seven articles of the Christian faith in what some New Testament scholars believe was a creed that new converts recited just before they were baptized and received visibly into the church. The point that Paul makes is very clear: there is no unity apart from the truth.

Someone might ask, “Why not use the Bible alone? The Bible is the only written authority and inerrant rule for the faith and life of the church. Creeds and confessions, on the other hand, are documents that are capable of error. Why don’t we just say, ‘No creed but Christ’ or ‘No creed but the Bible’?” The answer is very simple. Creeds and confessions are necessary because they are ecclesiastical statements about what we believe the Bible to teach. Statements like “No creed but Christ” or “No creed but the Bible” are actually self-contradictory. Those statements are creeds in themselves.

The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which simply means, “I believe.” A creed is simply a summary of what one believes. And a confession is similar. A confession is a more detailed explanation of the Christian faith. The word “confession” comes from the Latin *confessio*, which means “I acknowledge.” Virtually every Christian has a creed and a confession of some sort, whether he realizes it or not.

Let's say you asked a Christian friend about his beliefs. Your friend, wanting to be faithful to the Word of God, says, "I believe the Bible." This, of course, is a good answer, but it is very general and broad — the Bible is a big book! You then ask, "But what do you believe the Bible teaches? What does it teach about God? What does it teach about Christ? What does it say about salvation?" At that moment, your friend is forced to make a creedal statement. He is forced to make a confession. As soon as he begins to summarize what the Bible teaches about God, Christ, salvation, or any other doctrine, he has made a confession! This is what Peter did in Matthew 16 when Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He made a confession.

A personal confession is a good and important thing. But as one body of Christ, we ought to confess the same things. We need to be in agreement on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Especially those churches which hope to be obedient to God's command to demonstrate practical unity must make a unified confession if they are to walk together (Amos 3:3). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. They summarize essential apostolic doctrine and allow us to stand united as Christ's church with one believing heart and one confessing tongue. They help preserve the church's unity in the truth.

Creeds & Confessions Protect the Church from Heresy

It is interesting to note that creedal statements often appear in Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:4 we find the great Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Jews have recited this creed since the days of Moses. It was an important creed because it protected the Israelites from the heresy of polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. When Israel received this creed, they were in the process of being brought out of Egypt where they had lived for hundreds of years. Egypt was a culture steeped in polytheism. There were deities for virtually every conceivable area of the universe. There was a god for fertility, a god for agriculture, a god for rain, a god for the sun, etc. Coming out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan, it was vital for Israel to know that there is only one true and living God. He alone is the Creator of the sun, moon and stars, who filled the air with birds, the sea with fish, and created all animals and mankind. He is sovereign over all. This simple creed, the Shema, helped to protect Israel from the falsehood of polytheism.

We also see creedal statements in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul sought to correct the terrible heresy circulating in the Corinthian church which denied the bodily resurrection. The first thing he does is quote a creed with which they were familiar. He says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3f). He then unpacks that little creed throughout the rest of the chapter, explaining that one cannot deny the resurrection of the body without also denying the resurrection of Christ (and thus the gospel!). Essential doctrine, therefore, had to be stated briefly and clearly in order to protect the flock from wolves who would lead Christ's sheep astray.

This pattern is pervasive in the New Testament. The apostles had to state the truth unambiguously in order to protect the church from heresy and harm. This is a pastoral responsibility that has continued in the church throughout the ages. Each time a new heresy has threatened the purity of

the truth, the church has had to respond by clearly stating the essential doctrine that Scripture teaches.

For example, in the fourth century the church faced a great crisis when the heretic Arius attacked the doctrine of the eternality and divinity of Christ. Arius said he believed the Bible. He was even trained at one of the best schools of his day and ordained. Yet, thinking he was acting in the interest of the truth, he denied essential Christian doctrine and led many people astray. Thus, the church responded to this situation by looking carefully at Arius' teachings, and then rightly condemning them as heresy. The church, represented by ecumenical delegates, wrote a creed in response to Arius' doctrine in order to protect believers. That creed is the Nicene Creed.

As heresies arise and attack the church, it is necessary for the church to respond by summarizing particular doctrines in Scripture in order to refute false teaching. This is a charge given to the church. Paul told young Pastor Timothy, "Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into silly myths" (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

Likewise, the apostle John says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. By believing and confessing a clear system of biblical doctrine, the church is better equipped to protect Christ's sheep.

Furthermore, creeds and confessions protect us from ourselves. Each of us reads the Bible with philosophical presuppositions. We are fallen people. We bring baggage to the text we are interpreting. While creeds and confessions do not guarantee that we will have an infallible interpretation of Scripture, they nevertheless provide a safeguard. Like rails upon which a train runs, our confessions keep us on track. Take away the rails, and you have a disaster. Likewise, when an individual Christian tries to read the Bible completely detached from the historic Christian church, and refuses to check his interpretation with what the church has confessed through the ages, he is bound for disaster.

Creeds & Confessions Provide Instruction on the Essentials

Creeds and confessions help us "connect the dots" of the Bible. They instruct us on the doctrine which arises from the story of redemption. They are one of the ways the church fulfills her responsibility to "Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Christ has] commanded" (Matt. 28:18-20). The church has the responsibility to teach apostolic doctrine, which has been laid as a foundation for our faith (Eph. 2:20). This is why it is named the Apostles' Creed — not because the apostles themselves wrote it, but because it is a faithful expression of apostolic doctrine which Christ commanded his church to teach.

Additionally, this is why the Reformation gave us rich catechisms. The Heidelberg Catechism goes through the Apostles' Creed and explains it, line by line, so that we are instructed in what

we believe and why we believe it. It teaches us what God requires of us in each of the Ten Commandments, and what it means to pray each line of the Lord's Prayer. It educates us about the law and the gospel, and how we are to live in gratitude to God with a life of good works. It organizes biblical doctrine and teaches us in a question and answer format so that we will know the basics of Christianity.

When we understand the creeds, confessions, and catechisms, we should be able to confess them as our own. In 1561–62 the Reformed churches sent a copy of the Belgic Confession to the Roman Catholic King of Spain, Philip II, along with a letter that said that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, but that they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire” rather than deny the truth expressed in their confession. To the glory of God, and for the good of his church, we should have such a commitment to the truth.

Reformed Christians are confessing Christians. That is to say, they are members of confessional churches that hold to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints and confessed during the Protestant Reformation. In our confession, we are, by God's grace, “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Appendix 3

Biblical Principles of Tithing & Giving

Most Christians are familiar with the offering in worship. Plates or baskets are passed down the pews and filled with money that comes from the pockets of worshipers. This should not be an uncomfortable experience for Christians, but a joyful opportunity to express our love for God and commitment to make disciples in the world. But what does God require of us in the offering? How much and how often should we give? To answer these questions, we must consider what the Bible says about our duty in financial giving.

The Tithe of the Old Testament

We begin with the Old Testament and what it calls the “tithe.” The word tithe means a tenth. Today it is common for many Christians to speak of “tithing” or “giving a tithe” to describe their financial giving even though the amount they are giving is not a tenth of their earnings but some other amount which they have determined for themselves. The tithe, however, is a tenth. It was an ancient form of worship, predating the Mosaic Law.

The book of Genesis tells how the patriarchs practiced tithing as an act of worship. Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, a priest of God Most High, giving him a tenth of all the spoils from battle (Gen. 14:17-24; cf. Heb. 7:1-2). Later, we read of Jacob vowing to God, “of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you” (Gen. 28:22). These tithes were not given in response to any specific laws about tithing. They were simply expressions of gratitude to God for his mercy

and grace. Abraham and Jacob were pleased to worship the Lord by offering a tenth of their income.

Later in redemptive history, God commanded his people to give a tenth of their income for the support of the ministry. As part of the Mosaic Law, God commanded the Israelites to provide for the maintenance of the temple and the Levites. The Levites were the one tribe of Israel who did not receive a portion of the land which God graciously gave to Israel. For the Levites, the priesthood was their inheritance (Num. 18:24; Josh. 18:7). As priests, they were to serve the other tribes. In order to provide for their survival, God appointed the tithe: “To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do” (Num. 18:21). A tenth of one’s regular agricultural increase — the means of survival and gain for the Israelite — was to be set apart as an offering to the Lord: “Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’s; it is holy to the LORD... And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman’s staff, shall be holy to the LORD” (Lev. 27:30, 32).

Deuteronomy 14:22-29 points out that when these tithes were taken to the tabernacle, a portion would be eaten before the Lord in joyful fellowship with the Levites and the poor. Far from being a burdensome obligation, the tithe was meant to be an occasion of jubilant worship and fellowship.

Tithing, therefore, was an important part of Israel’s covenantal life with God. It was also a great sin to withhold tithes. To do so was to steal from God. Through the prophet Malachi, God indicted

Israel for the sin of withholding tithes: “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you” (Mal. 3:8–9). Conversely, if Israel would show their trust in the Lord by obeying him with the tithe, they would have their needs met and be blessed. “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need” (Mal. 3:10).

Giving in the New Testament

The New Testament gives no explicit command for tithing. The strict tithe seems to be linked to the old covenant, that is, God’s covenant with the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, there is some continuity between the old and new covenants when it comes to giving. Just as Israel was to provide for the priests in the old covenant, the church is to provide for the ministry of the gospel in the new covenant. Paul makes it very clear that the ministry of the gospel is to be supported with the resources of the church. The apostle gives very straight-forward teaching on this topic in 1 Corinthians: “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (9:14).

Writing to Timothy, Paul quotes some general laws from the Old Testament and applies them to the ministry of the Word: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not

muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages’” (1 Tim. 5:17f). Likewise, writing to the Galatians, Paul says, “One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.” (Gal. 6:6)

But it is not only the pastor’s livelihood that a congregation is to support. A congregation must also express the communion of the saints in its use of financial resources. Near the end of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul tells of his plans to deliver collected funds for the poor Christians in Jerusalem:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (Rom. 15:25-27; cf. 1 Cor 16:1-4)

To this end, every Christian should be mindful of his responsibilities in supporting the budget of the congregation to which he belongs, so that the aforementioned needs are being met. Giving to worthy para-church organizations, such as Christian radio programs or sound Reformed seminaries, can be a noble use of our resources, but such giving should never replace the support of a Christian’s local church and its missionaries. The support of the local church must always come first, for it is only the church that baptizes, administers the Lord’s Supper, and exercises discipline. God has ordained the local church as the primary means for making disciples and establishing the communion of saints.

So, How Much Am I to Give?

If the compulsory Levitical tithe was particular to the Levitical priesthood and the New Testament does not explicitly command a strict ten percent of one’s income, just how much should the believer give? Paul gives us at least three important guidelines. But notice that, for Paul, the question of *how much* we should give is never to be separated from *how* we should give. Giving is an act of worship and a spiritual matter. Thus, we should consider carefully the following three principles.

Give freely and cheerfully.

Paul says that “Each one must give as he has made up in his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). In the New Testament, there is no prescribed amount that one must give. The amount that you contribute is something that only you can decide. But however much you give, do it with joy! Do not give to the work of the kingdom out of any sense that you have been pressured to do so. Give cheerfully or do not give at all. As one writer has put it, “God loves the one who gives cheerfully, and if God has not yet cheered your heart with the gospel, so that you delight to think you can contribute to the gathering and the perfecting of other saints, work on that issue first.”

Give consistently.

Again, in his correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul gives us direction. He says, “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2). Establish the practice of setting aside a certain amount of your resources for the work of the kingdom, just as you would anything else in your monthly budget and financial planning. While ten percent is not a strict requirement for the new covenant, it is nevertheless an excellent guideline. Christians do well to make ten percent of their income the minimum of their giving, as it is expression of their joy in the Lord and gratitude for salvation. Once again, we look back to the example of Abraham and Jacob who were both pleased to give in this way. But whatever amount we decide to give, we are, according to the apostle Paul, to do so with consistency on a weekly or monthly basis. The support of the local church is not dependent upon the state, but upon the regular giving of the members of the congregation.

Give as the Lord prospers you.

Notice those last words in Paul’s command above: “as he may prosper.” In other words, our giving should be in proportion to what God, in his providence, has given us. As God is pleased to increase the amount of our income, our giving should increase accordingly. Again, we see how the old covenant practice of tithing can be applied wisely in the new covenant. Setting aside ten percent of our income, whether we make a little or a lot, helps us to give as the Lord prospers.

We must remember that all of our resources come from God and are properly his, while we are stewards of his resources. As Paul says, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Likewise, Jesus

warns in Luke 12:48, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required.” The question every Christian must ask himself in this regard is, Am I being faithful with what God has entrusted to me?

In his Sermon on the Mount, our Lord said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). What we do with our resources is a telling sign of what we value.

Do we consider our giving an investment in the kingdom — not an investment to reap financial reward here on earth, or hope for a bigger mansion in heaven (as the health-and-wealth preachers would have us believe), but an investment in the advancement of the gospel and in the edification of God’s people until the Lord returns? As those who have been justified and adopted by virtue of the person and work of Christ, we are already most abundantly blessed! We already have “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven” for us (1 Pet. 1:4). We are, therefore, to be heavenly minded with our resources in this life.

Thus, as we have opportunity to worship the Lord with the offering each week, may each of us experience the joy of giving, and seek to bring him glory with everything he has entrusted to us.

Appendix 4

What Is Reformed Worship?

We live in a place and time of unparalleled individual freedom of choice. We choose how we dress from an almost endless number of options. We decide whether we want our books in paper or digital format. Young people graduating from high school or college enjoy a host of vocational opportunities. Our culture trains us to think that we should be able to have things our way. In the 1990s, Burger King advertised its menu with the slogan, “your way, right away.” In the 1980s, AT&T advertised themselves as “the right choice” for telecommunication and technology needs. Since the 1970s, abortion advocates have referred to their movement as pro– choice, a very clever appeal to that value which seems to enjoy sovereignty in our society.

This emphasis on choice and individual freedom has significant implications for how we view worship. With the combination of personal mobility and the increasing smorgasbord of church flavors, Americans today have almost limitless latitude in terms of how, where, and when we worship. To be fair, these worship options are not necessarily bad or avoidable, but they do challenge us to sift through the options with biblical wisdom.

Many people seem to weigh their worship options on the scale of personal preference and emotional attraction: “I like more energetic worship, so I attend church X.” “I prefer more contemplative worship, so I go to church Y.” Too seldom do people reflect on worship by asking the following kinds of questions: “Does God have anything to say about how I worship? Should something more than my feelings and preferences determine how and where I meet with God? Is there an authoritative guide to Christian worship? What kind of worship pleases God?” To answer these questions, we must turn to Scripture.

Worship is Standardized by Scripture

God reveals in his Word that he is deeply concerned about how he is worshiped. He reserves for himself the right to decide how his people will worship him. In the old covenant, he made this supremely clear to his people when he gave them his law. The first two of the Ten Commandments require that we worship God alone, and only in a way that conforms to his will (Exod. 20:3f). The Second Commandment in particular reveals that Israel was not free to worship God any way they pleased but only in a way that pleased God. In our Reformed churches we call this the “Regulative Principle of Worship” — the proper application of the Second Commandment such that all worship is done in accordance with the Word of God. The Heidelberg Catechism explains clearly what God requires of us in this commandment:

Q. 96. What is God’s will for us in the Second Commandment?

A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.

In other words, not everything that moves us emotionally (like an image) is appropriate for worship. The governing question in many modern churches is, “What will produce a stimulating spiritual feeling?” The question ought to be, “What does God want worship services to look like?” While no single church or tradition answers that question perfectly, many churches today are no longer asking the question. Nadab and Abihu should have asked that question. God commanded them to worship him in a particular fashion. Ignoring the details about acceptable worship, they offered “strange fire” to God, for which he consumed them with his own holy fire (Lev. 10:1-2).

This principle that God regulates worship flies in the face of much of what passes for worship today. Instead of being regulated by Scripture, much worship nowadays is regulated by personal preference, and driven by an itch for innovation. But our lawgiver governs our worship with full authority. He still says to his people, “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it” (Deut. 12:32; cf. Matt. 28:20). We are not free now in the new covenant to offer God our own strange fire in worship. Rather, we must “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28f).

The regulative principle of worship is often perceived as a confining and stifling thing that would remove joy and vibrancy from the worship of God. But the truth is, when our worship is regulated by the Scriptures we have the assurance that our liberty to worship God in an acceptable way is protected from the attempts of man to bind our consciences to do in worship what is designed only to please man. To be ruled in worship by the all-sufficient Word of God is not confining and limiting but actually something that liberates us from the false rule of man, and liberates us for the true worship of God.

Worship Is Structured by Scripture

Not only does the Bible stipulate what particular elements of worship are acceptable to God, but it also suggests to us the overall covenantal structure that worship should have. A covenant is a binding relationship between two or more parties. Worship is a formal covenantal meeting between the Great King and his subjects.

God delivered Israel out of Egypt so that his redeemed people could meet and renew covenant with him (Exod. 6:2-9). Contrary to contemporary opinion, worship is not meant to be an evangelistic crusade. The gospel must always be faithfully preached with both unbelievers and believers in mind. But the worship service is primarily a holy convocation between God and his covenant people, namely professing believers with their children.

Though it is often unrecognized, Scripture clearly assumes the involvement of the whole family in worship (Deut. 31:10-13; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:18-20). It should not surprise us that God’s commandment regarding the manner of proper worship should contain generational curses and blessings (Exod. 20:5f). Our worship services give our children an early and often unshakeable impression of who God is and how we must relate to him. Services which suggest that we can approach God on our terms, governed only by the limits of our imagination, give our children a dreadfully defective impression of who God is and how we must find him. Seeker-sensitive

worship can even threaten one's commitment to the biblical Christ, by whose merits alone we can approach God (Heb. 10:19-22).

Another aspect of covenantal worship that the Bible reveals to us is the dialogical nature of our meeting with God, so that the two covenant parties are drawn together in conversation with one another. While Scripture does not provide us with an explicit liturgy for a worship service, it nevertheless reveals the basic elements. The books of Acts tells us that the first new covenant congregation “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). As the rest of the New Testament makes clear, these are the essential elements of a worship service: the preaching of the Word (“the apostles’ teaching”), the communion of saints (“fellowship”), the sacraments (“the breaking of bread”), and prayer and singing (“the prayers”).

These elements help form the dialogue between God and his people. God speaks to us in his Word and sacraments, and we respond to him in prayer and song. He calls us to worship, and we respond by pledging our dependence upon him (Ps. 124:8). God then announces his greeting of grace and peace to his covenant people (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3-5; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1f). We confess our sins (Ps. 51), and cry out with our needs (Ps. 18:6). God responds with forgiveness (Ps. 32; Ps. 130:3-6) and with his provision for us in his Word and sacraments (2 Cor. 5:18-20; Heb. 12:25; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; 1 Cor. 10:16; Rev. 12:6, 14). We worship him for his goodness (Ps. 147). He sends us forth with his blessing (2 Cor. 13:14). This historic and sound pattern of worship helps to make our covenant meeting with God a spiritually rich one, as God's gracious word to us enlivens us to respond in accordance with his will.

Worship is Saturated with Scripture

Contrary to the practice in some churches, Christian worship is inherently verbal, not visual. The Second Commandment explicitly condemns making images of God, not just because it is impossible for God to be adequately represented by an image, but because God will not permit us to draw near to him by the use of images that will distract us from his word. The golden calf was not another god but Israel's attempt to serve Jehovah by visual means, when they should have waited for his Word (Exod. 32:4f; cf. Deut 4:9-19). By implication, the historic Protestant church has been critical of the use of images to represent any of the three persons of the Trinity, including Christ.

Images give a biased impression of God based on the artist's creative abilities and theological proclivities. A beautiful image of Christ would stand in contrast to his description in Isa. 53:2: “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” An Anglo-Saxon image of Christ, apart from being historically inaccurate, would communicate an ethno-centricity. A cartoonish image of Christ runs the risk of stripping the second person of the Trinity of the dignity which he deserves. It is not simply that a visible image of Christ would fail to communicate his divinity (thereby implying a separation of his two natures), but that every image of Christ is necessarily an attempt to make an image of God. For a time, God saw fit to send to earth his Son as his fleshly image (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). But then, after taking this image back to heaven, he gave us his written Word, which sufficiently reveals God to us. At this present

time we do not see the Word made flesh, but we are to hear him (1 Pet. 1:8f). Not by crucifixes and paintings are we to see Christ, but through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, those "pictures" of Jesus which have been prescribed by the Lord himself.

When God called Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, it was abundantly clear that he had center stage, and that his speech should stop every mouth (Deut. 5:4f, 23-27). When the church gathers for worship God still speaks (Heb. 12:25-27). We honor God's Word the way Cornelius received Peter: "Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (Acts 10:33). This means Scripture must be read (1 Tim. 4:13), preached (2 Tim. 4:2), and sung (Col. 3:16). God's revelation should even permeate our prayers (Matt. 6:9-13).

Worshippers Are Sanctified by Scripture

In the worship service, God serves his people with his Word and sacraments. These are God's ordained means of grace to sanctify his people. Before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The preaching of the gospel is the means God uses not only to grant us faith (Rom. 10:17) but also to strengthen it (Rom. 16:25). Likewise, the Lord's Supper is a real communion and participation in the body and blood of Christ in heaven (1 Cor. 10:16; cf. John 6:51-58). These means of grace are indispensable to the sanctification and spiritual growth of every Christian.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God revealed that our very lives depend on hearing and receiving his Word: "Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live" (Isa. 55:2-3). In the new covenant, God feeds his people with this food for the soul. This is why Jesus commissioned Peter with the words, "Feed my lambs...Feed my sheep" (John 21:15, 17). Just as physical food provides nourishment for the body and gladdens the heart, the spiritual food God provides in Word and sacrament gives the believer spiritual nourishment and everlasting joy.

