

II.

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Introduction

The prayer of Christ that His people might be one is fulfilled in the spiritual unity that exists between each believer and Jesus Christ, and in Christ with one another. It is a unity expressed to various degrees in the image Scripture uses of the Church as a body (1 Cor. 12), a kingdom (Matt. 13), and the household of faith (Eph. 2:19). As Presbyterians we acknowledge that this real spiritual union which exists among believers is to be expressed outwardly, not only in local churches, but beyond that in Presbyteries, Synods and General Assemblies. Furthermore we believe this outward unity is desirable and should be promoted and pursued where possible between denominations without compromise of the Truth revealed in Scripture. We must tenaciously resist a false ecumenicity which seeks unity at the expense of Truth. On the other hand we must resist an unbiblical separatism that tends to descend into a proud and blind isolationism.

The Ecumenical Relations Committee seeks to maintain this balance in their work of interacting with other Churches throughout the world. As a result we can benefit from our brethren and we trust they likewise can benefit from us. We have various degrees of contact with Reformed Churches at home and abroad, including churches from each of the major continents throughout the world. This report will summarise some of these contacts and highlight some important issues.

International Council of Reformed Churches (ICRC)

The Free Church (Continuing) continues its membership of the ICRC, and its European sub-division the EuCRC. This affords an opportunity to send delegates to the meeting of the council every four years and is a cost-effective way to interact with and encourage Reformed Churches worldwide and to exert an influence on any of those Churches that might be drifting from their confessional moorings. The EuCRC met in May 2016 where Mr Donald J. Morrison represented our Church, bringing back an encouraging report of Church planting, especially in Eastern Europe. The ICRC is due to meet in July 2017 in Ontario, Canada, and the Free Church (Continuing) will send two delegates.

North America

The Committee continues contact with a number of North American denominations with roots in the Westminster tradition of Reformed Orthodoxy, e.g. the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and the Continental Reformed tradition, e.g. Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC), the Free Reformed Churches (FRCNA) and the United Reformed Churches (URCNA). We are glad to receive delegates from these Churches to our General Assembly and this year we hope to be represented by delegates at the Synod of the FRCNA and the General Assembly of the OPC in June 2017.

The Committee also note with prayerful interest the discussions taking place in North America between our own Presbytery there and the Presbyterian Reformed Church toward a closer working relationship. We commend this to the prayers of the Church.

The Netherlands

Ecumenical relations are at present maintained with two Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the fellowship of our Dutch brethren is greatly appreciated. Relations with one of these Churches however is raising concerns and is under close scrutiny by the Committee. At their Synod of 2014 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) or GKN(v), considered a Committee report on the rôle of women in the Churches. That report, prepared by a very small committee appointed by the previous General Synod,

attempted to argue from Scripture that Scripture could not be deemed to exclude women from office in every era. That position was opposed by conservatives in the Church and visiting delegates from other Reformed Churches were given opportunity to speak regarding the report. Our own delegate was among those who opposed the move and the report was sent back to the committee for further reflection. At their General Synod in April 2017 a fresh report on the same subject was brought forward by the Committee appointed by the previous (2014) General Synod. In accordance with Dutch practice, (General) Synod Meppel, 2017, has appointed a Synod Committee to consider the report of the Committee appointed by (General) Synod Ede, 2014, and to report on it to a later session of Synod Meppel 2017 with recommendations. Along with representatives from many foreign churches, delegates from the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) had extended meetings with the Committee of Synod Meppel 2017. Representatives from all the foreign churches were unanimous in expressing grave concern that the reasoning of the Report of the Committee appointed by Synod Ede 2014 was scripturally unsound and contrary to the historic understanding of the Church regarding the rôle of women. It is important to understand Dutch procedure in this matter. The Committee of Synod Meppel 2017 will consider the Report of the Committee appointed by Synod Ede 2014, along with the representations of foreign churches, and will then bring its own report to a latter session of Synod Meppel 2017. That session of Synod Meppel 2017 will have before it a proposed deliverance from the Committee appointed by Synod Ede 2014 and a proposed deliverance from the Committee appointed by Synod Meppel 2017 and there may be further motions from the floor. If the eventual finding of Synod Meppel 2017 would bring about a change in the status quo, the finding cannot be finalised without going down to Consistories (Kirk Sessions) under a procedure similar to our Barrier Act. The votes of Consistories would then come back to the next General Synod in 2020. If at the 2020 Synod it were found that a majority of Consistories had approved a change in the status quo, that could still be appealed against to a further General Synod in 2023. It must also be borne in mind that in terms of Dutch practice, findings of Synod do not bind individual consistories in the same way as findings of Assembly bind our Kirk Sessions.