Curved in on ourselves in selfish introspection and idol worship, we need an external word, a voice that comes from outside of ourselves to interfere with our make-believe worlds and to tell us the truth. We need to hear that surprising message of a holy God justifying the wicked through Christ. The "living preaching of his Word," as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Question 98, is God's ordained means to accomplish this. It is an intrusive act by the Holy Spirit, driving us out of ourselves and directing our faith to the promises of God, which are all "yes" and "amen" in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

The primary purpose of going to church, therefore, is not to serve God, but to be served by Him. The same Lord who once rose from supper, laid aside his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples, continues to condescend to his followers, and to serve them in Word and sacrament. He summons us to a corporate, festive event in the call to worship. Each week, through the Ministry of the Word, he spreads a table in the wilderness, setting before us excellent food and drink for the soul.

Our response to this feast is to worship God with reverence, zeal, and joy. In the worship service, God does not bring us to the terror of Mount Sinai but to the festal gathering of Mount Zion above (Heb. 12:18-24). Yet, he is still a holy God and a consuming fire, and must be worshiped with both gratitude and awe, and in full accordance with his Word (Heb 12:28f).

Appendix 5

What about Infant Baptism?

“Why does your church baptize babies?” This is a common question asked by visitors to a Reformed church. Since the historic practice of baptizing the children of believers has fallen on hard times, what used to be the norm among Protestants is now a foreign concept to many. Consequently, the doctrine of infant baptism can be a difficult hurdle for a person who is interested in joining a confessional, Reformed church.

So why *do* Reformed churches baptize children? The answer is simple: *We baptize the children of believers because they belong to the covenant and people of God.* While this answer is simple, it nevertheless requires some explanation. As with many doctrines, such as the Trinity or the deity of Christ, the doctrine of infant baptism requires a broader approach to Scripture than reading a few proof-texts. In order for us to understand this doctrine, we must first think about God’s covenant of grace with his people, and the nature of his church.

Perhaps the simplest approach to understanding this doctrine is by beginning with the Heidelberg Catechism’s concise explanation of infant baptism:

Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

There are four parts to this answer which we should consider carefully: (1) there is one covenant of grace; (2) in the old covenant, God included children in his church; (3) in the new covenant, God still includes children in his church; (4) there is a promise made in baptism that must be believed.

There is one covenant of grace.

The Heidelberg Catechism makes the claim that the children of believers, “are in God’s covenant and are his people.” What is this covenant to which the Catechism refers?

The concept of covenant is important for Christians to grasp because it is the organizing framework of the Scriptures. A covenant, simply defined, is a formal agreement, with oaths and promises, creating a solemn relationship between its parties. Most of us are in a number of different covenants. Marriage, for example, is a covenant between one man and one woman. A mortgage is a covenant between the lender and the borrower. In Scripture, we find covenants between God and humans throughout redemptive history. Anyone who has read through the Bible even once knows that God's covenant-making is central to the story. God makes covenants with such key figures as Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and David. While there are many different covenants of various natures and purposes recorded in the Bible, there is ultimately one covenant in which the benefits of redemption are bestowed upon God's people, a covenant we rightly call the "covenant of grace." In this covenant, God promises salvation to sinners through faith in Christ, who merited salvation for his people through his life, death, and resurrection.

The covenant of grace begins in Genesis 3:15, just after Adam and Eve were expelled from the holy garden as punishment for having sinned against God. Although Adam, mankind's federal representative, plunged the entire human race into sin and death (Rom. 5:12-19), he subsequently received a promise from the Lord that a Champion would come to bruise the serpent's head, and merit eternal life for his people (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 5:14-21; Rev. 12:4-11). That is to say, Christ would be sent as the second Adam to fulfill the work that the first Adam failed to do (1 Cor. 15:21f, 45). In this promise, we see the beginning of the covenant of grace. God promised to send a mediator, and to take for himself a people, the offspring of the woman, separating them from the offspring of the serpent.

The covenant of grace continues as the Bible traces the lineage of God's redeemed people (the offspring of the woman) from Seth to Abraham (Genesis 4-11). Once Abraham is brought into the picture, the speed of the story slows down. God then expands upon his covenant of grace by making particular promises to Abraham. He would make of Abraham "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), and in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). He would give Abraham an offspring numbered as the stars in heaven (15:5), and a land for them to possess (15:7). God then sealed these promises with a solemn covenant ritual involving the shedding of blood. He passed between severed animals, swearing an oath that he would fulfill his promises to Abraham (15:8-21; cf. Jer. 34:18f).

God fulfilled these promises later in redemptive history. From Abraham came the twelve tribes of Israel, who grew in number like the stars in heaven (Deut. 1:10). After freeing them from slavery in Egypt, God brought them into the Promised Land. In Joshua 21:43-45 we read,

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

As the Bible moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament, God fulfills these promises in an even greater way. In Galatians, the apostle Paul tells us how one becomes a true descendent of Abraham. In Galatians 3:7-9 he says,

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

What does all of this show us? It shows us that there is *one* plan of salvation for the *one* people of God, whom the Bible describes as the seed or offspring of Abraham (Gal 3:29; cf. Rom. 2:28f; 11:17-20). There is no other way to be a child of God than to be included into Abraham’s covenant. Thus, when Reformed people speak of “*the* covenant,” we are speaking of the one covenant of grace that was first promised in Genesis 3:15, was expanded in detail to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, was finally fulfilled in Christ, and continues until the consummation of all things. Anyone who ever has been or will be saved, during any period of human history, is a member of this one covenant of grace. Salvation is always the same: by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, the one Mediator of the covenant.

In the Old Covenant, God included children in his visible church.

Having looked briefly at the covenant of grace in redemptive history, we must now ask the question, *if believers participate in the covenant and people of God, what is the status of their children?* The Old Testament reveals that God not only allowed the children of believers to be brought into his covenant and visible people, but that he also commanded them to be included. In Genesis 17:6-8 we read of God reminding Abraham of the promises he made in his covenant, which extended to his offspring:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

God then commanded that a covenant–sign be given to Abraham and his descendants. That covenant–sign was circumcision. In Genesis 17:9-14 we find God’s direction to Abraham:

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant

be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

Circumcision was a “sign of the covenant.” The bloody ritual of cutting the flesh in the male reproductive organ signified the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants when he walked between the bloody animal halves. This was no mere formality; to be circumcised meant to receive a sign of the deepest spiritual significance. Circumcision even pointed to the realities of regeneration and justification (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 4:11). It was a sign carved in flesh as a constant reminder of God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants.

While this covenant sign did not guarantee that every recipient of it possessed the spiritual realities that it signified, it nevertheless functioned in every case as the official act of consecration, so that each recipient was made a member of the covenant community. Every male in Abraham’s household, whether sons or servants, as well as every male in the covenant community thereafter, was to receive this sign in his flesh if he was to be identified with God’s covenant people. Conversely, anyone who rejected the sign of the covenant was to be cut off from the covenant community. To reject the *sign* of the covenant was to reject God’s *promises* in the covenant. Ultimately, it was to reject fellowship with the God who walked between the severed animal halves as a guarantee of his promises to Abraham.

In the New Covenant, God still includes children in his visible church.

Regarding the children of believers, the Heidelberg Catechism says in Answer 74, “Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.” The covenantal sign that is administered upon initiation into the visible church is no longer circumcision, but baptism (Col. 2:11f). Like circumcision, baptism is a one-time, initiatory sign and seal of God’s covenant promise, which marks out an individual as belonging to God’s visible covenant people. Like circumcision, baptism is for the believer *and his children*.

Our Baptist brothers often argue that the children of believers should not be baptized until making a credible profession of faith because the New Testament never gives an explicit command or example of infant baptism. To this we must ask: Where in the New Testament do we find an example or command to *exclude* the children of believers from the visible church? Defending the doctrine of infant baptism in his day, the great Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield put it in the most straightforward of terms when he said, “The argument [for infant baptism] in a nutshell is simply this: God established his church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his church and as such entitled to its ordinances.” Clearly, no such command to remove the children of believers from God’s covenant exists. On the contrary, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:14).

More importantly, however, is the obvious trend in the New Testament of including those who once were excluded from the church. The greatest example of this is the gospel going out to the Gentiles. People who formerly were not of the physical family of Abraham but were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12) are now in Christ Jesus “no longer strangers and aliens” but “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). We also see this in the fact that baptism was applied to females as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to circumcision, which was only for males. Thus, Paul says, “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). While there is still a distinction between men and women with regard to their assigned roles in the family and the church, baptism shows that men and women are the same in terms of personal worth to God, for both are created in His image (Gen. 1:26-28) and equally redeemed in Christ. Christian women, therefore, are not to worship in a separate courtyard as they did at the Jerusalem temple. They are to worship alongside men in the congregation (Col. 3:18f).

Considering these things, are we really to think that while God includes Gentiles into his covenant people and includes women more fully by extending to them the covenant sign just as he does to males, that he also takes an opposite position with regard to the children of believers? While God extends his grace more abundantly in the New Covenant by including those who once were excluded, why would he then *exclude* children who once were *included*? Indeed, first-century Hebrew parents that became Christians would have been horrified at the suggestion that their children were now outside of the covenant of grace.

On the contrary, the apostles brought good news to parents. Preaching on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the gospel to a large audience of Jews and Gentiles and told them to repent and be baptized in Jesus’ name. He concluded by saying, “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39). Those who are “far off” are the Gentiles, now included in God’s covenant. But notice that Peter specifically points out that the promise is still “for your children.” Children of believers are not excluded from membership in God’s covenant community but included, just as they were from the beginning.

For this reason, Paul addresses the children of believers as members of the covenant of grace: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Eph 6:1). He reminds them of the Fifth Commandment in the very next verse, showing that new covenant children have the same responsibilities and privileges as old covenant children. They are to be raised as disciples of Christ: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4; cf. Deut 6:4-9). Clearly, these children are considered members of the visible church no less than they were in the old covenant. As such, they should receive the sign of the covenant and be baptized.

There is a promise made in baptism that must be believed.

The promise to which Peter referred in his Pentecost sermon is mentioned in Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 74. It says that our children, “no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith.”

For this reason, parents must take great care to catechize and pray for their children, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). It is why parents are required to take vows at the baptismal font, promising to the utmost of our power to teach our children and have them taught the doctrine of salvation. Baptized children must not only grow up with the understanding that they have been “received into the Christian church” and “distinguished from the children of unbelievers” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 74), but must — in light of their baptism — be asked the questions, Do you believe the gospel? Do you trust that Christ’s blood alone washes away your sins as certainly as you see water washing away dirt from the body? Do you believe what is signified in your baptism?

If he rejects the gospel, then the waters of baptism are not a sign of blessing, but a sign of judgment. Like the unbelieving Israelite whose circumcision symbolized the cursing of being “cut off” from the favor of God, the New Covenant child who rejects what is signified in his baptism will become like those unbelievers who perished in the floodwaters of God’s judgment while Noah and his family were brought safely through water (1 Pet. 3:20-22).

On the other hand, the covenant child who believes the gospel, embracing Christ with a true faith, is able to see in his baptism God’s pledge and token that gives us assurance that we are as really washed from our sins spiritually, as our bodies are washed with water (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 73).

We baptize the children of believers because they belong to the covenant and people of God.

Glossary

Church planter: A minister called to labor beyond the field of an organized church as a home missionary under the supervision of his sending consistory. The church planter’s calling is to develop the core group and church plant into an organized church.

Classis: A broader ecclesiastical assembly of United Reformed churches within a particular geographical area.

Consistory: The elders and minister(s) in a local church.

Core group: The beginning nucleus of families and individuals within a church plant.

Council: The term used to describe the consistory and deacons meeting together.

Joint Venture Committee: A group of two or more congregations partnering together to support a particular mission work.

Sending church: The overseeing and primary supporting church of a church plant.

Recommended Resources for the Church Planter

Church Planting, Missions, and Evangelism

Bavinck, J.H. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960.

The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008.

Hyde, Daniel R. and Lems, Shane, eds. *Planting, Watering, Growing: Planting Confessionally Reformed Churches in the 21st Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011.

Kuiper, R.B. *God-Centered Evangelism: A Presentation of the Scriptural Theology of Evangelism*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978.

Nevius, John. *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1958.

Packer, J.I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2009.

Education of the Core Group

On creeds and confessions:

DeYoung, Kevin. *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism*. Chicago, IL: Moody, 2010.

Hyde, Daniel R. *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2008.

Trueman, Carl R. *The Creedal Imperative*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Venema, Cornelis P. *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1994.

Williamson, G.I. *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993.

On systematic theology:

Berkhof, Louis. *Manual of Christian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939.

Horton, Michael S. *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

On covenant theology:

Brown, Michael G. and Keele, Zach. *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2012.

On ecclesiology and sacraments:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. New York: Harper Collins, 1954.

Horton, Michael S. *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*. Louisville, KY.: Westminster, 2008.

Hyde, Daniel R. *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children*. Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Fellowship, 2006.

_____. *Welcome to a Reformed Church: A Guide for Pilgrims*. Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2010.

On worship:

Hart, D.G., and Muether, John R. *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002.

Horton, Michael S. *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.

Hyde, Daniel R. *What to Expect in Reformed Worship: A Visitor's Guide*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007.

Payne, Jon D. *In the Splendor of Holiness: Rediscovering the Beauty of Reformed Worship for the 21st Century*. White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege, 2008.

Pastoral Care

De Jong, Peter Y. *Taking Heed to the Flock: A Study of the Principles and Practice of Family Visitation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948.

Murphy, Thomas. *Pastoral Theology: The Pastor in the Various Duties of His Office*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1877.

Poirer, Alfred. *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict*. Grand Rapids: Bakers, 2004.

Sittema, John R. *With a Shepherd's Heart: Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of Elder*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1995.

The Training of Officers

Allison, Archibald Alexander. "Biblical Qualifications for Elders." *Ordained Servant* 3.4 (1994): 80–86, available online at <http://www.opc.org/OS/pdf/OSV3N4.pdf>.

Brown, Mark, ed. *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*. Duncansville, PA.: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993.

Brown, Michael, ed. *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2007.

De Jong, Peter Y. *The Ministry of Mercy for Today*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003.

_____. *Taking Heed to the Flock: A Study of the Principles and Practice of Family Visitation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003.

Dickson, David. *The Elder and His Work*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004.

Sittema, John R. *With a Shepherd's Heart: Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of Elder*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1995.

Strauch, Alexander. *The New Testament Deacon*. Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1992.

Van Dam, Cornelis. *The Elder: Today's Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009.

Witmer, Timothy Z. *The Shepherd Leader*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010.

Standing Committee on Appeals Report to Synod Escondido 2024

Dear Fathers and Brothers,

Synod Wheaton 2018 appointed the Standing Committee on Appeals and gave it the following mandate:

- a. To receive and review appeals submitted to synod, in advance of synod, in order to organize, summarize, and index relevant documents and data.
- b. To assist the convening consistory of synod concerning the admissibility of appeal submissions.
- c. To make recommendations to the relevant synodical advisory committee concerning the proper and timely handling of particular appeals, without making recommendation concerning the disposition of the appeal (Acts of Synod 2018, Article 64, p. 44).

Our committee is currently comprised of representatives from each classis, five ministers and three elders: Rev. Joel Dykstra, Rev. William C. Godfrey, Rev. Jeffrey Karel, Mr. Henry Nagtegaal, Rev. James Sinke, Mr. Steven Tjapkes, Rev. Cal Tuininga, and Mr. Mark Van Der Molen.

The Standing Committee on Appeals has no work to report. Our committee has not been made aware of any appeals that have been advanced to Synod 2024. And because we have had no appeals to receive or review, we have not needed to meet as a committee since our last report to Synod Niagara in 2022.

The appeals process is certainly an important safeguard for justice within our federation. While the absence of appeals to synod does not mean an absence of conflicts and difficulties in our churches, we give thanks to God that our committee has not had any appeals to review in the past two years.

In His service,
Rev. Cal Tuininga, Chairman
Rev. William C. Godfrey, Secretary

**Study Committee
On Digital Media and Corporate Worship
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

I. Introduction

Synod Niagara 2022 adopted the following recommendations (*Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Article 47):

1. That Synod accede to Overture 15: “to establish a Study Committee to provide Pastoral Advice to the churches on the degree to which viewing or hearing worship via broadcast is participation in corporate worship,” with the following grounds:

Grounds:

- a. This is a matter relevant to the modern church.
 - b. This is a matter of continuing pastoral concern in leading those who are unable or unwilling to attend in-person worship.
2. That Synod mandate the study committee to address the following questions in light of Scripture, our Confessions, and the Church Order, giving special attention to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, Lord’s Days 35 and 38 of the Catechism, and Articles 37, 38, 41, and 46 of the Church Order:
 - a. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?
 - b. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?
 - c. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?
 - d. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?
 - e. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend, and why?
 3. That Synod appoint the following eight brothers to serve on this committee:
 - a. Rev. Danny Hyde (Southwest US)
 - b. Rev. Brian Lee (Eastern US), Chairman
 - c. Rev. Ryan Swale (Ontario East)
 - d. Rev. Harry Zekveld (Southwestern Ontario)
 - e. Rev. William Pols (Western Canada)
 - f. Rev. Todd De Rooy (Central US)
 - g. Rev. Russell Herman (Pacific Northwest)
 - h. Rev. Talman Wagenmaker (Michigan), Reporter
 4. That Synod instruct the study committee to report to the next Synod.

5. That Synod set the budget for the study committee at \$10,000 USD.

The *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* define “Pastoral Advice” as follows (Appendix D.2):

Pastoral Advice: *Pastoral Advice* is Synod’s application of the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches.

2.1 Pastoral Advice expresses the collective wisdom of Synod to guide the churches in their pastoral care.

2.2 Pastoral Advice should be received with respect. It would be unwise to disregard Pastoral Advice in preaching or writing. It may not, however, serve as grounds in matters of discipline.

2.3 Pastoral Advice may be appealed as outlined in Church Order Articles 29 and 31 (Regulations for Synodical Procedure 3.4 and Appendix B).

Our committee presents this report in fulfillment of the mandate Synod Niagara 2022 gave us. To write this report, we met via video conference on the following dates:

- November 9, 2022
- January 11, 2023
- February 22, 2023
- April 5, 2023
- May 17, 2023
- July 12, 2023
- September 13, 2023
- November 8, 2023
- November 21, 2023
- January 10, 2024
- February 7, 2024
- March 13, 2024

In addition, our committee met face-to-face at the campus of Mid-America Reformed Seminary on October 4, 2023. Further committee work was done via email, and we received helpful input from churches as well as individuals.

The report proper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly presents biblical and theological foundations for corporate worship with an aim to draw attention to the major issues related to our mandate. The second section addresses the five mandated questions and issues surrounding them. The third section proposes pastoral advice as an application of the previous two sections and a distillation of those sections into guidance for the churches.

II. Report and Pastoral Advice

A. Biblical and Theological Foundations for Corporate Worship

The Supreme Importance of Worship

God made man in his image so that he might truly know God, love him with all his heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 6). Stated differently, God made man to worship him. The first and second commandments make clear that to have “no other gods” but the Lord our God means we “bow down” and serve him only (Exodus 20:1–5). God calls people of all nations to “ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name” (Psalm 96:7–8), which means all must worship him “in the splendor of holiness” (Psalm 96:9).¹ The great commission (Matthew 28:18–20) is the Father’s way of seeking true worshipers to worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24).² Worship then is the most important thing we do.

From Genesis to Revelation, God gathers a people to worship him. Though the depravity of man quickly manifested itself in the descendants of Cain, Genesis 4:26 tells us concerning Seth’s descendants, “At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.” This language indicates “the exercise of the whole worship of God” and that “they began then to settle and establish the worship of God more openly, more solemnly, and frequently.”³ This is generally accepted as the Bible’s first reference to corporate worship, and the story of God gathering a worshipping people continues through succeeding generations until Christ’s return. The final book of the Bible gives multiple visions of the redeemed from all nations worshipping before God’s throne. Scripture describes the climax of redemptive history in the words, “All nations will come and worship you” (Revelation 15:3–4).⁴ The worship of God’s people is one of the most important themes throughout all Scripture.

Old Testament Worship

When the Bible speaks of worship, it tends to emphasize the *corporate* activity of God’s people. This is not to diminish the importance of individual or family worship, as the “I will” statements of the Psalms repeatedly express the duty, privilege, and delight of personal prayer and praise.⁵ However, the Bible most frequently describes worship as the activity of God’s people *together*.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references throughout are from the English Standard Version.

² “In spirit and truth” should not be understood to mean the worship God is seeking is somehow immaterial or disembodied. While the precise meaning of the phrase is debated, it should not be used to suggest that physically gathering is unnecessary because worship is “in spirit.” The worshipers the Father seeks, and sent his incarnate Son to gather, are not *discarnate*, but embodied.

³ *Dutch Annotations upon the whole Bible* (London: Henry Hills, 1657) [<https://archive.org/details/dutch-annotations/Dutch%20Annotations%20Gen%20%20to%20%20Sam%203/>].

⁴ See also Revelation 7:9–12; 11:16–18; 22:3.

⁵ See Psalm 145:2; 146:2: “I will bless you... I will praise the LORD... I will sing praises to my God...”

We hear this in the “let us” language of the Psalms as they call God’s people to worship corporately, and as they speak so often of the “assembly,” “congregation,” or “throne.”⁶

In the Old Covenant, the place of this corporate gathering was the tabernacle (and later the temple) where sacrifices were brought (Psalm 96:8) as God dwelt between the cherubim, above the mercy seat (Exodus 25:22). This was the dwelling place of God where Israel went for the feasts and solemn assemblies, and where God placed his name (Deuteronomy 12:5). In these assemblies, God blessed his people and put his name upon them in connection with their sacrificial offerings (Numbers 6:23–27; Leviticus 9:22–24). Worship required preparation and activity; the worshipers traveled, often over significant distances and taking considerable time, to a specific place to worship God. The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134) often allude to the practice of going up to worship the Lord, where worshipers looked forward with love and longing to gather with God’s people on Mount Zion.⁷ Corporate worship thus meant gathering with others at the same location where God placed his name and manifested his special presence in grace.

While Scripture speaks of God’s *omni*-presence, it also speaks of God’s *special* presence in his temple and in worship (e.g., the Psalms speak of God both as *everywhere* present [Psalm 139:7–10] and invite God’s people to come *into his presence* [Psalm 95:2; 100:2]). God is everywhere present, but he is also *special* present among his people gathered for worship. He delights in our individual vocations, homes, and gatherings, but he takes a special delight as we leave our homes to come together in family reunion as his redeemed household (Psalm 87:1–3).

New Testament Worship

The theme of God’s presence with his gathered people continues in the New Testament, though no longer in the physical temple (John 4:21). God’s people together *become* his spiritual temple through Christ who is God’s true temple (John 2:21; Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:5–7). Thus, God is now specially present with his people wherever they gather together in his name (Matthew 18:20).⁸ The significance of the “place” where we gather is not the physical location or beauty of the building in which we meet but our gathering together as the people in whom God dwells as his holy temple. In our corporate identity as the organized, worshipping church of the living God, we

⁶ Psalm 22:22; 26:12; 34:3; 35:18; 40:9–10; 42:4; 55:14; 68:26; 95:1–2, 6; 107:32; 109:30; 111:1; 122:1; 132:7; 149:1.

⁷ It is worth pointing out that the gathering together of God’s people in the Old Testament did not exclusively refer to the festal gatherings in the temple but also included the weekly gatherings on the Sabbath, which Leviticus 23:2–3 calls “holy convocations” (and which did *not* occur in the temple). Later, these gatherings took place in the synagogue (Acts 15:21).

⁸ We recognize that Matthew 18:20 is often misused to suggest wherever two people gather informally is a meeting of the church. This is not what we are saying; and we do recognize that the context of Matthew 18:20 is the formal exercise of church discipline. However, this discipline is to be exercised in the context of the gathered church (1 Corinthians 5:4) as an exercise of the keys of the kingdom that are entrusted to Christ’s ordained office-bearers. Thus, by using this verse, we are making the point that Christ promises to be present with his people when they gather together publicly for the exercise of the keys of the kingdom “in his name.” His presence therefore is not dictated by the place in which they gather, but rather by the people who are gathered together, and the ordained officers under whose oversight they are gathered.

become his “household” (1 Timothy 3:15), where God manifests his grace. We no longer gather at the temple in Jerusalem but assemble as a “holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers” “wherever God has established it” (Belgic Confession, Articles 27 and 28). When the congregation assembles to worship God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the power of the Lord Jesus is present (1 Corinthians 5:3–4).

The author of Hebrews thus exhorts God’s people not to neglect meeting together but to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus which he has opened up for us through the curtain (Hebrews 10:19–20, 25). Interestingly, this applies temple language to the corporate gathering of God’s New Testament people, implying that when we meet together for worship, we enter into the holy place Christ has opened through his one sacrifice. Therefore, God’s people are exhorted to “draw near” (v. 22) with hearts “sprinkled clean” and bodies “washed with pure water.” This verse applies the Old Testament imagery of priestly washings to believers in what appears to be a reference to baptism. Our physical bodies, having been washed, draw near to God in his most holy place when they meet together with other believers for public worship. In this we witness both the corporate and physical aspects of New Testament worship. It is not merely a mental or emotional exercise of the mind and heart done individually, but consists in God’s people “drawing near” to “meet together” in physical bodies washed with pure water. Indeed, the worship of God’s New Testament people is corporate and bodily in nature, fulfilling the gathering together of God’s Old Testament saints in the new heavenly Mount Zion that is the church (Hebrews 12:22–24).⁹

Our catechism also affirms the corporate aspect of worship. In Q. & A. 103, every aspect of divine worship occurs in “the assembly of God’s people,” which all are called to “diligently attend.” The worship required of God’s people is corporate and embodied. God is glorified when his people gather together to learn what his Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to him publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor (see URC Church Order, Articles 37, 38, 41, 46). This is our blessed privilege and highest calling, which God’s Word not only calls us to do in faith, but promises to bless us in doing.

The Unique Blessings of Corporate Worship

The great blessing and privilege of corporate worship consists in the enjoyment of God’s special presence. To gather for worship is to “come into his presence” (Psalm 100:2). The promise of God’s presence with us is often thought of as God coming to us and entering our assembly in condescending grace. No doubt the presence of God in his church by his Spirit is glorious, but the Bible gives us another perspective on corporate worship that exceeds this in glory. The wonder of corporate worship is not primarily God coming to us on earth in our assembly, but God admitting us to the assembly around his throne in heaven. Based on Christ’s intercession we enter into the holy of holies and come boldly to the mercy seat and “throne of grace.” Thus, according to Hebrews 12:22–24:

⁹ In the New Testament, synagogue language is used to refer to the church’s gatherings (Hebrews 10:25), in addition to the temple language noted above. Thus, as revelation progresses, it is the case that both the synagogue gatherings *and* the national temple gatherings merge into one and find their fulfillment in the New Testament worship of the church.

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The worship around the throne in heaven, frequently described in Revelation, previews not only the joy of the life to come but describes the glorious invisible world to which we already participate in corporate worship. Even now on earth we may sing:

God Himself is with us; hear the harps resounding!
See the crowds the throne surrounding!
Holy, holy, holy, hear the hymn ascending
Angels, saints, their voices blending.¹⁰

In this light we hear the words of Hebrews 10:25 about “not neglecting to meet together.” Thus, the consistory calls the congregation together for corporate worship to delight in the worship of God (Church Order, Article 37). We ought to take every advantage of such a tremendous calling and privilege of grace.

Saints are sometimes hindered from going to God’s house by illness, infirmity, or other hindrance. Thus, the privilege of going to the house of God is sometimes remembered with tears, as the psalmist says, “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts of praise, a multitude keeping festival” (Psalm 42:4). Being denied access to corporate worship is a trial of faith as well as an opportunity to trust in God’s sufficient grace. The psalmist gives voice to these sentiments in Psalm 84: “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD... Blessed are those who dwell in your house... The LORD bestows favor and honor” (vv. 2, 4, 11).

Thankfully, digital media can help those who are providentially hindered from gathering with God’s people. They may still be built up by the Word, maintain a sense of connection to the church, and practice their love for Christ and his people as living members of the church in their limited circumstances. Shut-ins and others hindered from worship also need the continued prayers, sympathy, and loving attention of the church. Those who cannot come to worship recognize from the hardship of their circumstances that these helps cannot replace the special blessings of corporate worship.

We give particular attention and honor to our brothers and sisters around the world who live under the cross of persecution. For many, leaving home to gather as God’s household involves great risk and requires much thought and creativity to find ways to maintain true, visible community. The Spirit of unity impels them to gather as a church body wherever and however they can. As our forefathers testified in times of intense persecution, “And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God’s Word... to join this assembly wherever God has

¹⁰ “God Himself Is with Us” (Trinity Psalter Hymnal #164).

established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result” (Belgic Confession, Article 28).

With longing and delight, the Psalms often express the special blessings of worshiping in the assembly of saints. In Psalm 63 David recalls the sanctuary as the place where God’s power and glory are seen (v. 2). In Psalm 27 he declares his one desire and quest: to “dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (v. 4). In fact, Psalm 92 (titled “A Song for the Sabbath day”) describes the flourishing of the righteous as those who are “planted in the house of the LORD” (v. 13). This imagery shows the stability and fruitfulness of a life centered around the worship of God and points to the blessedness of the life to come in which we will “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).

By gathering together, we strengthen and build up the people of God. The Scriptures utilize different imagery to express this sentiment: the church as a building joined together, a family gathered around the same table, and citizens of a heavenly country celebrating our freedom and extolling our glorious King. As we see one another’s faces and hear one another’s voices, we are united more in love (Psalm 122:1–4). Many professing Christians have become comfortable with a life detached from the worship and fellowship of the gathered church. God’s “household” and “flock” are significant aspects of our identity in Christ (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 5:2). When we neglect the face-to-face gathering, we harm our faith and undermine our identity in Christ as his people. We forfeit the blessings only face-to-face fellowship brings (2 John 12; 3 John 13-14). As the Day of the Lord approaches and the battle against the kingdom of darkness intensifies, assembling together for mutual encouragement and affirmation of our identity as God’s chosen people becomes all the more urgent for God’s children (Hebrews 10:25).

The rich blessings of corporate worship are assured by God’s benediction proclaimed to his people and compel Christians to gather with the church at every opportunity. A biblical view of belonging to the church as living members directs us to see attending worship as the most important expression of who we are as members of Christ and his body. Worship is not merely one activity among others. We are a people restored to the worship of God, “planted in the house of the LORD” (Psalm 92:13). Such worship gives the world a powerful witness to the saving grace and mercy of God (Psalm 67) and testifies to a love and unity which demonstrate Christ has come and we are his disciples (John 13:35; 17:21).

B. Addressing Questions About Digital Media and Corporate Worship

Synod mandated this committee “to provide pastoral advice to the churches on the degree to which viewing or hearing worship via broadcast is participation in corporate worship.” Synod also asked the committee to address specific questions related to this topic with special attention to our confessions and church order.¹¹

¹¹ *Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Article 47.2:

That Synod mandate the study committee to address the following questions in light of Scripture, our Confessions, and the Church Order, giving special attention to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, Lord’s Days 35 and 38 of the Catechism, and Articles 37, 38, 41, and 46 of the Church Order:

a. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?

In this section of our report we address each of those questions directly. We note, however, that they touch upon a complex series of interrelated issues involving our theology of worship, sacraments, and the field of media ecology.¹² We believe it helpful to identify each of these issues, treat them in an orderly fashion, and address the questions at the relevant points of that broader discussion. In identifying the following topics, we have taken the marks of the church from Belgic Confession, Article 29 as a guiding principle. The topics we address are as follows:

- The distinctiveness of corporate worship
- The necessity of the believer’s physical presence for participation in corporate worship
- How our theology of the preached Word informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- How our sacramental theology informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- How our understanding of discipline informs viewing or hearing via remote broadcast
- Benefits to viewing or hearing worship via remote broadcast
- The importance of embodied worship

The Distinctiveness of Corporate Worship

Both worship in general and corporate worship in particular are central to the life of the church, as the preceding discussion of biblical and theological foundations demonstrated. The challenge of our current media environment, however, calls the very meaning of “corporate worship” into question. Given this rapidly changing environment, we believe the church must clarify its understanding of worship.

A few words about etymology may help. The word “corporate” comes from *corporatus*, which means “to form into a body;” and *corporatus* is itself rooted in the word *corpus*, which means “body.” Both the Old Testament and New Testament speak of the “assembly” of God’s people and the “congregation,” i.e., those who have congregated. The New Testament further develops our understanding of the worshiping congregation by calling it the “body of Christ,” with our Savior as the head and believers as the many members. In gathering for corporate worship, this metaphor becomes more concrete as we gather our individual bodies to form a corporate body, led in worship by our ascended Savior and head, Jesus Christ.¹³

-
- b. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?
 - c. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?
 - d. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?
 - e. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend and why?

¹² For a helpful brief introduction to the field of media ecology, see T. David Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family,” *Modern Reformation* (April 30, 2014), <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/media-ecology-for-the-family> and, “The Material Is Not Immaterial,” *Modern Reformation* (July 1, 2023), <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/the-material-is-not-immaterial>.

¹³ Church Order, Articles 37 and 38.

In the preceding discussion, we affirmed that *corporate* worship exists as the biblical paradigm for all worship. Therefore, one ought to carefully define corporate worship and distinguish it from *individual* or *family* worship. As *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* helpfully states,

While believers are to worship in secret as individuals and in private as families, they are also to worship as churches in assemblies of public worship, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected or forsaken. Public worship occurs when God, by his Word and Spirit, through the lawful government of the church, calls his people to assemble to worship him together.¹⁴

Individual or family worship are in one sense derivative from and dependent upon corporate worship.

The distinction between corporate worship and other forms of worship is important when considering media technologies that communicate various elements of a corporate worship service to a remote audience. Technologies such as sermon audio, streaming video of a corporate service, or even interactive video platforms may benefit believers by augmenting or assisting individual or family worship. They are, however, inherently *dis-embodied*. Transmitting the content of a bodily, corporate worship service in space and time changes both how the content is received, and also the content itself.¹⁵

While we understand their origin, the terms “virtual worship” or “digital worship” are problematic because they fundamentally confuse the useful distinction between corporate, individual, and family worship. We believe it is wise to avoid using these terms. Our committee intentionally named itself the “Study Committee on Digital Media and Corporate Worship” to avoid any such confusion. While we recognize the invention of new digital media technologies raises important questions for the life of the church, it does not justify the creation of new categories or forms of worship. Indeed, these impulses ought to be resisted.

The Necessity of the Believer’s Physical Presence for Participation in Corporate Worship

Corporate worship necessarily involves participants being bodily present in the same location and being involved in the same activity. These factors result in this form of worship being referred to as “in-person” worship. There is something significant about the body of Christ coming together in person to worship our Lord and Savior. Paul provides insight into the corporate nature of the church as he details how God composes the body and how the members care for one another, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Corporate gathering of God’s people allows for the body of Christ to worship with and care for each other in a real and tangible way. Bearing one another’s burdens becomes extremely difficult when removed from worship and fellowship with God’s people.

¹⁴ Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Book of Church Order: the Directory for the Public Worship of God*, I.A.1.c, 2020 edition.

¹⁵ Cf. T. David Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family,” and, “The Material Is Not Immaterial.”

Biblically, participation involves three key elements: endorsing, experiencing, and contributing.¹⁶ All three elements of participation are significantly impaired when observing worship remotely. Depending upon the technology, remote observation of worship may or may not be a public act, and therefore the level of *endorsement* is more ambiguous than for those who attend in person. Further, viewing or hearing worship remotely creates a decidedly different *experience* than in-person attendance. As we recognize the difference between listening to recorded music and attending a live concert, we should also recognize a difference between remotely observing a worship service and being bodily present. One key factor of digital media is “distraction.”¹⁷ Additional distractions exist for the remote viewer in a different location. Being remote allows the ability to pause, mute, or otherwise “opt out” of the content, either temporarily or permanently. He or she can effectively “change the channel” by listening to a different sermon, a different preacher, or with a few clicks, choose a different church entirely. At a minimum, remote viewing radically transfers any *contribution* of the worshiper, if not making it impossible altogether. Many of the active elements of worship entail congregants addressing one another as they sing, confess, or pray to God (cf. Colossians 3:16). Worshiping remotely creates an altogether different experience, and ultimately limits contributing to public worship in any of the activities listed in Article 38 of the Church Order: singing, praise, praying, and the giving of offerings. A remote viewer does not add their physical presence to the public witness of the gathered church in worship. Applying such distinctions, those who view or hear worship via broadcast do not participate in corporate worship but rather utilize the broadcast of corporate worship to aid their worship in secret and/or in private.¹⁸

¹⁶ These three aspects of participating in something are drawn from where Scripture uses synonyms of “participating” (e.g., joining, partaking, partnering, fellowshiping, taking part, being a companion, contributing, and sharing). *Endorsing* can be seen in texts such as: Hosea 4:17; Matthew 23:30; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:21–22; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4, 23; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 5:7; Philippians 1:5; Philemon 17. *Experiencing* can be seen in texts such as: Proverbs 21:9; 25:24; Ecclesiastes 9:4; Romans 11:17; 15:27; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 9:10–12, 23; 10:16–20; 2 Corinthians 1:7; 13:14; Ephesians 3:6; Philippians 1:7; 2:1; 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:22; Hebrews 2:14; 3:1, 14; 6:4; 10:33; 12:8; 13:16; 1 Peter 4:13; 5:1; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:3–7; 2 John 11; Revelation 1:9. *Contributing* can be seen in texts such as: Proverbs 28:24; Isaiah 1:23; Malachi 2:14; Luke 5:7, 10; Romans 12:13; 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4, 23; 9:13; Philippians 4:15; 1 Timothy 6:18; Philemon 6; Hebrews 13:16.

¹⁷ Gordon, “Media Ecology for the Family.”

¹⁸ This understanding of corporate worship leads us to answer the first two questions put to this committee.

1. Can virtual or digital worship be corporate worship?

No, viewing or hearing a worship service remotely does not constitute participation in corporate worship. Technology which communicates elements of a corporate worship service to a remote location may assist in individual or family worship, but they do not transform it into corporate worship.

2. Is its validity limited in any way, and what are the key aspects or elements that must be present?

Significant benefits may result from the use of digital media to communicate audio and/or video from a corporate worship service to a remote audience. However, because participation in corporate worship requires local, bodily presence, this remote viewing shouldn't be understood as a valid form of participating in corporate worship. It is rather a means by which individual or family worship may be augmented. If we clearly understand that we are not seeking to emulate corporate worship for those who are not present, churches should feel free to use wisdom to determine which forms of digital media are most helpful for

How Our Theology of the Preached Word Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

The Scriptures teach that the preaching of the Word is one of the central elements of corporate worship, and our confessions clearly echo this. The Belgic Confession distinguishes between the “body and fellowship of the true church” and false sects by the manifestation of certain marks, noting “the church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel” (Article 29). In expounding the Second Commandment, the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes the importance of the “living preaching of the word” (Q. & A. 98), over and against the use of images. Later, the catechism teaches that the Fourth Commandment requires we “diligently attend the assembly of God’s people, to learn what God’s Word teaches,” among other elements of corporate worship (Q. & A. 103). The Second Helvetic Confession reflects the high view of preaching that characterized the Protestant Reformation when it states, “The preaching of the word of God is the very word of God,” and is therefore “living and active” as it aligns with Scripture (Hebrews 4:12; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The “living preaching of the Word” utilizes language and is delivered in the language of the congregation (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:1–19). Preaching is heard, and to some degree, understood corporately, as there are a multitude of congregants receiving the same message at the same time and place.¹⁹ The preached Word is not received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly, nor does the preacher directly address remote listeners who are absent from the physical gathering. While we acknowledge God uses print or audio media to expand the reach of the preached Word beyond the bounds of corporate worship, we also recognize the use of these media transforms the character of this message. In the gathered body of believers, the congregation not only receives the Word, but participates and responds in a way that incorporates and engages the other worshippers as well as the minister. Indeed, a faithful preacher must engage with his congregation as well as with his text. He must faithfully apply a text in the light of the needs of the congregation and the context in which he is preaching. Scripture records the speaking of an “amen” to prophesying or present-day preaching, and some persons who heard preaching responded with a question (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:16; Acts 2:37). While many of our churches do not include verbal responses within or after the preaching of the Word, every minister knows the reception of the message by the congregation impacts his delivery in real-time.²⁰

In contrast, remote worship is one-way communication. A word preached to a distant audience is merely received, without any immediate interaction or feedback provided to the preacher. While they hear the Word preached, they do not contribute to the event itself. Furthermore, the remote audience is not a “captive audience,” and thus exercises control of the sermon they hear. Remote listeners are free to mute, fast forward, skip, or depart altogether, with little or no consequence.

individuals and families engaging in secret or private worship.

¹⁹ In the case of someone who is hearing impaired, the spoken word may be translated into sign language without diminishing in any way the “living preaching of the word.”

²⁰ These aspects of the living preaching of the Word are missing when a video feed replaces the live ministration of the Word.

All of this affects how the preached Word is “received” since remote observers are entirely receptive in terms of the event and thus are more limited in their involvement than those who are physically present.²¹

How Our Sacramental Theology Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

Sacraments are visible and tangible signs and seals of an invisible grace. Thus, the sacramental nature of biblical worship constitutes one of the primary reasons why it is impossible to participate in corporate worship remotely. Sacraments convey the same message as gospel preaching. As the Belgic Confession, Article 33 states, “our good God...has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both when he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.” The Heidelberg Catechism notes in Q. & A. 66, that the sacraments “were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise.” Sealing requires physical contact. The sacraments are heard, seen, touched, smelled, and tasted which necessitate being bodily present where and when the event is occurring.

Sacraments are to be administered in the assembly of the saints. This emphasis on assembling as one body is reflected in our confessions. In baptism we “are received into God’s church and set apart from all other people and alien religions” (Belgic Confession, Article 34), and we submit that “receiving into” requires local presence.²² Regarding the Lord’s Supper, Article 35 of the Belgic Confession states, “We receive the holy sacrament *in the gathering of God’s people*, as we *engage together*, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, and as we thus confess our faith and Christian religion” (emphasis added).²³ The Westminster Confession of Faith (29.4) echoes this sentiment when it states, “receiving this sacrament...alone...is contrary to the nature of this sacrament and to the institution of Christ.” Reformational churches have always denounced “private” celebrations of the Lord’s Supper (i.e., of the Roman Mass). Any celebration of the Sacraments must not be a private matter but occur in the gathering of God’s people as a ministry of the church.

Sacraments are to be administered by ministers of the Word, not as a private devotional exercise. This is alluded to in Q. & A. 75 of the Heidelberg Catechism which says, “As surely as I receive *from the hand of him who serves*, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ’s body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for

²¹ This informs our answer to the third question posed by Synod:

3. What constitutes “the living preaching of the Word” (Lord’s Day 35, Question & Answer 98)? Is the Word preached received in the same way at home as it is in the assembly?

No, the preached Word is not received in the same way when it is received remotely via digital media.

²² Church Order, Article 42. Our church order clearly stipulates the ordinary practice of the churches in the post-apostolic era. We recognize there are extraordinary cases recorded in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 8).

²³ Church Order, Articles 45–46.

eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood” (emphasis added). Even if the elements are brought to the people by an elder, it is the minister, set apart to represent Christ, whose hand delivers the elements. The corporate nature of the sacraments rules out remote viewers administering the elements to themselves.²⁴

Every individual is to examine himself prior to coming to the Lord’s table (1 Corinthians 11:27–31), but the elders are also responsible to fence (i.e., guard) the table (1 Corinthians 5:11–13) since the Lord’s Supper is a “participation” in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16).²⁵ The elders fence the table by exercising church discipline, which is one of the two keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:15–20; John 20:22–23). Therefore, “the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude” the unbelieving and ungodly from admission to the Lord’s Supper (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 82). Remote viewers of worship cannot properly be admitted to the table by the elders because they are not bodily present.