This has been, and remains, a matter of real concern which will be closely monitored. We are, however, very grateful to have had the opportunity to have an input into the work of the Committee which will bring a recommendation to a later session of Synod Meppel 2017.

South America

The Committee are aware of the growing interest in the Reformed Faith in the South American Continent and the unofficial links our Church has to this through contacts of Rev. J. Ruiz. In addition to this, the Committee has received communications from the Puritan Reformed Church of Brazil and the Presbyterian Church of Colombia and they continue correspondence to investigate whether closer relationships can be established with these churches.

Affinity

The Free Church Continuing continues its membership of Affinity where we are represented on the council by Rev. T.J. McGlynn. Mr McGlynn brought an article in the Affinity Theological Journal on the Days of Creation to the attention of the Committee, with the concern that this could highlight a worrying trajectory in the organisation toward a non-historical understanding of the Genesis creation account and its implications for the interpretation of Genesis 1-11.

The Committee asked Mr. McGlynn to convey our concerns to the Affinity Council and were glad that he was able to do so clearly. It is also noted that in a subsequent edition, the same journal published a further article making the case for a literal understanding of the days of Creation.

This issue compelled the Ecumenical Relations Committee to evaluate our Church's involvement with Affinity and they recommend our continued involvement in this forum where we are able to raise a voice against worrying trends and in this way assist those of our brethren in England in independent evangelical churches who share these same concerns and value our support.

Scotland

The Committee continue to work to develop ecumenical relations with like-minded Churches in Scotland. We continue relations with the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC) and were represented at their Assembly by Rev. Robert Josey. It was an encouragement that the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland (RPCS) sent Rev. Peter Loughridge as an observer to our 2016 General Assembly and as a result of ongoing discussions between representatives of both churches throughout the year, it is hoped that this will issue in a delegate from the RPCS attending our 2017 General Assembly.

GAVIN BEERS, *Convener*

DONALD A. ROBERTSON, *Vice-convener*

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and thank the Committee, especially the Convener, Vice-convener and the Clerk;
2. The General Assembly acknowledge that the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) has a duty to recognise other true Churches worldwide and foster appropriate relations with them where possible, without compromise of God's Truth, and thank the Committee on Ecumenical Relations for their work to that end;
3. The General Assembly note the ongoing involvement of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in the International Council of Reformed Churches and pray for the work of that body;
4. The General Assembly note the discussions between our USA Presbytery and the Presbytery of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of North America and pray that these will develop toward closer ecumenical relations;
5. The General Assembly note the actions taken by the ecumenical relations Committee with regard to matters currently before the courts of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt) and instruct the Committee to continue to monitor the situation and to report on any significant matters arising;
6. The General Assembly note with thanksgiving the growing interest in the Reformed Faith on the South American Continent and pray for future Ecumenical Relations that may develop between the FC(C) and churches there and for ways that we may be of assistance to our brethren;
7. The General Assembly note the ongoing membership of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Affinity and especially pray that we may be an influence for good within this organisation; the Assembly also thank the Rev. T.J. McGlynn for his faithful work as our Church's representative on the Affinity council;
8. The General Assembly note the ongoing discussions between the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland and acknowledge with thanks the willingness of the RPCS to send a delegate to our Assembly in 2017.