Baptism as an initiation rite of the covenant is to be administered only once to individuals or households, and therefore the entire congregation does not receive the sacrament together. However, we as members of the church do participate in baptism by being reminded of our own baptism, renewing our covenant vows, and hearing God’s call on our lives. As a church body, we may also participate, promising “to receive this child in love, pray for him/her, help care for his/her instruction in the faith, and encourage and sustain him/her in the fellowship of believers.”²⁶ This vow points to the communal nature of the body of Christ. While a remote viewer of the baptismal rite may assent to the vow, they are unable to be held accountable for the corporate act.

While those observing worship remotely see the sacraments, and hear God’s Word and promises, they do not have access to the uniquely tangible and sensory aspects of the sacraments. Those absent are unable to receive the seal of divine grace, which requires physical contact. Furthermore, the communion of the saints we enjoy at the Lord’s Supper cannot be conveyed to a person who is not physically present (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).²⁷

²⁴ “In Matthew 28:19 the administration of baptism along with that of the Word has been entrusted to the apostles. They, along with the ministers, are the distributors of the mysteries of God, proclaimers of the ‘secrets’ that God has revealed in the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 4:1), stewards of God whose task is to distribute his grace (1 Corinthians 9:17; Titus 1:7–9). With reference to these mysteries, one must undoubtedly first of all think of the word of the gospel. But the sacrament follows the Word and is always connected with it. In Jerusalem the apostles devoted themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4). At the breaking of bread (20:7, 11), Paul spoke. Voicing the thanksgiving at the Lord’s Supper was a part of the ministry of the Word and therefore assigned to the minister, though like the breaking of bread in 1 Corinthians 10:16, it is represented as an act of the congregation. . . . This unique linkage of the administration of the Lord’s Supper to that of the Word proves that the minister acts in the name of Christ and functions as the steward and distributor of his mysteries. The Lord’s Supper is a meal whose host is Christ.” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 4, page 563).

²⁵ Church Order, Articles 45–46.

²⁶ Citation from the *Baptism of Infants* forms, Forms and Prayers, pages 11, 15. Compare with the forms for the baptism of adults (Forms and Prayers, pages 23, 26).

²⁷ The fourth question posed by Synod is as follows:

4. What place do the sacraments have for those participating in virtual or digital worship?

How Our Understanding of Discipline Informs Viewing or Hearing via Remote Broadcast

The Belgic Confession further teaches us that “the true church can be recognized” by the fact that “... it practices church discipline for correcting faults” (Article 29). While it may not be immediately apparent how practicing church discipline relates to the question of digital media and worship, it is in fact essential to the question. The first and primary obligation of a member is to “diligently attend the assembly of God’s people” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 103). Corporate worship is an important means of discipline, where God’s people are taught from God’s Word, called to repentance by the law, nourished and comforted by the gospel, and instructed in how to live in Christian gratitude.²⁸ The fellowship of the saints before, during, and after corporate worship is a crucial time during which informal discipline is able to take place among the saints as they exercise the general office of believer (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 32). It is also a crucial time during which the special officers exercise their calling by shepherding and caring for God’s people.

Christian discipline is a public ministry that takes place when the congregation is assembled (1 Corinthians 5:4; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 85). God’s people must be joined together as his family to be admonished and humbled as one body, to stir one another up to speak to and pray for their brother or sister, and to sorrow together and comfort one another when a member is admonished, excommunicated, or excluded from the fellowship. When someone who has been excluded from the Christian fellowship is readmitted, this is a public event in which the congregation reaffirms its love for and rejoices together with this reconciled brother or sister (2 Corinthians 2:6–8). For this reason our Church Order envisions that the ministry of official discipline take place publicly, in the gathered congregation with the use of the appropriate liturgical form (Church Order, Articles 55, 58, 60; Forms and Prayers, pages 56–62).

Therefore, those who use digital media to observe corporate worship remotely are failing to receive all the benefits of discipline in the church. Attendance at corporate worship is also one of the clearest markers by which the consistory may observe the vitality of a member’s faith. Attending the assembly of God’s people requires effort, and therefore reflects a commitment to being a part of the body of Christ. Everyone who is in attendance by definition is exercising a modicum of participation, even if they may be mentally distracted. However, the attention level of remote viewers is unobserved and unknown. This is why failure to attend worship services is a useful metric for a consistory to determine a greater need for pastoral care. If a member continues to violate the Fourth Commandment by willfully neglecting the assembly of God’s people (Hebrews

The sacramental nature of biblical worship is one of the primary reasons why it is impossible to participate in corporate worship remotely.

²⁸ While we ordinarily use “church discipline” narrowly to refer to the process whereby a consistory seeks the restoration of an unrepentant sinner (outlined in Church Order, Articles 55–60), we are here using “discipline” in a broader sense to refer to the discipling relationship between the under-shepherds and the flock, which incorporates a range of activities that are conducive to the care and nurture of souls. In our view, discipline as a mark of the church necessarily entails both constructive and corrective elements, both the “rod and the staff” of the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23:4).

10:25), this may be grounds for formal discipline and even the extreme remedy of discipline — excommunication.

Benefits to Viewing or Hearing Worship via Remote Broadcast

There are benefits for those who view corporate worship remotely. Objective benefits come about by the Spirit blessing the Word as it goes forth in its various forms; the Word is powerful and living and active (e.g., Isaiah 55:11; Romans 1:16–17; Hebrews 4:12). God promises to bless all of his people through his Word (e.g., Psalm 19:7–11; 119:9–16, 97–112). Those remotely observing a broadcast of public worship may hear the Word, sing and hear the praises of the church, set apart the Lord’s Day, join in the prayers of the church, and observe the administration of the sacraments and professions of faith. In addition, there may be subjective benefits which allow a degree of connection with the body to be felt; these can mitigate somewhat the loneliness members feel at the time of worship when they are unable to attend. Those who are unable to attend public worship are not rendered lesser Christians because of a genuine inability to be gathered together with God’s people.

Nevertheless, only in-person worship is corporate worship. It is the duty of the consistory to extend God’s call to the church to be gathered for public worship each Lord’s Day, and it is therefore the duty of members of the church to attend as they are able (cf. Church Order, Article 37). Viewing corporate worship remotely can serve as a help to preserve connection to the body of Christ during times of forced absence. However, it should not be used longer than necessary or be preferred to physically participating in corporate worship. If someone is unwilling to attend corporate worship or has arranged matters such that he is unable to attend corporate worship, that indicates a problem with someone’s heart that should be addressed and (by God’s grace) rectified. It should be the desire of every believer to attend in-person corporate worship; “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122:1; cf. Psalm 42). We should make every effort to attend in-person.²⁹

The Importance of Embodied Worship

We close our report with a note of gratitude for Synod’s mandate asking us to address a few crucial questions regarding the impact of digital media on the church’s worship. In the course of our labor,

²⁹ The final question posed by Synod is as follows:

5. Is participation using virtual or digital means still beneficial for those who cannot attend and why?

We do not believe those who view a service remotely are in any meaningful sense participating in corporate worship.

However, we believe that individual and family worship is both valid and extremely important in the life of the believer, and this importance is only greater when circumstances prevent individuals from attending corporate worship services, such as persecution, health concerns, weather, infirmity due to advanced age, etc. As noted in the report, there are benefits that may result from listening to or watching a corporate service of worship remotely.

the committee has been struck by a renewed appreciation for corporate worship and the practical importance of the body in Christian worship. We have been reminded of the crucial significance of gathered worship to our faith, and how the topic of worship inspires deep theological reflection that stretches across the loci, including theology proper, Christology, anthropology, creation, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

In this spirit, we wish to make it abundantly clear that we do not understand this report or the pastoral advice that follows to be the last word on this topic. Rather, we hope it is something of a first word, a clarion call encouraging our churches to reflect in a new way upon the importance of corporate worship. The cultural assumptions of our digital age present a wide range of challenges to a biblical model of the church as an incarnate people gathered together in a concrete place, an inbreaking of the New Creation and the age to come. We pray that our work may enhance the reflection needed to meet these challenges, and that our churches may thereby be all the more faithful when our Lord returns. Come, Lord, quickly.

C. Pastoral Advice

1. According to Scripture and our Reformed Confessions, corporate worship requires in-person gathering of the congregation under the direct oversight of the consistory.

Leviticus 23:1–3; Psalm 22:22–25; 96; 100; 107:32; 111:1; 122; 133; Matthew 16:19; Luke 4:16; Acts 2:42; Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 10:19–25; 13:17; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; cf. Church Order, Articles 14, 37, 38

2. Consistories should regularly remind their members that the power of the Lord Jesus is uniquely present when the congregation is assembled for worship, and every member should make a sincere effort to gather with the congregation in-person unless prevented by infirmity, illness, or other hindrance.

Psalm 22:22, 25 (cf. Hebrews 2:11–13); 68:26; 87:1–3; 95:1–2, 6–8; 100:2, 4; 133; Matthew 16:18–19; 18:18–20; 1 Corinthians 5:4–5; 14:23–25; 2 Corinthians 13:1–4; Hebrews 10:24–25; 12:22–29; Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 65–67, 83–85; Church Order, Article 37

3. Willfully forsaking the assembly is an act of disobedience. Consistories should therefore admonish members who are content to utilize digital means as a replacement for attending corporate worship. They should urge members to gather in-person with the congregation for the sake of their own spiritual welfare, for the edification of the congregation, and for the glory of Christ, the Head of the Church.

Psalm 35:18; 40:9–10; 122:1–2; 109:30; 111:1; 133:1–3; 149:1–2; Hebrews 10:25; 13:17; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 85

4. It is the duty of every member to exhort one another not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, and to encourage each other: “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Psalm 34:1–3; 122:1; 132:6–7; Hebrews 3:12–13; 10:23–25

5. Consistories should be careful that the language used with regard to broadcasting does not undermine the church's theology of embodied worship. Care should be taken to avoid using language such as "Please join us online for corporate worship" or "Welcome to those who are worshipping with us online."

Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; Church Order, Article 37

6. Watching/listening to a worship service remotely is not participation in corporate worship, yet many benefits may be received by those unable to attend. Potential benefits include: setting apart the Lord's Day, maintaining a degree of connection with their congregation, being fed by the ministry of the Word, and finding encouragement through the singing and praying of God's people.

Cf. Psalm 42 where the Lord stirs up David's heart remotely to long for God and remember the beauty of the assembly of God's people; Revelation 1:9–11

7. Consistories are encouraged to have a deliberative discussion of the proper use of digital media for their congregation, and how to minister to their members who are unable to attend corporate worship due to illness, infirmity, or other hindrance.

Matthew 25:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15; Hebrews 10:24; 13:3, 17; Belgic Confession, Article 32

8. The preaching of the Word may be published through digital media wherever and to whomever the church is able to proclaim the joyful message of the holy gospel.

Matthew 24:14; Romans 10:17–18; Philippians 1:12–14; 2 Timothy 2:8–9; Canons of Dort, II.5; cf. Canons of Dort, I:3

9. The living preaching of the Word has the central place in corporate worship. Digital media should not be considered a replacement for the living preaching of the Word.

Nehemiah 8:1–8; Acts 20:7; Romans 10:13–16; 1 Corinthians 2:3–5; 2 Corinthians 4:5–15; 1 Timothy 4:11–13; Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 96–98; Church Order, Articles 38, 40

10. When members are unable to join their own congregation in corporate worship on the Lord's Day because they are away from home, they should make every effort to gather in-person with a faithful congregation in another place in order to keep the Sabbath Day holy to the Lord and to build up the church they are visiting.

Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12; Luke 4:16; Acts 17:1–2

11. When members are unable to join in corporate worship and they choose to view or listen to a service remotely, they should give priority to their own congregation if digital means are available.

Ephesians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

12. The Lord’s Supper and baptism shall be administered in a service of corporate worship. Private communion and baptism are contrary to Scripture. Consistories are encouraged to have a deliberative discussion about livestreaming during the administration of the sacraments.³⁰

Luke 1:58; Acts 2:1, 40–41; 16:13–15; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17–22; Belgic Confession, Article 35; Church Order, Articles 41, 46

13. Since bringing Christian offerings is an act of corporate worship, churches should maintain the practice of receiving offerings on the Lord’s Day.

Deuteronomy 16:16–17; Psalm 96:8; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 103; Church Order, Article 38

14. The churches should be reminded to appreciate and enjoy through the Spirit’s power the many tangible benefits of diligently attending the assembly of God’s people for worship, such as:

- a. Greeting one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16)
- b. Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19)
- c. Hearing the voice of God together (Acts 2:42; Romans 10:14–17; Hebrews 12:25)
- d. Glorifying our God and Father with one voice and exalting his name together (Romans 15:6; cf. Psalm 34:3)
- e. Encouraging one another in our identity as God’s household and strengthening our fellowship with the body of Christ (Psalm 133; 1 Peter 2:5)
- f. Overcoming fear, sadness, or spiritual drift that result from being isolated from God’s people (Psalm 42–43; Hebrews 3:12–13; 10:25)
- g. Suffering and rejoicing together as members of one body (1 Corinthians 12:25–27)
- h. Increased joy in meeting brothers and sisters face-to-face (2 John 12; 3 John 13)
- i. Bringing joy to the spiritual leaders who watch over the souls of God’s people, who must give account for them, and who are grieved by absenteeism which is unprofitable for the members of the body (Galatians 6:6; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27)
- j. Encouraging one another in faith and good works and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:23–25)
- k. Testifying of God’s holiness to unbelievers through the congregation’s united, solemn worship (1 Corinthians 14:24–25)
- l. Exercising regular, meaningful accountability to your leaders and fellow members (Hebrews 10:25; 13:7, 17)

³⁰ Our Church Order uses the wording in Articles 41 and 46 of administering the sacraments “in a service of corporate worship.” We believe it is beyond the scope of this report to speak to the issue of the church’s administration of the Lord’s Supper to shut-ins, and we do not intend our advice here to address that topic.

III. Conclusion

We have attempted to define corporate worship carefully and distinguish it from other forms of worship. In our understanding, corporate worship requires physical presence, so any worship taking place absent from the assembly of God's people would necessarily be classified in another category of worship. Though not itself corporate worship, observing a corporate worship service remotely may still provide many benefits.

Grateful and humbled by the trust placed in us for this work, our committee thanks God for the unity and harmony our committee enjoyed in prayerfully laboring over this matter on behalf of the federation.

IV. Recommendations

We humbly submit the following recommendations:

1. That Synod recommend the report to the churches for further study, without adopting every formulation.

Grounds:

- a. The report provides a biblical, confessional, and theological foundation for the pastoral advice.
- b. There are many issues and situations related to this topic. The report provides a theological foundation that consistories can use to address related issues and situations.
- c. Technology changes, but biblical principles remain timeless. Knowing biblical principles, therefore, will help guide consistories in making future decisions in an ever-changing technological landscape.

2. That Synod adopt the pastoral advice provided and refer it to the churches.

Grounds:

- a. The churches have asked for pastoral advice on this subject.
- b. The pastoral advice applies the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity to particular circumstances in the life of the churches.
- c. The pastoral advice will assist the churches in shepherding the flock with regard to digital media and corporate worship.

3. That Synod instruct the federation Webmaster to post the report on the website. For the purpose of this recommendation, the report consists of sections II.A and II.B.

4. That Synod instruct the federation Webmaster to post on the website as a stand-alone document the pastoral advice that Synod approves.

5. That Synod permit the report to be published in booklet form. For the purpose of this recommendation, the report consists of sections II.A and II.B. Our committee has provided a suitable electronic document to the Stated Clerk that can be distributed for this purpose.
6. That Synod thank the study committee and dismiss it.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Dr. Brian Lee, chairman
Rev. Talman Wagenmaker, reporter
Rev. Todd De Rooy
Rev. Russell Herman
Rev. Dr. Danny Hyde
Rev. William Pols
Rev. Ryan Swale
Rev. Harry Zekveld

**Study Committee
On Human Sexuality
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

Mandate and Composition of the Study Committee

At its meeting in Buffalo, New York, in October 2022, Synod Niagara adopted the following recommendation:

That Synod accede to Overture 16 to “establish a study committee to address the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality, with a particular attention to same-sex attraction and transgenderism, providing biblical response to these matters as well as pastoral advice for both office-bearers and members on how to minister the Word of God to these matters,” with its grounds (adding to the first ground the words: “including the need for legal protection”).

In addition to the decision to appoint a study committee, Synod Niagara also adopted the following motions:

That Synod mandate the committee to address the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality, with particular attention to same-sex attraction and transgenderism, providing biblical response to these matters, as well as pastoral advice for both office-bearers and members on how to minister the Word of God to these matters.

That Synod instruct the committee to focus its attention on the nature of sin, temptation, and repentance, especially as it concerns sexual sins (for example, the use of the term “gay Christian,” the question of same-sex orientation, and how to minister to same-sex attracted members and those struggling with “transgenderism,” gender dysphoria, pornography, and other sexual sins).

That Synod instruct the committee to make appropriate use, where possible, of such reports issued by other NAPARC churches.

That Synod instruct the committee to include in its report a statement of affirmations and denials serviceable for legal protection for the churches.

Acts of Synod Niagara 2022, Article 37.

Synod Niagara also appointed seven members to the study committee:

Rev. Bill Boekestein (Michigan)
Rev. Greg Bylsma (Southwestern Ontario)
Rev. Joel Dykstra (Ontario East)
Rev. Chris Gordon (Southwest U.S.)
Rev. Andrew Compton (Central U.S.)
Dr. Jeff Doll (Michigan)*
Elder Mark Van Der Molen (Central U.S.)

*Note: Dr. Jeff Doll requested not to take part in the committee’s deliberations or the preparation of this report.

The Committee’s Work and Approach to its Mandate

In order to fulfill the mandate of Synod Niagara, the Committee deliberated in numerous Zoom meetings, and then in person in Escondido, CA in February 2024. The initial meetings were devoted to discussing the committee’s mandate and to determining the categories necessary for a report that would

serve the churches well in addressing the sexual revolution. The remainder of our meetings were spent discussing each section of the report and refining its contents with the goal of providing better clarity in the face of the culture's current confusion on human sexuality.

We took into consideration that there are at present many helpful NAPARC church reports that address the core doctrinal issues regarding human sexuality. The Committee agreed that our report would make grateful use of the study reports of other confessional Reformed churches in North America. A consensus was reached, however, that the aim of our report would be to address the issues given in the mandate in a more practical manner, with the goal of providing a guide for the churches, especially office bearers, in shepherding our people through the core issues of the movement.

The committee decided first to provide a brief sketch of the emergence and the challenges of the sexual revolution. Second, to provide summary statements that more fully explain the biblical and confessional issues that are germane for a proper, biblical, and creational sexual ethic. Third, to provide a list of the core affirmations and denials that would serve to address confessional issues, as determined from the Three Forms of Unity, and provide clarity for the churches in determining what is within and outside the boundaries of what we confess together on issues of human sexuality. These affirmations and denials are also serviceable for legal purposes should the churches need concise summaries of our foundational beliefs on these issues. And fourth, to provide a practical guide addressing the questions raised in the mandate with the goal of helping our churches through the more complex issues of the movement. This is followed with a glossary of terms and definitions that is designed to help bring clarity to key terms of common, conventional use so that the churches would speak clearly to the issues that often face purposeful confusion. Finally, the appendix commends the New Reformation Catechism on Human Sexuality, along with other helpful resources for further study and growth in helping our churches through these issues.

The committee offers the following report to the churches with earnest prayer to the Lord of the church that he will preserve us in the way of truth, and that our testimony regarding a biblical and creational sexual ethic will bring clarity in our time.

A Brief Sketch of the Emergence and Challenges of the Sexual Revolution

Over the past century, Western culture has experienced a radical change in our understanding of what it means to be human and how that is expressed in our sexual ethics. Our post-Freudian, neo-Marxist western culture has championed sexual identity as the most important truth for any individual pursuing happiness. While many of the current perversions of God's good creational norms and sexual ethic received societal restraint until the later part of the twentieth century, the past ten years have witnessed the escalation of practices that are against nature, as the apostle Paul describes in Romans 1.

The redefinition of marriage to include same-sex unions in the U.S. Supreme Court's Obergefell decision of 2015 has provided legal sanction and even encouraged unrestrained behaviors that are offensive in the eyes of our God, harmful to the good of our neighbor and to a well-functioning society. Rulings against Trinity Western and conversion therapy have had a similar effect in Canada. Most importantly, these perversions of God's good design in marriage, family, and human sexuality evidence a society given over to lawlessness in its hatred of God. Organized under the banner of LGBTQ+, homosexuality, transgenderism, gay "marriage," along with the obliteration of God-assigned biological sex in creating us as either male or female, these perversions are normalized and celebrated by mainstream culture.

At present, with the accelerated unraveling of creational norms and the embrace of what is contrary to nature, Christians find themselves living in a world that demands the acceptance, defense, and celebration of every tenet of the sexual revolution. Refusing the demand for acceptance may come at the pain of exclusion from the benefits of being good citizens of society. Full participation in the workplace and in wider society increasingly require submission to the prevailing ideals of the moral revolution and the reset of all creation norms.

The church must help God's people address these issues both biblically and confessionally, even as Christians are daily being catechized by the culture to embrace the new sexuality. In an attempt to gain

cultural acceptance, some quarters of the Christian church in the West have accepted many of our culture's ideologies. Other movements with the Christian church in the West have attempted to forge a middle way by adopting an identity in unnatural desire, such as being a gay Christian, so long as the desires are not acted upon. If the current trajectory continues the church will witness a much wider acceptance of sexual perversions as permissible "Christian" identity and behavior, championed in the name of love.

For these reasons, the church must be clear and bold in addressing the sexual revolution, providing a positive view of God's creational ethic and the power of the gospel to set people free to pursue sexual purity. Our churches cannot afford to remain silent in the face of these challenges. Great attention must be given to helping the most vulnerable among us, especially our children, in exposing the lies of the evil one. The church must provide constant and sound teaching, telling people the truth, in love, about creation, anthropology, and the goodness of God's created order. In short, the church must do what she has always been called to do: train God's people in the truths that we confess together, using wisdom to apply these truths to the challenges posed by the current sexual revolution.

Our testimony to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is richly set forth in our Three Forms of Unity, demands that we carefully examine the claims of the sexual revolution in the light of God's Word. This is our obligation to our King and the head of the church, Jesus Christ. And in so doing, we will proclaim the only way to live as a holy people, set apart and pleasing to the Lord.

Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality

Article 1: Creation

At creation God made two sexes, "in the image of God he created them, male and female he made them (Gen. 1:26-27)." The purpose of our creation in the image of God is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, as male and female (Deut. 6:5). God commanded that we use the excellent qualities with which he made us in true righteousness and holiness, in body and soul, as male and female, for his own glory, as we exercise dominion over the earth. We were created to find fulfilment in the will of God as he determines how we are to live for his glory (Belgic Confession Article 12, 14).

Article 2: Biological Sex

God commands all people to glorify and enjoy him forever as he created them either as male or female (Lev. 19:18). It is contrary to nature and to the will of God for anyone to attempt to change their biological sex. God designated his creation of male and female as good and as something that belongs to the natural order (Gen 1:31; Ps. 100:3). To introduce gender as a new category of personhood, wholly unrelated to the biological category of sex, in pursuit of a different sexual identity, is unnatural to the created order and harmful to the purpose for which God made humanity. Any attempt to reverse God's creation of male and female due to fallen thoughts or self-perceptions is an act of rebellion and a gross distortion of God's creative handiwork in specifically forming us for his own glory (Rom. 1:21-27; Belgic Confession Article 14).

Article 3: Marriage

God established the institution of marriage at creation, bringing together the man and the woman and blessing marriage as a state honorable to all (Gen 2:18). Marriage is designed to be a lifelong, covenantal union between one man and one woman (Mark 10:6-9). Co-habitation, being unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14), same-sex unions, etc., are contrary to what God instituted at creation and a direct violation of his will. From creation, the purpose of marriage is that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, living together for life in mutual harmony and love (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:21-25). In marriage, God provides a proper setting for a husband and wife to enjoy each other in the

physical and relational desires he gave to them (Heb 13:4). Further, through marriage God increases the human race through the institution of the family, enriches society by providing an orderly function, provides training of children in the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and generally advances his kingdom (Gen 1:26-28). Marriage also is designed to represent the mystery of Christ and his church. Husbands and wives are called to honor the union of marriage as God has ordained and, therefore, man has no right to change or unbiblically separate this union (Matt. 19:6; Eph 5:25; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 41).

Article 4: Sin

In the fall of man into sin, we rebelled against God's creation order through the instigation of the devil, plunging ourselves into ruin through the obeying of sinful desires contrary to God's law (Gen. 3:16). The fall has so affected humanity that even the desires of our hearts have become distorted and fallen so that not even our hearts can be trusted as we are prone to be carried away by various passions (2 Tim. 2:6). We sin when we entertain and practice the sinful desires of our hearts (Jas 1:14). All impure thoughts and desires, prior to our acting upon them, are considered sin in God's eyes (Matt. 15:18-20). God is angry with the sinful desires we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit, and he has declared that he will punish with a just judgment, both now and in eternity, all sin against his holy law (Rom. 1:18ff; Belgic Confession Article 15).

Article 5: Redemption

Jesus Christ has announced in the gospel that all who repent and believe the gospel are freely granted the forgiveness of all sins, including sexual trespasses, as he cancels the record of our debt and covers our guilt, and grants and credits to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if we had never sinned nor been a sinner (Col. 2:13-14; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 23). Christ's death, burial, and resurrection has set us free from slavery to any form of sexual sin (Rom. 6:1-14; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 8). As new creatures in Christ we are called to live with a renewed desire to reckon ourselves as dead to our old ways of sexual immorality and alive to God in pursuing a sexually pure life for his glory (1 Thess. 4:3; Belgic Confession 17; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 5, 6, 7, 32, 33).

Article 6: Identity

In our redemption God recreates us into the image of Jesus Christ through union with him (Rom. 8:29) giving us a new identity in Christ. We are salt and light in this world, separated from identifying with the desires, passions, and practices of the old man. Our sinful desires no longer define us or constitute our identity. Any pursuit in establishing an identity through sinful desires is expressly forbidden by God's law. In union with Jesus Christ, we are to be satisfied in God's love as his adopted children. To invite that which is profane into our holy union with Christ is incompatible with a new life in Christ and, therefore, we are called to flee all forms of sexual immorality in the Christian life (1 Cor. 6:16; Rom. 6:15-20; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 33; Canons of Dort II, Article 8).

Article 7: Repentance and Sexual Purity

As new creatures in Christ, we are called to confess our sins and eagerly turn away from all forms of sexual sin and to seek to walk in the newness of life. God has promised that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and will forgive all of our sexual trespasses when we come to him with a broken and contrite heart (Pss. 32, 55; 1 Jn 1:8-2:2). Believers who continue to struggle against sexual sins should trust in Christ's forgiving mercies, and by the strength of the Holy Spirit given through the means of grace, strive to walk in the newness of life. Genuine repentance involves the dying-away of the old self by hating and fleeing all forms of sexual immorality, and the rising-to-life of the new self, by finding delight in leading a sexually pure life (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 33). Since fleeing sexual

immorality is the will of God for our sanctification, the Christian should pursue a life of sexual purity to show that he is thankful to God for his salvation. The Holy Spirit is committed to strengthen the Christian's walk as one battles against the sinful nature (1 Thess. 4:3; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 41).

Article 8: Pornography

Pornography serves the lustful desires of the sinful flesh, through the channel of the eye, through the looking upon or distribution of naked images of males and females for the purpose of sexual arousal. Pornography use is often associated with masturbation. Pornography use and solo sex are sins against one's own body, and the will of God. Pornography ruins the sexual intimacy intended for marriage (1 Cor 6:16, 17); it empties sex of its significance (Gen. 2:24), habituates sexual selfishness (1 Cor. 7:3), encourages and rewards lust (Matt. 5:28). Pornography also dehumanizes men and women, promotes abuse especially of women, advances other forms of sexual immorality, creates idols in society to the harm of our neighbors, and degrades the mind into darkness. Coupled with pornography use, habitual self-stimulation impedes proper sexual function. The use of pornography is expressly condemned as a way of serving the lusts and passions of the old man and is incompatible with the new life in Christ (Matt. 5:28; 1 Cor. 7:9). God's children must reject "all unchaste actions ... thoughts, [and] desires" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 109, cf. Eph. 5:3,4) and control our bodies in holiness and honor (1 Thess. 4:4).

Article 9: Husbands and Wives

Husbands and wives are to model in marriage the love that Christ has for his church. Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, nourishing and cherishing them (Eph 5.25, 28-29); practicing headship modeled on that of Christ (Eph 5:23); not being harsh with their wives (Col 3.19); living with their wives in an understanding way, and showing honor to her as a fellow heir of Christ (1 Pet 3.7). Wives are to submit to their husbands in everything as to the Lord (Eph 5.22, 24) and as is fitting in the Lord (Col 3.18).

Both husbands and wives are to treat each other according to the "one another" passages of Scripture (e.g., Eph 4:1-2, Col 3.12-13), including showing loyalty, kindness, understanding, tenderness, humility, self-control, sexual purity, love, patience, encouragement, self-denial, contentment, seeking the other's good, and avoiding abusive and manipulative behavior.

In this way, husbands and wives model before all the love and purity that is intended to be enjoyed in marriage (Eph. 5:22-33; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 39 & 41).

Article 10: The Family

Christians have a peculiar witness to our culture when the family is maintained to the glory of God. In our families, Christ should be made the center of our homes through love, humility, and patience toward one another, godly discipline of children, the regular reading of Scripture, heartfelt prayer, and family worship, removing all things spiritually harmful from our homes, and making Lord's Day worship a priority together (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 39).

Article 11: Singles

Singles are called to honor the Lord in the situation that God has called them. Singles who desire marriage are called to holiness, contentment, and prayer, trusting the Lord in every circumstance of his providence, waiting upon his provision of a spouse (while using godly means to pursue marriage), and finding delight in the Lord who makes us fulfilled whether as single or married. Christians who believe they are gifted with singleness are called to holiness and contentment, giving undivided devotion to the Lord, while remaining open to God's will to provide a spouse and change one's desire for marriage (1 Cor. 7:17).

Article 12: Training Children and Young Adults

In the training of children, parents should model before their children a loving relationship, holding marriage in high honor as God designed it. Parents are called to speak to their children, in a way appropriate and sufficient to their maturity, about biblical sexuality and proper sexual conduct as designed for marriage. Parents should be active in guarding their children from all forms of sexual immorality and pornography that promote a different sexual ethic than what God made as good in creation, including overseeing their use of technology and social media. Both children and young adults honor their parents by maintaining sexual purity and chastity and refraining from pushing their parents to accept the ungodly sexual norms of the culture (Ep. 6:1-4; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 39).

Article 13: Christian Witness

As Christians find themselves living in a world where sexual sin is normalized, maintaining sexual purity is a crucial part of Christian witness. Believers should respond by speaking the truth in love about sexual sin, repentance, and faith in Christ, giving witness to the deliverance God has given us from our own sins and performing acts of kindness. Christians should not neglect those mastered by sin outside of the church (1 Cor. 5:12,13). The body of Christ should similarly not avoid those who struggle in the pursuit of repentance of sexual sin. Instead, with a spirit of compassion, they should "bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2). By our godly living, we should seek to win our neighbors over to Christ (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86; Jn 13:35; Belgic Confession Article 24; Canons of Dort II Article 5).

Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality

A. Honoring God's Supreme Authority Over Human Sexuality

We affirm:

1. The Word of God is God's revelation of his infallible rule for faith and life (Belgic Confession Article 5).
2. The Word of God is true, perfect, and complete in everything it teaches, including on matters of human sexuality. All things taught contrary to the Bible must be rejected (2 Timothy 3:16; James 1:21-24; Belgic Confession Article 7).
3. The Word of God teaches as godly and right the disobedience of earthly authority when this authority demands others to violate the revealed will of God.

We deny:

1. That any person, group of people, organization, or governmental entity has the authority to redefine God's created institution of marriage or his created order of human sexuality, or to declare sinful desires and attractions as good, or bind the consciences of Christians, or compel actions contrary to the Bible and our Reformed Confessions and the following Affirmations and Denials (Rom 13:1-7; *Belgic Confession* Art. 36; URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #15).

B. Male & Female Sexual Identity

We affirm:

1. God made two biological sexes at creation: male and female, created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 26-27; 2:18).
2. Attempts to change or identify as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is a sinful act of rebellion against God's creative handiwork (Genesis 2:7; Psalm 100:3).
3. Knowingly using pronouns or language that identifies an individual as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is condoning such sinful rebellion and is not speaking the truth in love to our neighbor (Ephesians 4:15; Exodus 20:16).
4. The fall has impacted the biological creation such that some people may be biologically indeterminate as that sex (e.g., "intersex"); nevertheless, these deficiencies do not negate the objective categories of persons being created male or female.

We deny:

1. That gender is a legitimate category wholly unrelated to the two distinct biological sexes which God created.
2. That physiological sexual anomalies or psychological distortion of sexual identity can change the God ordained order of two biological sexes made at creation.
3. That sexual identity is mutable and that we have the prerogative to identify ourselves as something other than how God made us as either male or female.

C. Marriage & Sexual Relations

We affirm:

1. Marriage is designed to be a lifelong, monogamous, covenantal union between one biological man and one biological woman (Proverbs 2:17; Mark 10:6-9; Ephesians 5:22-33; Gen. 2:18-25; Matt. 19:4-6; Church Order of the URCNA, Seventh Edition, Article 48; URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #10).
2. Sexual relations are reserved for the marriage bond between one biological man and one biological woman (Prov. 5:18-19, URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #5).

We deny:

1. That any sexual desires in or outside of marriage which are contrary to the moral law of God are acceptable (Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 5:1).

D. Original Sin, Desire & Temptation

We affirm:

1. God made us holy and happy but accepting the lie of the devil, we have robbed ourselves of these blessings by obeying sinful desires (Genesis 3:16-19; Psalm 14; Romans 3:10-18).
2. When temptations come from without, being tempted is not sin, unless we enter into the temptation. But when the temptation arises from within, it is our own act and is rightly called sin (Genesis 39: 6-12; Matthew 4:1-10; Jas. 1:14).
3. Christians have the duty to increasingly put sin to death in their lives which includes the sinful lusts and desires of the heart. Although one may not formally engage in a sinful outward act, even entertaining any desire contrary to God's law is sin itself. The new man in Christ is to pursue righteousness and holiness having been set free by the grace of Christ

(Col. 3:5-17; Eph. 5:3ff; Heidelberg Catechism Q. 88-90; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 99:5,6).

4. Sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will are still sin since they proceed from a corrupt nature (Matthew 15:19; James 1:15; Heidelberg Catechism Q. 6-8).
5. Such sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions that arise from our corrupt nature as well as our actual sins are deserving of God's condemnation and require our repentance (Romans 7:14-25; Genesis 3:16 Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 10).
6. Proper sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions for the other sex are natural and good but are sinful when these are exercised outside the bonds of marriage (Matthew 5:28; Heidelberg Catechism Q. 10).
7. Sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions for the same sex are unnatural and heinously sinful, even if not entertained or acted upon (Romans 1:24-26; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 151).
8. Identifying oneself according to the sinful sexual ideologies of the sexual revolution (*e.g.*, “gay Christian”, “trans-Christian/transgender-Christian”) is contrary to God's command to repent of sexual sin and believe the gospel (Romans 1:24-26; Romans 12:2).

We deny:

1. That impure, though unchosen sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions are acceptable.

E. Gospel Witness and Restoration

We affirm:

1. Through repentance and faith in Christ we are granted forgiveness of all our sexual sin, whether arising from our original corruption, thoughts, words, or deeds (Romans 1:16,17; Hebrews 10:10).
2. The gospel promises to free us from slavery to any form of sexual sin and makes us new creatures in Christ with a desire to pursue a sexually pure life to the glory of God (Romans 6:11; Ephesians 1:7-14).
3. Christ by His Spirit enables Christians to begin to live according to all the commandments of God, including the command for sexual purity (1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 114).
4. The church is called to rejoice in the repentance of those who have been guilty of committing sexual immorality. When they turn to faith in Jesus Christ, we are to embrace them in the household of God as loved and forgiven fellow believers (Luke 15:11-32; John 21:15-19).
5. The church is to show the love of Christ in a deliberate and discerning manner to any and all people. As Christ our Lord applied the truth to differing people in different contexts, applying the moral law to the sins practiced in His time, so the church must follow His example (John 8:1-11; John 4:16-17; Matthew 23:27).

6. Christian compassion does not mean justifying any sin or ignoring potential dangers posed by those who commit heinous sins against God's created order (1 Corinthians 5:1-8), Similarly, repentance for sin includes accepting reasonable consequences to ensure the protection of the vulnerable, especially when past sin has put the vulnerable at risk.

We deny:

1. That sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, and predispositions are immutable characteristics constituting a person's identity.
2. That sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, and predispositions will be eradicated in this life, as we remain sinners saved by grace.
3. That concupiscence is an excuse not to fight against sin or to yield to it.
4. That repentance and healing negates ongoing accountability intended to protect the vulnerable.

Frequently Asked Questions on Human Sexuality

1. How Can I Stay Sexually Pure Before Marriage?

Marriage provides a proper setting for Christians to address sexual temptation (1 Cor. 7:9), but marriage may not be possible. There are several things one can do to promote sexual purity in the condition one is called (1 Cor. 7:24).

First, understand the uniquely destructive threat of sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:18). An unrelenting commitment to fornication will exclude a person from heaven (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

Second, become an active member of a faithful church. In our sexually permissive culture, God has provided the local church to help the believer stand against sexual sin and provide hope for those struggling with sexual sin.

Third, take responsibility for sexual purity. Repent of sexual failures, develop friendships with people who value purity and are who willing and able to hold you accountable. Resist sin, use wisdom in avoiding temptation, and pursue marriage if applicable.

Finally, embrace your new identity in Christ. Believers are washed, sanctified, justified, and bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:9–20). Believers are provided the resources they need to honor God's will for their sexuality.

2. How Can I Prepare for Marriage Honorably?

Marriage is a creational institution given by God to provide companionship, protect children, preserve sexual purity, and encourage sanctification. Marriage symbolizes the union between Christ and the church. Believers who desire marriage should prepare in the following ways:

First, become a suitable partner. Believers in Christ should bring to marriage a strong commitment to Christ and a delight to do God's will. Ideal spouses are those set apart to Christ beforehand, and the pursuit of holiness will be a blessing to their future partner. Develop those qualities that benefit a marriage like self-control, selflessness, and servanthood.

Second, be selective. A Christian is not permitted to pursue any romantic relationship with someone who is an unbeliever that could result in an unequally yoked marriage (2 Cor. 6:14). Believers must marry—and therefore also date—only in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39).

Third, have clear intentions. Scripture has no detailed code for dating. Yet, all romantic relationships should be intentional and aimed toward marriage.

Fourth, pursue wisdom. Counsel should be sought from parents, pastors, elders, or other spiritual friends in every stage of a romantic relationship.

Finally, practice biblical courage. Commitments can be intimidating, and rejection is often feared. But loving commitments should not scare us or cause undue anxiety as we choose to walk in the way of obedience by marrying only in the Lord.

3. How Should I Love My Neighbor Who Identifies as LGBTQ+?

God calls us to love our neighbors (Matt. 22:39) regardless of their gender-identity or sexual orientation. We must accept our responsibility to love fellow image-bearers without approving their lifestyle.

To love others well requires holiness in your own walk with God. We should remember ~~that~~ the Lord has declared, “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, so turn and live” (Ezek. 18:32). Those who sin with indifference are disqualified from judging others (Matt. 7:5).

Yet, Christians are called to judge righteously (Jn 7:24). Homosexuality is a sin (e.g., Rom. 1:26–27). People who love any sin more than God will not inherit his kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Believers love their neighbors by warning them of the cost of living in sin.

Believers should speak the truth in love with the goal of setting people free in the gospel. The Bible’s condemnation of sin frames the good news that whoever believes in Christ shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Our message to those who identify as LGBTQ+ neighbors should be: “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11), and those who confess and repent of their sin, and turn to Jesus Christ in true faith, receive his righteousness credited to them. We should be willing to tell our neighbors that God has a plan for our sexuality that is more satisfying and fulfilling than the values shaped by our culture and the desires of our sinful hearts.

4. Which Pronouns Should I Use?

Pronoun use is being used by the world to support the individual expression of someone’s identity contrary to their biological sex. Christians should not knowingly use pronouns or misleading proper names that contradict the biological sex of someone made in the image of God, for the following reasons:

First, names are significant. God gave Adam the privilege of naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20) and his wife (Gen. 3:20). The role of Adam in creational naming forbids us to use inaccurate titles.

Second, gender is binary and assigned by God. God created male and female (Gen. 1:27). To compromise on gender through false designations, rejects God’s sovereignty in designating our sex, and undermines an essential component of our image bearing.

Third, unlike many names (cf. Gen. 10:2 and Hos. 1:3), pronouns are inherently gendered. Traditional pronouns reflect God’s good creational order.

Fourth, kindness does not permit lying. Scripture demands kindness (Col. 4:6). But kindness cannot cancel the truth about someone as an image bearer of God (Col. 4:4). Christians must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) no matter how unpopular with the world.

Finally, pronouns can often be avoided by using proper names or fitting titles (server, police officer, etc.).

5. If I Become a Christian, Will I Be Free of Same-Sex Attraction?

A Christian who is delivered from the dominion of sin in this life may continue to face ongoing temptation to perverse sexual sin and may not immediately have a romantic desire for the opposite sex after conversion. However, the reordering of our affections as we walk by the Spirit (i.e., to joyfully pursue holy sexuality) is something Christians should humbly and hopefully expect. Christians should not believe this temptation will always be their burden; God will begin to set them free in this life and will fully perfect them in the next. This freedom is experienced as God gives believers a hatred for past sin and a delight in holy love as they walk daily in faith and repentance.

Regardless of our progress in sanctification, Christians should never identify themselves by temptations they face. Even if we still struggle, we should not identify ourselves as “gay Christians,” but as saints chosen in Christ, holy and beloved of God (Col. 3:12).

6. How Should We Respond to Family Members who Identify as LGBTQ+?

Gross sin that is practiced in our families can create great pain and brokenness. As we strive to honor God and love unbelievers in our families, there are important ways to address this challenge.

First, embrace the gospel promise: no matter how far someone has progressed in sin, God’s power can restore them through repentance and faith in Christ. Prayer for our family members is one of the most important ways we can help them.

Second, protect the vulnerable. Be aware of how the introduction of ungodly ideas and technology may tempt other children in the home. Do not allow “love” to lead others into sin.

Third, maintain beneficial contact where possible. Set boundaries to allow for contact without embracing their lifestyle. This will vary based on the situation. Flagrant, aggressive sin, or sin held alongside a claim of being a Christian, will require greater degrees of separation.

Fourth, use wisdom when addressing their sin; lifestyle choices do not need to be confronted at every visit. A word fitly spoken and in due season should be considered (Prov. 15:23). Pray for opportunities to boldly witness of Christ, and for ways to positively influence them as a family member.

Finally, Christians or Christian organizations should never participate in functions that celebrate sin (e.g., weddings, baptisms). In promoting God-centered schooling, parents must be vigilant in resisting the LGBTQ+ agenda. Loving sinners may never lead us to support their lifestyle or suggest God’s blessing up on sinful behavior.

7. How Should we Honor our Bodies?

Christians in first-century Corinth failed to see how their Christian faith (a *spiritual* commitment) impacted the use of their *physical* bodies. They excused illicit sexual acts under the assumption that it wouldn’t damage their *spiritual* walk with God (cf. 1 Cor. 6:14-20). Today we face a similar challenge.

The church must reemphasize the inherent value God has placed on our physical bodies both as bodies created in God’s image (Gen. 9:6) and as bodies united to Christ through His redemptive work (1 Cor. 6:18-20, Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1). This must impact the way we view and use both our bodies and the bodies of others around us. Marriage is to, “Be held in honor among all,” and the, “Marriage bed...undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). Our homes and church cultures must reject worldly trends such as nudity and promiscuity in entertainment, coarse jesting regarding sexuality and purity, and objectifying the human body (either male or female). These lead us away from the purity to which God calls us.

We must teach a standard of modesty and honor that safeguards purity in others as well as ourselves. We must positively teach the inherent value of our physical bodies in the eyes of our holy God, encourage a commitment to honor that value for Christ and His glory, and warn that departing from God’s standard brings judgment (Heb. 13:4). As those made in His image, we must honor his will regarding the goodness of our bodies.

8. How are We to Handle Sexual Offenders Who Seek to Join the Church?

The Lord may bring into his church, through repentance and faith, someone who has been guilty of sexual crimes against others. This situation can be a challenge for the body of Christ. Welcoming repentant sinners does not mean all consequences of sin are erased even while we rejoice in the deliverance God has provided. There are a few principles churches should remember:

First, we always praise the Lord for repentance and restoration by the gospel. A hardened criminal (like the apostle Paul) can become a redeemed and trustworthy child of God through the power of God’s word and Spirit.

Second, we recognize that spiritual restoration does not remove ongoing consequences of sin. A repentant criminal may continue to suffer legal consequences for his actions, and church elders should be aware that ingrained patterns may not change overnight. Where those patterns seriously threaten the flock of Jesus (Mt. 18:6), elders must be loving and wise.

In certain circumstances, it may be wise to communicate the nature of the crime to the congregation or to require convicted sexual offenders to be accompanied by a responsible person while attending church. Further, great caution should be used before integrating the person into a position which would suggest trustworthiness to vulnerable members. Where the sin affected others in church, local elders may encourage the offender, even after repentance, to worship in another faithful church so that the victim is not displaced from their home church. Elders should shepherd the offender to find a church and speak openly with the leadership of the new church to maintain awareness and accountability for Christ’s flock.

A Glossary of Terms

The following glossary defines its theological and ethical terms with particular application to matters of human sexuality. A quality theological dictionary should be consulted for a more fulsome definition of some of these terms.

Term	
Adultery	Unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires and whatever may incite someone to them.

Affirm/Affirmation	The societal expectation that sinful sexual choices and desires must be affirmed--i.e., celebrated, encouraged, and declared to be normal. This is based on the belief that expressive individualism is fundamental for humanity's flourishing.
agender	A term for people who claim that they are without a gender.
asexual	A term for people who claim they are not sexually attracted to anyone.
attraction	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God which enables us to find the beauty of God's creation appealing. In sexual matters attraction refers to sexual appeal.
Authentic/Authenticity	The belief that being true to yourself, however that self is defined, is a moral and virtuous act. In LGBTQ+ settings, it refers to embracing, affirming, and living out one's sexual attractions or gender identity whether or not they reflect God's revealed will.
Bestiality	A sin committed by sexual activity with an animal.
Binary	A term which refers to God's creation of only two genders: the male and female sex. See non-binary.
chaste, chastity	the willing acceptance of the Lord's call to his people in their sexuality as it is expressed in words, dress, and relationships.
Cisgender	A term used in LGBTQ+ discourse to refer to people whose gender identity is the same as their biological sex. It is used to suggest that cisgender and transgender are equally normal.
Concupiscence	That innate or instinctive powerful sexual desire or lust that is sinful. There is a belief, especially promoted by the Roman Catholic Church and Side B Christianity, that disordered desires which afflict humans due to the Fall do not become sin without a consenting act of the will.
contentment	As relates to sexuality, contentment is an emotional, mental, and spiritual state wherein an individual joyfully accepts the Lord's will for his/her sexual life.
Covenant (marriage, sex, divorce, etc.)	The bond that unites husband and wife in love and fidelity, including both promises and obligations. It is the exclusive setting within which sex is to be enjoyed. This covenant can only be ended by death or by a radical violation of the bond through adultery or abandonment.
Cross-dressing	See transvestite
Desire, Sexual	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God whereby we entertain thoughts about and/or actively work to enjoy sexual intimacy with another image bearer of God.
Drag	See transvestite
desire, sinful	That aspect of our fallen identity as sinners whereby we thoughts about or work to obtain that which is contrary to God's will.

divorce (sexual focus)	That grievous consequence of unfaithfulness in a marriage covenant resulting in the ending of that relationship. The Scripture indicates two legitimate reasons for divorce (sexual immorality and abandonment).
Expressive individualism	The belief that one must have unhindered opportunity to share and live out one's personal feelings and desires to be realized and authentic as a human being.
Fall, the	Man's rebellion against his Creator by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All disordered sexual attractions, desires, development, and anatomy, as well as all sexual perversions and rebellion against our Creator originate in and are a result of the fall.
family	The social unit created by God for the purpose of advancing a healthy society and the kingdom of God through the distinctive roles of husband and wife--through their biological and anatomical sexual complementarity--and through the raising of children.
Female (sex / gender)	Those image bearers of God of the biological and anatomical female sex who are typically able to bear children.
fornication	Any sexual immorality committed by persons who are not yet married.
Gay	Historically the word gay refers to men who are attracted sexually to other men. Currently the word can be used to describe all members of the LGBTQ+ movement (Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, etc.). Similar to queer.
gay Christian	The mistaken identification of Christians who struggle with sinful same-sex-attracted desires which fails to acknowledge the radical nature of redemption in Christ. Though it should be rejected, some Christians use this language to help others understand the particular spiritual challenge of homosexual attraction and temptation.
Gender	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God that expresses the biological maleness or femaleness of our sex. The LGBTQ+ movement views this as that aspect of our identity as autonomous individuals that expresses how we experience our sexuality.
Gender Identity	A term used to refer to an individual's personal gender expression. It is often used to suggest that gender exists on a continuum that is not related to biological and anatomical sex. See Gender.
Genderqueer	See non-binary
Gender Affirming Care	A euphemism for surgical and pharmacological interventions which attempt to make an individual's physical appearance match their claimed gender identity.
Headship	That biblical teaching which refers to husbands as the leading authority in the marriage. Though prone to abuse in fallen man, godly-headship reflects the leadership of Christ in this world.
Heteronormative	A term for the expression of the heterosexuality of God's created order within law, culture, business, etc. This term is used pejoratively for the residual expression of a previous cultural imagining which enforces heterosexuality as normative.

heterosexual	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God whereby we are sexually intended/designed for and attracted to the opposite sex.
Homosexual	A term that refers to individuals attracted to the same sex. In LGBTQ+ discourse, the term has been labeled offensive and the term "gay" is suggested as a less offensive term.
Hormone Treatment	A medical treatment that can address deficiencies in ordinary human hormonal balance, but in LGBTQ+ settings refers to a treatment taken by people attempting to transition to their claimed gender; it is intended to align their hormonal balance with their desired gender by suppressing and/or supplementing the hormones that ordinarily accompany their biological and anatomical sex.
Identity	That aspect of our being image bearers of God that distinguishes us from all other creatures. In modern parlance identity refers to our self-perception or self-definition freeing us from the imposition of an identity by God or others.
Idle thoughts	Thoughts that are useless or yield no advantage or edification; those lustful thoughts or fantasies that we may dismiss as harmless but are under the judgment of God.
Image of God	that aspect of humanity's creation which, especially before the fall into sin, revealed itself in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The image of God distinguishes and exalts humanity above all other creatures and according to Genesis 1:27 (cf. Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6) is expressed as male and female.
Intersectionality	The belief that the intersection of social identities (race, gender, class, etc.) contributes to oppression, privilege, or both.
Intersex	A general term for different physical conditions in which a person is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the ordinary anatomical features of the female or male sex. This may include chromosomes, gonads, or genitals that do not allow an individual to be physically or medically identified as male or female.
Intimacy (sexual)	The state of closeness of body and soul between two people. The most intimate relationship is marriage, and in marriage intimacy is uniquely expressed in sexual union.
Love	According to our culture, love is that emotion one feels towards another person or object. Biblical love is a heartfelt commitment to others patterned after the love of God.
LGBTQ+ etc.	An initialism which is sometimes longer (e.g., LGBTQIA etc.), sometimes shorter (LGB or LGBT), and is used to collectively refer to anyone who either rejects heterosexuality as normative and/or rejects the biblical distinction between man and woman, male and female.
Male (sex / gender)	Those image bearers of God of the biological and anatomical male sex which is never able to bear children.
Marriage	The union of one biological/anatomical man and one biological/anatomical woman in a lifelong covenant of love and faithfulness

Masturbation/Solo Sex	That perversion of our sexuality which seeks personal sexual pleasure outside of the marriage relationship through self-gratification.
Monogamy, Monogamous	The type of marriage commitment intended by God in the beginning whereby one man and one woman covenant to live in an exclusive bond of love and faithfulness all the days of their lives.
Non-Binary	A term used to deny that there are only male and female genders which can neither be combined or broken down into rejectable aspects. cf. genderfluid; gender spectrum; a gender.
Orientation	A term used to describe an instinctive attraction to one gender or the other.
Paraphilia	A fallen condition which expresses itself as intense and recurring sexual desire involving things, actions, or situations that are abnormal or atypical according to God's revealed will.
Pedophilia	A fallen condition which expresses itself in a perverse sexual sin against children.
Person, Personhood	That identity which belongs uniquely to human beings by virtue of being made in the image of God, created body and soul, male and female. Persons are not merely defined by their abilities, their significance, or even their consciousness, but by their relationship to their Creator God.
Polyamory	An expression of our fallen condition which rejects the unique, monogamous, and exclusive nature of a marital/sexual relationship and instead affirms the virtue of multiple sexual partners.
Porneia	A biblical term for sexual immorality.
pornography	Images, videos, or other media representations of a sexual nature intended to satisfy a sexual desire outside of the boundaries of marriage.
progressive sanctification	The work of the Spirit in the lives of the redeemed whereby disordered sexual attractions, desires, and perversions are increasingly overcome and proper sexual desires are given greater expression.
Pronouns	The use of personal pronouns expresses our gender identity to those around us. For those who identify as non-binary or gender fluid, pronouns indicate where on the gender spectrum they identify and how they prefer to be referred to by others.
Repentance (sexual sin)	That work of the Spirit whereby the sinner begins to hate more and more their sexual sin, disordered sexual attractions and desires, and run away from them to the Lord, delighting to walk in the way of purity.
Sex (noun)	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God that distinguishes men and women biologically and anatomically from each other, i.e., biological sex or anatomical sex.
Sex (verb)	The tender and loving expression of the sexual desires God gives humans to enjoy in the context of marriage.

Sex Work	A euphemism for stripping, prostitution and other forms of sexual acts done in exchange for pay. The term is used in place of these traditional terms as an attempt to make them sound like normal and acceptable forms of sexual expression.
Sexuality (noun)	That aspect of our identity as image bearers of God which expresses our desire for physical intimacy
sexually indeterminate	Those persons born without clearly identifiable male or female anatomy and/or genitalia. See Intersex.
Side A Christianity	A view that supports unnatural forms of sexuality as normative to Christianity and allows for the sanctioning same-sex marriage.
Side B Christianity	A view that supports identifying a person or group of people as Christian according to their LGBTQ+ classification, such as being a “gay-Christian,” even though they remain celibate.
Sin, Actual	Any thought, word, or deed which by its commission or omission violates the law of God especially as revealed in the seventh commandment.
Sin, Original	The imputed guilt and corruption from Adam which is the source of all disordered sexual attractions, desires, development, and anatomy, as well as all sexual perversions and rebellion against our Creator.
single, singleness	To be single refers to those who are unmarried. Singleness can be a permissible and a blessed condition in the kingdom of Christ.
straight	A term used to describe those who have natural sexual desires for members of the opposite sex.
submission	The calling of all believers to acknowledge the place and priority of God's Word and will in their lives and acting according to that rather than according to their desires or attractions. This comes to expression in many relationships including the submission of believers to one another, of citizens to the state, and of wives to their husbands. Christ is the paradigm of submission in Scripture.
temptation	The internal or external invitation or desire which arises from sin to rebel against God.
Tolerance	Historically tolerance has meant the acknowledgment that all men are image bearers of God and therefore worthy of respect and honor. Currently tolerance has come to mean the affirmation of the rightness and normalcy of a person’s chosen actions or claimed identity.
Transgender	A term for one who identifies or expresses their gender identity in a way that does not march their biological/anatomical and genetic sex of man or woman. This is independent of sexual orientation (e.g., a transgender woman--i.e., a man who identifies himself as a woman--may be attracted to other men or still be attracted to women).

Transgender Man	A woman who identifies and expresses herself as though she were a man.
Transgender Woman	A man who identifies and expresses himself as though he were a woman.
Transvestite	A person who cross-dresses, i.e., who dresses in the traditional and cultural clothing and adornment of the opposite sex. While those who cross-dress may be transgender and/or same-sex attracted, that is not necessarily the case.
Victimhood	In contemporary critical and Neo-Marxist frameworks, a victim is anyone who believes they have been mistreated by someone in a position of greater power. The goal of such victim identification is to restore the power balance.
Woke	To be alert to discrimination, injustice, and oppression towards sexual minorities as such categories and persons are identified and defined according to contemporary critical and Neo-Marxist social-justice theories.

Study Committee Recommendations:

1. Grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Christopher Gordon (chairman) and Rev. Joel Dykstra (secretary) as well as any other members of the study committee present during the discussion of the report.

Ground:

- a. *The officers and members of the study committee should be able to answer delegate questions and give their insight to assist Synod’s deliberation of the report.*

2. Commend the Study Committee Report to the churches for study.

Grounds:

- a. *The report as a whole provides valuable background, explanation, wisdom, and resources to the churches on the issue of human sexuality.*
- b. *Commending a study committee report to the churches is contemplated in Regulations for Synodical Procedure Appendix D, Section 3.2*

3. Adopt the “Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality” and the “Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality” in the study report as Pastoral Advice pursuant to the Regulations for Synodical Procedure, Appendix D, Section 2.

Grounds:

- a. *Both sections provide concise confessional & biblical guidance to the churches in their pastoral care on the issues of human sexuality.*

- b. The “Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality” and the “Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality” together are serviceable for legal protection for the churches, and as such, should have the imprimatur of formal adoption by the federation.*
4. Publish the adopted Pastoral Advice on the federation website.

Ground:

- a. Such publication will make the Pastoral Advice readily accessible by the churches and is consistent with prior Synodical action after the adoption of Pastoral Advice.*
5. Dismiss the Study Committee with thanks.

Ground:

- a. The Study Committee has fulfilled its mandate and completed its work.*

Appendix 1: Recommended Resources

Though not an exhaustive list, the following books, articles, and resources provide faithful and wise counsel on the issue of human sexuality in our current cultural context.

Books on understanding our current cultural climate.

1. Stange New Word, Carl Trueman.
2. Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age, Rosaria Butterfield.

Books on Homosexuality

1. What Does the Bible Really Say About Homosexuality, Kevin DeYoung
2. The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics, Robert Gagnon
3. Is The Church Pro-Gay? How to Respond to a Moral Crisis with God's Love, Shawn Mathis

Books on Biography

1. Out of a Far Country, Christopher Yuan and Angela Yuan
2. Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert, Rosaria Butterfield.

Books on sexuality generally

1. Love Thy Body, Nancy Pearcey
2. Holy Sexuality and the Gospel, Christopher Yuan
3. One man, One woman, Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley

Books on Transgenderism

1. Gender Ideology: What do Christians Need to Know, Sharon James
2. Affirming God's Image, Alan Branch

Digital resources

Articles

How can we fight sexual sin, Bill Boekestein, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/how-can-we-fight-sexual-sin>

How to not have sex before marriage, Bill Boekestein,
<https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/how-to-not-have-sex-before-marriage>

Same sex attraction as sin, Mark Jones, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/same-sex-attraction-as-sin>

Anthropology and the Sexual Ethic, Chris Gordon,
<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2023/06/anthropology-and-the-sexual-ethic/>

Videos

Holy Sexuality Project (12 Episodes) Christopher Yuan

Other Ecclesiastical reports

PCA: [AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf](https://www.pcagap.org/Reports/PCA-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf) (pcaga.org)

RPCNA: https://www.pcahistory.org/topical/sexuality/RPCNA_Study.pdf

Appendix 2: The New Reformation Catechism on Human Sexuality

THE NEW REFORMATION CATECHISM ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

*A Catechism Based on
The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563*

Christopher J. Gordon



Table of Contents

Foreword	5
Preface	7
Introduction Questions 1–2	11
Part One: Creation Questions 3–15	12
Part Two: Fall Questions 16–22	17
Part Three: Redemption Questions 23–26	20
Part Four: Restoration Questions 27–41	22

Foreword

“I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.” So begins the Heidelberg Catechism. Written by Zacharius Ursinus and published in 1563, The Heidelberg Catechism quickly became a manual for Christian living and religious instruction during the Reformation. A catechism focused on helping Christians lay hold of the deepest truths in the best ways was dearly needed during the tumultuous time of the Reformation.

Today’s revolution in theology is not over the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but over sexual identity. Our post-Freudian world maintains without any substantial pushback that sexual identity is the most important truth about a person. Organized under the banner of LGBTQ+, authentic personhood depends on placing yourself under one of these letters, or joyfully and without reservation applauding people who do. The American Medical Association tells us that mental health depends on practicing what you desire, and enthusiastically supporting others who do what feels right in their own eyes is a suicide-prevention strategy. The biblical creation mandate seems a quaint ancient narrative with no binding force when in the United States today there are hundreds of pediatric gender clinics and testosterone is administered to adolescents from Planned Parenthood on a first visit and without parental consent or a therapist’s note.

In contrast to the world’s anthropology, a biblical anthropology understands that after Adam’s transgression (Genesis 3), we, his posterity, have a sin nature that compels each person to love something that God hates. If nothing checks our will, our sinful desires will plunge us headfirst into all manner of spiritual, moral, and sometimes physical danger. No one is exempt from original sin and its consequence. Neither good nor malicious intentions can rewrite God’s call for men and women. Scripture is clear that we are responsible for our inborn as well as our actual sins (Psalm 5:5, Romans 1:18, Deuteronomy 27:15, Hebrews 9:27). Taking responsibility for our own sin is hard and necessary, but because of the way that the world, the flesh, and the devil conspire, it is difficult to know where to start.

And this is where Christopher Gordon’s *The New Reformation Catechism* offers to the church such a timely and pastoral guide. I have no doubt that this means of discipleship will give glory to God and be used of the Lord to liberate many who are held captive by sexual sin. Twenty-three years ago, when I was in a lesbian relationship and at the same time reading the Bible, I would have greatly benefited from *The New Reformation Catechism on Human Sexuality*. I know that I am not alone in needing this catechism.

May God bless you richly as you grow in Christian liberty. May this catechism help you hold fast to the truth and better understand how the full counsel of God speaks to the godly priority of human sexuality.

Rosaria Butterfield

Preface

The historic creeds and confessions of Protestant churches have served to preserve Christians in the truth of the gospel for centuries. We are deeply indebted to those who took the time to formulate, with great accuracy and clarity, the precious truths of our faith. We are faced with a unique challenge in our times, however, with regard to new movements that are harming the integrity of what we believe.

Of particular interest is how the current sexual revolution has completely overturned what God established at creation as good. This is a unique challenge that has been answered by many helpful writers on the topic. The problem is that not enough Christians are taking the time to read current books that address this issue. Further, few resources are available that are intended to bring families, study groups, and churchgoers together around confessional-like statements that address the challenges of our day.

Creeds and confessions were originally written to provide summary truths of the Christian faith in the face of great theological error. Catechisms in particular provided short, concise summary statements, in question-and-answer format, on some particular doctrine of the Christian faith. These documents are intended to help Christians, especially children and those new to the faith, to have their minds trained in what Scripture teaches on a given point of Christian doctrine. To this day, catechizing is one of the most effective methods of preserving Christians from error.

The culture is daily catechizing us and our children in the ideas they want impressed upon minds. It has been to our own demise that Christians have not taken seriously enough the call to combat this vicious assault on our faith through catechizing God’s people in His truth. The great need of the moment is a robust recovery in training Christians in the truths of what we confess.

Many of our older confessional statements do not address our current challenges with any amount of specificity. Sadly, due to the fear that any new confession or catechism will challenge the integrity of the confessional statements that we already have, or

compromise our present unity, we have avoided the writing of new confessions or catechisms that address current issues.

What is not appreciated, however, is that catechisms in particular were regularly written by Reformed pastors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Richard Greenham, the great Elizabethan Puritan preacher, second only in influence to William Perkins, wrote a well-known short form of catechizing on the basic principles of the Christian faith. Greenham produced a masterful catechism that helped to provide further clarity on issues that were not specified in ecclesiastically approved Reformed creeds and confessions.

This is precisely the purpose of the present catechism that is being presented to you. There are official, ecclesiastically approved creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the church, that have official authority and serve the churches in the preservation of the truth. This catechism is not an official, ecclesiastical document and does not have the same authority. As a Reformed minister, I have written a pastoral catechism based on the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 to help Christians have their minds catechized in the truth of biblical human sexuality.

This catechism is intended to be used devotionally around the table, providing an opportunity for parents to talk with their children about these issues. This catechism is also intended to provide opportunities for Bible studies, Sunday school classes, and sermon series for pastors in addressing the current challenges surrounding human sexuality.

I have submitted this catechism to many well-respected scholars and pastors to receive feedback and correction where needed. In particular,

I would like to thank Rosaria Butterfield, Christopher Yuan, R. Scott Clark, W. Robert Godfrey, Carl Trueman, David VanDrunen, Michael Brown, Doug Barnes, Wes Bredenhof, Chad Vegas, Jonathan Cruse, and Jon Payne for their excellent help in producing this catechism.

I hope you will receive this, dear reader, as a humble attempt to help Christians enjoy the creational, sexual ethic that God established from the beginning for our good.

Christopher J. Gordon
Escondido, CA

INTRODUCTION

1. Q. Why is it comforting that we have a new identity in Jesus Christ?

A. I am being remade into the image of Christ, to have a true identity—¹ in body and soul, throughout the whole course of my life, to enjoy God and glorify him forever.² He redeemed my life with the precious blood of his Son,³ and has delivered me from the lie of Satan in the Garden.⁴ He also watches over me in such a way that he might free me from all sexual impurity as the temple of his indwelling;⁵ in fact, all things must work together to remake me into the image of his Son.⁶ Because I have this new identity,⁷ Christ, by his Holy Spirit, also assures me of God's steadfast love,⁸ and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to enjoy true freedom as a new creation.¹

2. Q. What must I know about human sexuality and my new identity in Christ?

A. Three things: first, how great my unholy desires and sexual sins are;² second, how I am set free from bondage to my unholy desires and sexual sins;³ third, how I am to lead a thankful life of sexual purity in union with Christ.⁴

¹ Gen. 1:26-27; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10

² Ps. 146; 1 Cor. 10:31

³ 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 John 1:7-9; 2:2

⁴ Gen. 3:4-5; John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:1-11

⁵ 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:15-20

⁶ Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18

⁷ 2 Cor. 5:17

⁸ Ps. 103:8-10; John 16:25-27

¹ 1 John 8:32; Gal. 5:13

² Ex. 20:14, 17; 2 Sam. 11:2-4; Gal. 5:16; 1 John 2:16

³ 2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 51; 1 Cor. 6:14-7:5; Col. 2:13-15

⁴ 1 Cor. 6:15-20

Part I: CREATION

3. Q. How many sexes did God make at creation?

A. God made two sexes at creation “in the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them.”⁵

4. Q. What does God require of us in making us in his image?

A. God requires that we love him as he created us, male or female, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.⁶

⁵ Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18, 21-23; 5:2; Matt. 19:4-5; Mark 10:6-7

⁶ Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37-40

5. Q. Why did God make us male and female in his own image?

A. That we might use all of the excellent qualities¹ with which he made us,² in true righteousness and holiness,³ in body and soul,⁴ as male and female, for his glory as we exercise dominion over the earth.⁵

6. Q. But aren't we able to make a distinction between biological sex and gender in search of our identity?

A. No. God established a natural order in the creation of male and female, that is good for us as image bearers of God.⁶ To introduce gender as a new category of personhood, separate from the biological category of sex, in pursuit of a different sexual identity, is unnatural to the creation order, and harmful to the purpose for which God made us.⁷

7. Q. But aren't some people born sexually indeterminate?

A. A small percentage of people are indeed born sexually indeterminate due to the fall, but such are, by definition, anomalies, and in medicine anomalies never negate objective categories of personhood. We

may not use the existence of anomalies to change or redefine the creational order that God has established as good.¹

1 Ps. 8:3-9

2 Ps. 100:3

3 Eph. 4:23-24

4 1 Thess. 5:23

5 Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8:3-9

6 Gen. 1:26-31; 9:6; Ps. 8:3-8; James 3:9

7 Gen. 1:31; Ps. 100:3; Rom. 1:21-27

8. Q. Does God permit us to change our sex?

A. Certainly not.² To reverse how God created us as male or female, due to fallen, unchosen thoughts and self-perceptions would be an act of rebellion,³ and a gross distortion of God's creative handiwork in specifically forming us for his own glory.⁴ Further, in the new Jerusalem, any genital mutilation, or confusion over sexual orientation identity, will be restored in our new resurrection bodies. Therefore, we should not change our sex since God promises to glorify our bodies, in everlasting happiness, as he created us male and female, in the final resurrection.⁵

1 Gen. 1:26-27

2 Deut. 22:5; Deut. 23:1; Ps. 51:3-6

3 Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:5

4 Gen. 2:7, 22; Ps. 100:3

5 Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:35-56; Rev. 21:1-8

9. Q. When was marriage instituted?

A. The holy bond of marriage was instituted by God at the very beginning of history in creation.¹

10. Q. What is marriage?

A. God created marriage to be a lifelong, monogamous covenantal union between one man and one woman.²

11. Q. Why did God institute marriage?

A. Six reasons: First, a husband and wife are meant to live together in sincere love and holiness, helping each other faithfully in all things.³ Second, marriage provides husbands and wives with a proper setting to enjoy each other with the physical and relational desires God gave to them.⁴ Third, by marriage the human race is to be continued and increased through the institution of the family.⁵ Fourth, a structure is provided that enriches society and contributes to its orderly function.¹ Fifth, by marriage God advances his kingdom through the loving devotion of a husband and wife, as children are nurtured in the true knowledge and fear of the Lord.² Sixth, marriage is designed to represent the mystery of Christ and the church that he loves.³

1 Questions 9-13 are adapted from the URCNA Statement of Affirmations Regarding Marriage: www.urnca.org/file_retrieve/63166; Gen. 2:18

2 Prov. 2:17; Mark 10:6-9; Eph. 5:25-32

3 Eph. 2:18; Eph. 5:21-25

4 Gen. 2:23; Heb. 13:4

5 Gen. 1:22, 28; 8:17

12. Q. Does the Lord permit sexual intimacy outside of marriage?

A. No. Scripture teaches that marriage is the only acceptable context for sexual union. Further, God calls us to live decent and chaste lives within or outside the holy state of marriage.⁴

13. Q. What is the Christian position on divorce?

A. Since husbands and wives are united by the Lord's hand, nothing should separate them in this life.⁵

1 Gen. 1:26-28

2 Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3; Mal. 2:15-16; Eph. 5:22-6:4

3 Eph. 5:25

4 Gen. 2:21-24; Ex. 20:14; 1 Cor. 7:1-2; Eph. 5:3-5; Heb. 13:4

5 Gen. 2:21-14; Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:7-9

14. Q. But aren't there any biblical grounds for divorce?

A. The Scriptures permit divorce in the irreconcilable circumstances of adultery or abandonment.¹ But these are exceptions to the general rule not to divorce.

15. Q. Does God permit same-sex marriage?

A. Absolutely not. God ordained marriage only between a man and a woman for life.² Governments do not have the authority to change marriage into something contrary to what God instituted at creation.³

Part II: FALL

16. Q. With what lie did Satan tempt our first parents in the garden?

A. Satan lied about the goodness of God's creation order. He presented God as restrictive and oppressive, and our first parents chose to sin through the desire to become their own gods and define their own way.¹

¹ Matt. 19:1-9; 1 Cor. 7:10-17

² Gen. 2:24; Lev. 18:22; Matt. 19:5; Mark 7:21; Rom. 1:24-32; 1 Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:31

³ Acts 5:28-29; Rom. 13:1-2

17. Q. What happened to our desires in the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in paradise?

A. All the desires of the human heart, even though they may be unchosen, have become distorted and fallen in the sin of our first parents.² These desires cannot be trusted,³ since we have a natural tendency to be led away by various passions.⁴

18. Q. But didn't God create us to be happy in following the desires of our hearts?

A. God made us holy and happy;⁵ we, however, accepting the lie of the devil,⁶ have robbed ourselves of this happiness by obeying sinful desires.⁷

¹ Gen. 3:1-7; John 8:44; 1 John 2:22

² Gen. 3:16; Jer. 17:9; 1 John 2:16

³ Rom. 7:14-25

⁴ 2 Tim. 3:6; Gal. 5:24; Eph. 2:3

⁵ Gen. 1:31; Ps. 8:6-9

⁶ Gen. 3:6

⁷ Gen. 3:16-19; Ps. 14; Rom. 3:10-18

19. Q. But isn't there a difference between temptation and the practice of evil desires?

A. God requires that we avoid entering into all forms of temptation.¹ Temptation is not sin when it originates outside of us.² Temptation becomes sin when we entertain and welcome the sinful desires of our hearts and act upon them.³

20. Q. Are we able to make a distinction between entertaining a sinful desire and choosing to live in that desire?

A. God condemns desires that are contrary to his law, as well as our actual sins.⁴ These contrary desires are sinful even if they are unchosen, since they proceed from a corrupt heart.⁵ All impure thoughts and desires, prior to the conscious act of the will, are considered sin in God's eyes.⁶

¹ Matt. 6:13

² Gen. 39:6-12; Matt. 4:1-10

³ Gen. 3:6; 4:6-8; 2 Kings 5:20-27

⁴ Prov. 6:25; 7; Matt. 5:28; 1 Cor. 10:6; Gal. 5:16

⁵ Matt. 15:19; James 1:15

⁶ Rom. 2:15-16; 8:5; Eph. 4:17-19; Rev. 2:23

21. Q. What kinds of sinful desires and deeds does God's law condemn?

A. Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 15:18-20: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds

from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”

22. Q. Will God permit our sinful desires to go unpunished?

A. Certainly not. He is terribly angry with our sinful desires, as well as our actual sins, God will punish every idle thought, careless word, or wicked action by a just judgment both now and in eternity.¹ As the Bible declares, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”²

Part III: REDEMPTION

23. Q. What has Jesus accomplished for me in the gospel with regard to all forms of sexual sin?

A. Through true faith in the promise of God’s Word,³ and wholehearted trust in Christ,⁴ by the gospel, God has freely granted— not only to others but to me also— the forgiveness of all my sexual trespasses,¹ canceling all my guilt² and meriting for me eternal righteousness and salvation.³

¹ Matt. 12:35-37; Rom. 1:18-32; 2:16; Rev. 20:11-15

² 2 Cor. 5:10

³ John 17:3,17; Heb. 11:1-3; James 2:19

⁴ Rom. 4:18-21; 5:1; 10:10; Heb. 4:14-16

24. Q. How does the truth of the gospel set us free with regard to sexual sin?

A. Since I died, was buried, and have been raised with Christ⁴ through his death and resurrection, I am set free from slavery to any form of sexual sin. Christ has broken its dominion over me,⁵ and I now live with a renewed desire⁶ to reckon myself dead to my old way of sexual immorality,⁷ but alive to God in pursuing a sexually pure life for his glory.⁸

25. Q. Since I am no longer my own but have been bought with the precious blood of Christ, what new identity has Christ achieved for me?

A. By faith I am joined to Christ as a new creature,⁹ and so I share in his identity.¹ In my new identity, I am satisfied in God’s love as his adopted child;² I am to think of myself as purchased, accepted, valued, and protected;³ and I am to find it a great delight to be remade in the image of Christ in true righteousness and holiness.⁴

¹ Col. 2:13-14; 1 Cor. 6:13-14

² Col. 2:14; Heb. 2:14

³ Rom. 1:16-17; Heb. 10:10

⁴ Rom. 6:1-4

⁵ Rom. 6:5-14

⁶ Heb. 8:10-12; Col. 3:1-5

⁷ Rom. 6:21; Eph. 5:1-17

⁸ Rom. 6:11

⁹ Eph. 1:7-14

26. Q. Why are all forms of sexual immorality incompatible with my union with Jesus Christ?

A. Since I have become one with Christ in body and spirit, any form of sexual immorality invites that which is profane into my holy union with Christ.⁵ Therefore, I am called to be one with Christ by fleeing all forms of sexual immorality.⁶

¹ Gal. 3:28; Eph. 1:9-11; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 5:17

² Rom. 8:16-17; 9:26; Eph. 2:19; 5:1

³ Rom. 8:32; 2 Thess. 2:16; 1 Pet. 1:18-19

⁴ Eph. 4:22-24; 1 Pet. 1:8

⁵ 1 Cor. 6:15-20

⁶ 1 Cor. 6:18; 1 Thess. 4:3

Part IV: RESTORATION

27 Q. What does God call us to do when we fall to sexual sin?

A. When I commit any form of sexual sin— even the slightest desire or though contrary to any of God’s commandments—I should confess my sins to him,¹ eagerly turn away from all sexual sin,² and seek to walk in the newness of life.³

28 Q. Is God angry with his children who still struggle in their striving to put away sexual immorality?

A. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness.⁴ When we come to God with a broken and contrite heart,⁵ confessing and turning away from our sins, God promises to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.⁶ He has declared, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”⁷

¹ Ps. 1; 32:5; 2 Sam 12:13; 1 John 1:9

² 1 Cor. 6:18; 1 Thess. 4:3

³ Rom. 6:4; 7:6; Col. 3:1-5

⁴ Ps. 103:1-14

⁵ Ps. 34:18; 51:17

⁶ Rom. 4:6-8; 1 John 1:9

⁷ Isa. 42:3

29 Q. What about believers who fight against same-sex attraction but continue to experience shame and guilt for these desires?

A. God, in the gospel of his Son, has announced that there is no condemnation. for those who are in Christ Jesus.¹ Any unholy desire, even if unchosen, such as same-sex attraction, is covered by the blood of Christ.² Believers who continue to struggle against same-sex attraction, should trust in God’s forgiving mercies,³ and with earnest purpose, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, strive to live in the newness of life.⁴ Further, the body of Christ should not avoid or shun those who struggle against any sexual sin.⁵ Instead, believers, with a spirit of compassion,⁶ should “bear each other’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”⁷

¹ Rom. 8:1

² Col. 2:13

³ 1 John 1:9

⁴ Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1-5

⁵ 2 Sam. 12:1-13; Luke 15:1-2

⁶ Jude 22; 1 Pet. 3:8

⁷ Gal. 6:2

30 Q. Since we have been delivered from all sexual sin, why should we pursue a life of sexual purity?

A. Five reasons: First, because our sinful desires do not define us or constitute our identity as those purchased by the blood of Christ.¹ Second, because sexual purity is the will of God for our sanctification,² as we are being renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the image of God’s Son.³ Third, by pursuing a life of sexual purity, we show that we are thankful to God for his salvation.⁴ Fourth, we also stand as witnesses, that those living in sexual immorality might see in us the holy purity that God loves.⁵ Fifth, as we battle against our sinful nature, the Holy Spirit strengthens our Christian walk and we give glory to God.⁶

31 Q. What is pornography?

A. Pornography is sexually explicit material produced to serve lustful desires of the flesh, activated through the channel of the eye,⁷ through the looking upon of naked images of males and females for the purpose of sexual arousal.¹

¹ 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; 1 Pet. 1:17-18

² 1 Thess. 4:3

³ Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19

4 Rom. 6:13; 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:5-10
5 Matt. 5:14-16; Rom. 14:17-19; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:1-2
6 1 Cor. 10:31; Gal. 5:17
7 Job 31:1; 1 John 2:16

32 Q. Why is pornography so destructive?

A. Because the use of such images ruins the sexual intimacy intended for marriage,² supports idolatry in the worship of the creature,³ dehumanizes men and women promoting abuse, especially of women,⁴ advances other forms of sexual impurity,⁵ creates idleness in society to the harm of our neighbors,⁶ and degrades the mind into darkness.⁷

33 Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their unholy desires and unrepentant of their sexual ways?

A. By no means. Scripture tells us that no sexually immoral person, no adulterer, no fornicator, no homosexual, no abuser of women, or the like will inherit the kingdom of God.¹

1 Matt. 5:28; 1 Cor. 7:9
2 Eph. 5:25; Heb. 13:4
3 Rom. 1:24-25
4 Gen. 1:26-27
5 Rom. 1:18-27; James 1:14-15; 2 Pet. 2:14
6 2 Thess. 3:6-12
8 Rom. 1:28-32; Eph. 4:18-19

34 Q. What is involved in genuine repentance of all sexual sin?

A. Two things: The dying-away of the old self, by hating all forms of sexual immorality and fleeing from it;² And the rising-to-life of the new self, by finding great joy in leading a sexually pure life and, if married, by properly loving our spouses.³

35 Q. How should husbands seek to love and honor their wives?

A. Husbands should demonstrate sincere love to their wives, in reverence for Christ,⁴ through the exercise of: loyalty, kindness, understanding, tenderness, self-control, sexual purity, by all means avoiding verbal, emotional, and physical abuse or controlling behavior, and by providing godly leadership.⁵ Men ought to be a good example to their wives of the love that Christ has for his church.¹

1 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:1-20; 1 John 3:14
2 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10; 1 Cor. 6:15-20
3 Ps. 51:8, 12; Isa. 57:15; Rom. 6:1-11; Eph. 5:22-33
4 Eph. 5:21
5 Gal. 5:22-26; Eph. 5:25-33; Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7

36 Q. How should wives seek to love and honor their husbands?

A. Wives should demonstrate sincere love to their husbands, in reverence for Christ,² through the exercise of: respect, patience, honor, encouragement, self-denial, contentment and by finding delight in godly submission that pleases the Lord.³ Women ought to be a good example to their husbands of the responsive love that the church has for Christ.⁴

37 Q. How should singles honor the Lord in the situation that God has called them?

A. Singles who desire marriage are called to contentment and prayer,⁵ trusting the Lord in every circumstance⁶ as he knows best for us, yet realizing that only Christ makes us fulfilled, and that ultimate joy is found in Christ whether as single or married.⁷ Singles who do not desire marriage, are called to holiness in body and spirit,¹ in the special opportunities they have to give “undivided devotion to the Lord,”² yet, should remain open to God’s will to provide a spouse and change one’s desire for marriage.

1 Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:19
2 Eph. 5:21
3 Prov. 31:10-31; Eph. 5:22-24; Titus 2:1-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-4

4 Eph. 5:28-30
5 Phil. 4:11
6 Prov. 3:5-7
8 Prov. 18:22

38 Q. How should the family be maintained to the glory of God?

A. By making Christ the center of our homes through: love, humility, and patience toward one another;³ godly discipline,⁴ the regular reading of the Scriptures,⁵ heartfelt prayer,⁶ removing all things spiritually harmful from our homes,⁷ and making Lord's Day worship a priority together.⁸

39 Q. What is God's will for parents in training children in proper sexuality?

A. Three things: First, that parents model before their children a loving relationship, and also hold marriage in honor as it was designed by God.¹ Second, that parents speak to their children appropriately and sufficiently about biblical sexuality, and proper sexual conduct, as designed for marriage;² realizing that our children are facing daily misinformation on sexuality. Third, that parents guard their children from all forms of sexual immorality and pornography,³ and overseeing the use of technology, social media, and other mediums that promote, through cultural peer pressure, a different sexual ethic⁴ than what God made as good in creation.⁵

1 1 Cor. 7:6-9
2 1 Cor. 7:35
3 Eph. 4:25-32
4 Eph. 6:1-4
5 Deut. 6:6-9; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:13
6 1 Thess. 5:17
7 Josh. 24:15; 2 Kings 23-24; Eph. 4:31
9 Heb. 10:25

40 Q. What is God's will for young adults in honoring their parents in sexual conduct?

A. Three things: First, that young adults honor their parents by maintaining sexual purity and chastity.⁶ Second, that young adults refrain from pushing upon their parents and adopting the ungodly sexual norms of the culture.¹ Third, that young adults take delight in the Lord and in their identity in Christ as singles, waiting patiently for the spouse that God prepares for them.²

1 Eph. 5:21-25
2 Prov. 5; 7; 22:6, 15; Heb. 13:4
3 Job 31:1
4 1 Thess. 4:3
5 Deut. 6:6-9
6 Ex. 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:18-20; 7; Heb. 13:4

41 Q. How do we love those who live in sexual sin?

A. We should not avoid or shun those who are mastered by sexual sin.³ Instead, we should speak the truth in love⁴ about sexual sin, repentance, and faith in Christ; give witness to the deliverance God gave us from our own sins;⁵ and perform acts of kindness.⁶ By our godly living, we should seek to win over our neighbors to Christ.⁷

1 Deut. 21:18-21; Prov. 29:15; 30:17; Col. 3:20; 1 Tim. 3:1-4
2 Gen. 2:22-23; Prov. 18:22
3 Luke 15:1-2; Matt. 9:13
4 Eph. 4:15
5 Mark 5:19; 1 Pet. 3:15
6 Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 14:12-14; Rom. 12:13; Heb 13:16; 1 Pet. 4:9
7 Matt. 5:14-16; Rom. 14:17-19; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:1-2

**Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture Board
Report to Synod Escondido 2024**

In August 2017, the U.S. Board of Directors of the United Reformed Churches in North America entered into a formal Joint Venture Agreement with the OPC's Committee on Christian Education (CCE) which has guided the process of producing and distributing the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal (TPH)* in both printed and digital formats. Current members of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* Joint Venture Board (TPHJVB) are URCNA representatives Rev. Christopher Folkerts (vice-president), Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen (president), and Mr. Gary Veldink; and OPC representatives Mr. Joel Pearce (manager), Rev. Dr. Alan Strange, and Mr. David Winslow (secretary).

1. Printing and Sales

The year 2023 marked the sixth year of sales for the *TPH*. There have been seven printings of the three print editions (pew, leather, accompanist), totaling 94,000 copies. The 8th printing will start production in summer 2024 for delivery in fall 2024, D.V.

The JVB has returned a total of \$485,000 to each of the partner churches since sales began, including \$50,000 each in October 2023. As of December 31, 2023, the JVB had \$185,749 in funds reserved for future printings, royalties, maintaining the website, and other digital development (see below).

Great Commission Publications (GCP) has continued to be an essential and excellent distribution partner and reports monthly to the Board. They receive 15 percent of all *TPH* sales for their work of taking orders, distribution, storing & handling, and keeping accounts and records.

Total sales for all *TPH* products since its introduction in 2018 have surpassed \$2.2 million, of which \$153,000 has come from digital and app sales.

Over 66 percent of URCNA churches have purchased the *TPH*. The four largest purchasers of *TPH* products from GCP are:

- 1) URCNA: \$635,827
- 2) OPC: \$587,496
- 3) Individuals: \$357,335
- 4) PCA: \$267,092

We wish to highlight that the JVB has a policy of granting a 35 percent discount to duly attested OPC and URCNA mission works for the first 50 copies of the printed pew edition.

2. Digital

Mr. Joel Pearce previously served as the Director of Digital Development of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, work that is now subsumed under his role as JVB Manager. The *TPH* website, trinitypsalterhymnal.org has been fully developed. It includes a full searchable song collection and streaming capability of most non-copyrighted tunes.

Three digital editions, the Locked PDF edition, Unlocked PDF edition, and Projection edition, are available for sale via GCP.

The Locked PDF edition is meant for personal use on a computer or tablet and is read-only.

The Unlocked PDF edition is meant for church and organizational use to assist in reproduction and is especially helpful for small churches that may not be able to afford many copies of the print pew edition. Included in the purchase of the Unlocked PDF are reproduction permissions for all OPC/URCNA copyrighted songs. Third party copyrights still require permissions from copyright administrators. The Unlocked PDF edition was updated in 2023 to reflect the 7th printing, and the Locked PDF is in process of being updated to the 7th printing.

The *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* mobile apps for Apple iOS and Android OS are supplemental to the print and digital editions of the TPH and feature the full text and music of the songbook, as well as tune recordings. Some key features of the apps include searchable full text, browsable indexes (title and first line, hymn table of contents), bookmarking of songs, and looping of a tune for the number of stanzas in each song. The Apple iOS app was updated in 2023 to include the creeds, confessions, and catechisms as found in the back of the book. The mobile apps also serve as a resource for planning worship, learning new songs, and singing along in family devotions. Future app upgrades and features are being considered in 2024 including more robust Scripture, topic, and tune indexes, as well as higher quality audio for the Android app being developed. More than 6,300 app downloads have been purchased, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive, including helpful suggestions on how to improve the apps. At the same time, the many questions received indicate the need to provide instruction on how to fully use the app. The JVB is presently preparing and will soon release a brief training video on using the mobile apps.

Responding to questions and permission requests submitted via the website or mobile apps is a regular weekly activity of our manager, Mr. Pearce. Psalm texts copyrighted by the OPC/URCNA have been requested by other hymnal projects, most notably *Psalms of Grace* (2022) and the *2024 Psalter*, an update to the classic *1912 Psalter*. In 2023 the JVB also collaborated with SingYourPart.org to host TPH songs in order to facilitate learning four-part harmony.

3. Choral and Other Recordings

Synod Niagara 2022 adopted the following actions relating to our board (*Acts of Synod Niagara 2022*, Article 56, pp. 56-57):

1. That Synod request that the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* Joint Venture Board (TPH JVB) facilitate the choral recording of TPH Psalms, in which they are already engaged.
2. That Synod request that the TPH JVB identify appropriate Christian musicians to oversee the technical matter of producing high quality choral recordings in a style that emphasizes both the musical and lyrical beauty of our Psalter collection.

3. That Synod request that the TPH JVB secure widespread distribution via top streaming platforms (Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music, others as advisable).
4. That Synod request that the TPH JVB select key Psalms to record, including selection criteria such as beauty, theological significance, popularity, frequency of tune usage, etc.

Grounds:

- a. Our Psalter collection uses a number of popular tunes repeatedly, so recording approximately 40 key tunes could easily cover over half of the Psalms in the psalter.
5. That Synod include the grounds to Overture 9 in the Minutes:

Grounds:

- a. Choral recordings will assist our churches in learning the music of the new songbook.
- b. Choral recordings will serve to promote the *TPH*, and expand the impact of this work, thereby increasing the harvest from this investment of labor and resources, and potentially increasing sales of this already popular songbook.
- c. Choral recordings will introduce and increase familiarity with the psalter collection in particular, which is unfamiliar to many of the users of the *TPH* who have never used a *Psalter Hymnal* before.
- d. Choral recordings will bring pleasure, beauty, and increased familiarity with God's word to the daily lives of the members of our churches.
- e. Choral recordings will introduce the new psalter portion of our songbook to many contemporary musicians outside the Reformed tradition who are seeking excellent settings of biblical psalms.
- f. High quality choral recordings will manifest to the world that we treasure excellence in our worship and rejoice in the beauty of congregational singing.
- g. Choral recordings of the psalter will make the worship of our churches visible on digital music streaming services, one of the most common and popular entertainment channels in the broader culture, bearing witness to the glory of God's word and the worship of his saints.

The JVB investigated and pursued commissioning a Christian professional or academic choir to record approximately 40 selections of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. In the fall of 2023 Dr. David Smith, a music professor and conductor at Geneva College, agreed to work with us. He conducts their choral group **The Genevans** and has agreed to record 20 Psalms in 2024 and 20 Psalms in 2025. There is also potential to collaborate with Crown & Covenant Publications on recording Psalms that appear both in their *Book of Psalms for Worship* and the TPH. The JVB is investigating where to make recordings available, including possibilities of uploading to streaming services (e.g. Spotify, Apple Music), and selling MP3 downloads via our website and/or GCP.

The board has also approved and is supporting a long-term project commencing in Summer 2024 that involves recording in-depth training videos to help church accompanists and musicians.

4. Large Print and Braille

Digital, text only Large Print and Braille editions (Microsoft Word format, for digital Braille converter devices) are available for those with vision impairment. They are available free of charge (by request only) to churches that have purchased pew editions of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. Those interested should contact Danny Olinger at danny.olinger@opc.org.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Christopher Folkerts (Vice-president)
Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen (President)
Mr. Gary Veldink

Website Oversight Committee

Report to Synod Escondido 2024

Twenty years ago, an action of Synod 2004 created the Website Oversight Committee (WOC) as a synodical standing committee with a mandate to oversee and maintain our federation's website at <https://www.urchna.org>. Each classis appoints a representative to serve on this committee. Subsequent synods have adjusted slightly the committee's mandate but its core task remains to oversee the federation website(s). Last year Synod added, "Classes should prioritize expertise in web design and development when appointing future representatives to serve on the Website Oversight Committee." The committee executes its mandate primarily in cooperation with and via oversight over the federation's current webmaster, Gary Fisher.

The current members of the WOC include the following:

- Bruce Vrieling – Ontario-East (Chairman)
- Rev. John Kistler – Pacific Northwest
- Rev. Talman Wagenmaker – Michigan (Secretary)
- Micah Van Maanen – Central US
- Tim Feijer – Southwestern Ontario
- Rev. Chuck Tedrick – Southwest US
- Andre Alves – Eastern US
- Jonathan Hall – Western Canada
- Gary Fisher – Webmaster

Road to a new website

Synod 2022 asked our committee to "entirely redevelop" the federation's primary website (urchna.org) and "seamlessly incorporate" a number of smaller websites with the new site (*Acts of Synod 2022*, art. 51, #1). This task has been the primary focus of the WOC since then.

For more than a decade, the federation website has been hosted by Service-Life, a federation-friendly web company out of Colorado Springs. Service-Life offers website hosting to business entities using its custom content management system, and its primary customer target seems to be home school groups. We have received excellent support and discounted pricing on hosting and development projects during our tenure at Service-Life.

For a variety of reasons we initially decided to migrate to an entirely new web platform elsewhere called WordPress. WordPress is the most popular website hosting platform on the planet, used by more than 800 million websites. Given the size of the task at hand, we embarked on a 'discovery process' with a web company to develop a report which would document the functionality of the current site, identify possible software technologies to accomplish our various goals, and provide for us an approximate cost of a new site.

As the discovery process unfolded, we began to realize how much custom work had been developed by Service-Life over the years which would require quite a bit of effort to rebuild. Because many of the features developed by Service-Life for the federation’s website were atypical for most projects (most WordPress sites are what we would call “brochure-ware” or they engage in ecommerce), and because of the sheer volume of development and integration required, the upfront costs for a new site to recreate this functionality was considerable. We also had more than one WordPress development company simply refuse to bid for the project or suggest a non-WordPress solution that would not have met our needs with respect to ease-of-use and being integrated into a single web portal. Finally, the ongoing annual cost for maintaining a WordPress site (cost of the plugin software, hosting, updates, backups, security) was estimated to be in the several thousands of dollars.

All these factors caused us to take a second look at Service-Life. After discussions with the owner of Service-Life and his development team regarding our requirements, our committee selected Service-Life to build and host the new urcna.org website. We did this for a number of reasons:

- Service-Life has a proven track record of providing excellent service over the years
- We were assured that many of the limitations/irritations of the existing Service-Life platform (forum email aesthetics, cumbersome statistics collection, branding, URL ugliness) would be addressed and remediated during the project
- Upfront costs would be much lower because we could reuse existing, back-end code
- Ongoing annual costs would be lower because we would not be using a host of new commercial web plugins
- We would be able to leverage our existing relationship with Service-Life throughout the project

Where we currently are

At the time of this report (late March 2024), our committee has approved the proposal from Service-Life and are about to begin redeveloping the website. We expect that the new site will be completed either shortly before or shortly after Synod 2024.

In addition, the committee has recognized the need to prepare ourselves for the *next* version of the website and are beginning discussions on how an eventual move to WordPress (or other similar web technologies) might be more inexpensively accomplished, perhaps by utilizing “in-house” talent (but not sacrificing quality).

Our other websites

As mentioned above, Synod 2022 asked us to “seamlessly incorporate” other existing URCNA web sites: Missions (urcnamissions.org), Forms and Prayers (formsandprayers.com), and Three Forms (threeforms.org).

Discussions with the both the Domestic and Foreign Synodical Missions committees revealed that they would very much like to maintain their own website. We will therefore seamlessly link to their site from the main URCNA site as needed.

We believe that over time the Forms and Prayers website can be folded into the main website and cease to exist as its own distinct website.

We also believe that, at the moment, the threeforms.org website has value standing on its own but needs some design work to integrate it more seamlessly into the main website.

Budget

Synod 2022 approved a \$20,000 budget for the new website (\$10,000 in 2023, \$10,000 in 2024), with an encouragement to come back to Synod if more money or resources were required. We are pleased to report that the combined cost of our discovery process and the cost of the new website development should not exceed the budget. Therefore, we are not asking for any additional funds for the new website at this time.

Annual costs for hosting the websites and email are unchanged at \$3,100. The eventual retirement of the Forms and Prayers web site should reduce this amount slightly.

For new development, we are also requesting \$2,500 annually until the next Synod.

Finally, as noted in their report, the Oversight Consistory of the Website Oversight Committee (OCWOC) has recommended their own dissolution. If this is approved by Synod, the WOC will take over responsibility for payments of the various web-related costs. The committee is therefore in discussions with the treasurer regarding this matter, and the URNCA Board has it on their agenda to discuss this matter soon.

Note that all dollar amounts mentioned in our report are USD.

Review of the Webmaster

Synod 2022 asked the WOC to review the current website staffing and recommend to Synod the level of staffing required to maintain the new website. We believe Gary Fisher continues to be the right choice for the position of Webmaster, as he not only had the *web skills* required to maintain the website but also the *people skills* to effectively answer the myriad of questions which come his way from functionaries and clerks of the federation. Gary is diligent, thorough, and works well with the committee. Importantly, he also has a good working relationship with Service-Life which ensures smooth and timely resolution to the inevitable issues that arise in the life of a website.

Directive to consult with stake-holders and create comprehensive design documentation

Article 51.2 of the Acts of Synod 2022 says, “That Synod direct the Website Oversight Committee (WOC) (which includes the Webmaster) to work with the Oversight Consistory of the WOC (OCWOC), Stated Clerk, URCNA Statistician, and any other stakeholders to identify additional needs, guidance, and resources needed to complete this project, and develop comprehensive design documentation for future change management.” We believe we have completed the directive to consult with various parties and have identified resources required to complete the project (some of which are enumerated in this report). We have worked to create discovery documentation and have reviewed various proposals from vendors. As a committee, we have also been challenged to be more proactive in addressed deficiencies of the website and be more forward-looking with respect to new web functionality. That all being said, we do not understand what “comprehensive design documentation for future change management” means, and suspect creating such a document is outside the capabilities of the current committee.

Webmaster Report

See Appendix A at the end of this report.

Recommendations from the Website Oversight Committee to Synod 2024:

Recommendation #1:

That Synod thank the Waupun consistory for their many years of faithful service acting as the supervising body over the Website Oversight Committee and the many administrative tasks it has undertaken over their years for the committee and the federation.

Recommendation #2:

That Synod thank Gary Fisher for his faithful service in the position of Webmaster for the federation and reappoint him until the next Synod.

Recommendation #3:

That Synod increase the annual honorarium paid to Gary Fisher by \$250 to \$5,500 starting in 2025.

Recommendation #4:

That Synod approve annual hosting costs of \$3,100 and annual development costs of \$2,500.

Respectfully submitted,

Bruce Vrieling
Chairman, Website Oversight Committee

APPENDIX A

Webmaster's Report to Synod Escondido 2024

*Updated and revised from the
Synod Niagara 2022 Report

Esteemed Fathers and Brothers;

In accordance with the relevant section of the current “Regulations for Synodical Procedure” and bearing in mind the requirements and duties enumerated over the years since this task was first described, I humbly offer this Report, “including website analytics and other technical statistics showing the usefulness of the website.” [Regulations 4.7.4.n]

To facilitate your evaluation of the work, I have organized this Report in roughly the order used within the Regulations to define the tasks with which you have entrusted me.

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable direction and assistance given to me by the Website Oversight Committee [WOC], which has always been and continues to be responsive to my requests for guidance, and diligent in relaying website-related questions which arise in their classes. WOC Chair Bruce Vrieling’s leadership and the wise counsel of the Classis Representatives have benefitted the website, and the URCNA, many times; this is by no means a “one-man job.”

I must also express my gratitude for the URCNA Statistician, and for Mrs. Jody Luth’s excellent grasp of that position. The Statistician and I are in regular communication as she utilizes the website, we work together on some of the unique requirements of our Federation Directory, and Mrs. Luth has suggested many enhancements we have subsequently implemented.

My General Responsibilities, as described in the Regulations, begin with day-to-day operation of the Federation website, and to this usually routine task I devote at least the first and last hour of my day, checking first each morning for help requests (lost passwords, etc.), new documents, event listings and Ministerial News items in need of approval, emails from both within and outside the URCNA, reports from the hosting company, and a general check of site functions, keeping a list of issues which will require further processing or follow-up. I attend to these at the time, throughout the day, or during my evening “rounds,” and confront any remaining or continuing tasks on Saturday. I also carry a laptop with me when travelling so that I can perform my duties year-round.

The bulk of requests for my assistance come by email, but my cell number is posted on the site; I typically receive several relevant calls a month. It is my practice, whenever possible, to address phone requests immediately, while the person in need of assistance is still engaged in the task which prompted the call. However, because such calls may come when I am away from my

office and unable to do more than talk the caller through the issue, email requests are still best for most contacts; when it is requested or the best course of action, I phone the requestor.

I remain available to the Clerk of each Classis and the Chairman or Clerk of each standing committee to confirm their information and provide assistance. Each classis and standing committee, and other committees or groups upon request, has administrative and editing access to multiple custom areas of the website, including webpages (e.g. URCNA.org/EasternUS for Classis Eastern US, URCNA.org/WesternCanada for Classis Western Canada, etc.), private forums, the Federation Calendar, and more. Some of these resources are underutilized but have been available for over a decade, and I can of course be called upon to help. Even brief reports from time to time would help sister churches and fellow members know how to pray and for what; to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] *weep with those who weep*,” and to see the United Reformed Churches as truly united, not just related. I hope to see these better used in the future, and they are included in the planning for future website improvements as well.

I humbly confess that my communications to the Classes by way of our Classis Representatives, who also comprise the Website Oversight Committee, have sometimes fallen short, as I occasionally learn of the agenda cutoff for a given classis meeting only days in advance. There have also been multiple incidents in which new Church Plants or Provisional Churches were not reported to me in a timely fashion. We have a “generic” reporting format which Representatives can use in preparing their classis reports, but with sufficient notice I can tailor the reports to include facts which might be pertinent to individual classes if that is requested.

Finally, I have worked particularly closely over the past months with the Synodical Interim Committee in preparing for Synod Escondido 2024, and I am happy to report that the significant work done in preparation for Synod Redeemer 2020 (canceled) and Synod Niagara 2022 has borne fruit in that the website preparations for Synod Escondido 2024 required far less work (as of this writing), especially in the area of Synod Registration, than in the past.

To the extent such documentation could be obtained, records from past Synods, particularly planning and working documents, have been collected and securely stored on the Federation website for use by future Synodical Interim Committees, at their discretion, for the organization and planning of future meetings of Synod, and for historical purposes, so that the collective wisdom of previous Synod planners can benefit those who follow. I thank particularly the planning committees of Synods Wyoming 2016 and Niagara 2022 for providing significant records for use by subsequent synod planners.

I have prepared and attached three pages below offering statistics, analytics and observations I believe will be helpful in evaluating both the website and my efforts.

Serving the church in this position, while occasionally taxing, remains a joy and a blessing, and I thank the Synod, our churches, and above all our God for granting me the opportunity to utilize the gifts granted to me in this way. It is my fervent hope that I will be found a profitable servant.

Respectfully submitted,

Gary Fisher
URCNA Webmaster

Website Utilization

Website utilization continues to grow, not only within but outside the Federation as well. A map of countries from which URCNA.org receives visitors includes every habitable continent. After only Canada and the United States, the third largest number of website visitors come to us from the Philippines, followed by the U.K. and China.



While our largest audience comes from North America, we regularly reach thousands in Asia and almost as many in Europe and Africa, and significant populations in South and Central America, Australia, and the Oceania region.

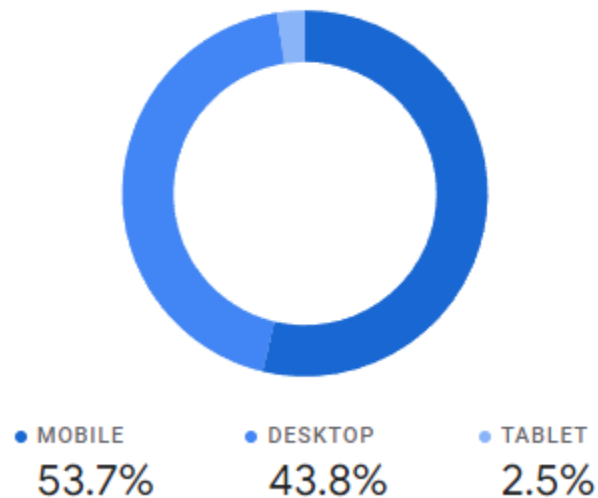
How Users Reach URCNA.org

In the early years of the Federation website, both computer and communications technology in widespread use were quite limited in comparison to now. Computers could display only limited colors, display resolution was often barely capable of presenting readable text, and pages took much longer to load, especially if high-quality photos or graphics were being used, largely due to slow internet connections. For most of us, those restrictions have passed into history and highly interactive websites with engaging graphics, animation, and advanced control technology are common and popular.

Nevertheless, both among our membership and especially in light of our potential impact around the world, as seen above, we need to maintain a careful balance between aesthetics and usability, keeping the website attractive as a visible aspect of the URCNA, yet still accessible to users who might be using older devices and slower – perhaps even dial-up – internet connections.

Here is how people at home and abroad view and use the URCNA website.

Users by Device category
[Updated March 2024]



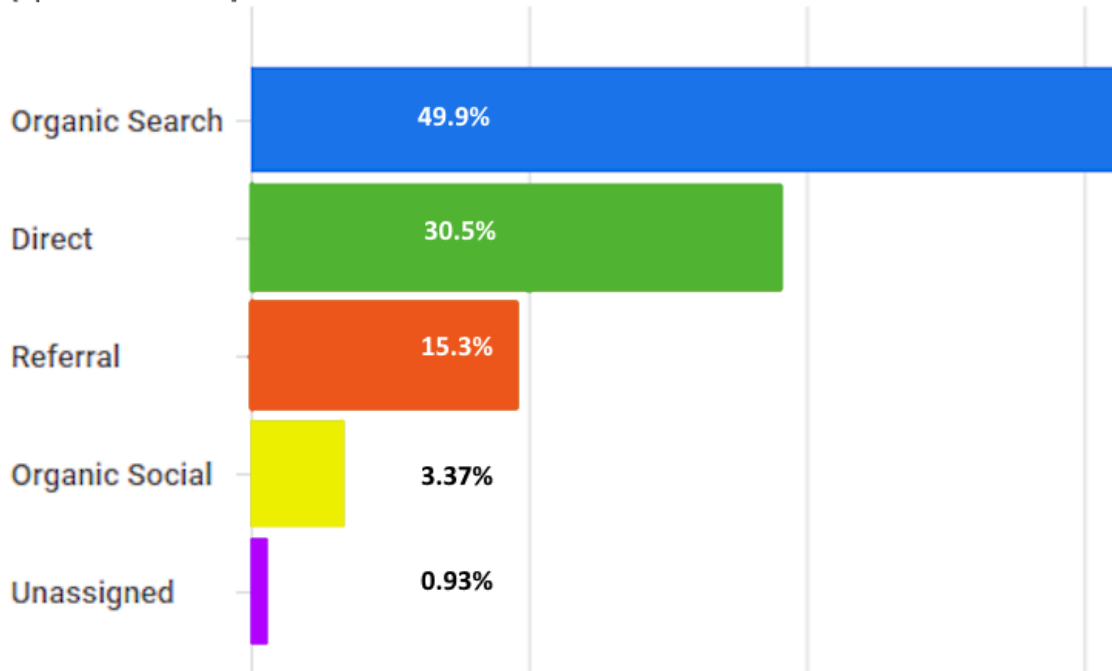
Cell phones are now the most popular device employed by users of URCNA.org, increasing year by year. Tablets have dropped in usage since my last Report, and desktop (+laptop) computers now comprise less than half of our utilization. I have worked closely with our hosting provider to optimize the presentation of URCNA.org on mobile devices.

How Visitors Find URCNA.org

Unlike buildings, books and brochures, a website, no matter how attractive or useful, cannot gain the interest of passers-by. With almost two billion¹ websites currently vying for attention on the internet, website usage depends entirely on referrals of one sort or another. It is essential to get and keep a website's URL ("address") before any intended audience, or they will simply not know about it.

Users by Session primary channel group (Default Channel Group)

[Updated March 2024]



The chart above shows that the majority of our visitors find us through Google, Bing, and other search engines. One key to this is a concept called SEO, Search Engine Optimization, which is a method of informing search engines of important keywords and categories, and of ensuring that content for which users might search is presented and organized in ways "friendly" to the search sites. Virtually every public page on URCNA.org has SEO facilities, and when a page is added, edited, or examined in my periodic checks of the site, I also check and, if necessary, update SEO.

A third of our users simply type "URCNA.org" to reach us; these are people who either already know of us, or who have obtained our "address" from a bulletin, a business card, or other source. The remaining categories are those who follow a link, either from another website, such as those of URCNA churches, or from social media, including Facebook, YouTube, etc. Most of our churches display a link on their own websites leading to URCNA.org, though some still do not; this should be encouraged to highlight our unity and to assist those interested in our churches.

[¹ <https://www.internetlivestats.com/total-number-of-websites/>]