

II.

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Introduction

The Ecumenical Relations Committee has the charge from the General Assembly to seek to strengthen present relationships with like-minded brethren and, where possible, reach out to other Churches who may have shown a desire to be at one with us. While we are thankful for opportunities to discuss various matters online with some, we have nevertheless been hindered in some situations by not being able to meet face-to-face. James Durham has an interesting view on union. He states, *There may and ought to be uniting when the evils that follow division or schism are greater and more hurtful to the church than the evils that may be supposed to follow on union.*

This Report is limited in its detail for obvious reasons, due either to the ongoing difficulties of the past two years and the few opportunities afforded of advancing relations already commenced with other bodies, or with some new enquiries received over the last few months.

Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland

The Committee were aware that at the last General Assembly there was a measure of negativity expressed by some to the talks which have been going on since 2013 with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, a Church with whom we share a common heritage in our adherence to the Second Reformation, as well as both Churches being fully committed to the Westminster Standards and purity of worship. This negativity, together with various more practical reasons, resulted in there being no further meetings during the past year. The Committee are unsure where these ongoing discussions can now lead, apart from providing a means of contact and fellowship with like-minded brethren; however, they are still desirous of seeking a resolution to the present lack of positive progress. It is the intention of the Committee to bring a finalised report to the 2023 Assembly.

Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland

It was noted that the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland is due to meet from 13th to 15th June 2022 and it was agreed to appoint Rev. Greg MacDonald as the delegate of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

Australian Free Church

At last year's Assembly the Committee reported that they had received a communication from the Presbytery of the Australian Free Church in which they indicated their desire to be incorporated into the FreeChurch (Continuing) as an Australian Presbytery of the Church. The Committee's Report noted that there appeared to be no constitutional barriers to such a move and expressed the hope that such a development might assist in the gathering together of various small confessional churches within Australia which might lead to the eventual development of an independent and indigenous Australian sister-church. Thus the 2021 General Assembly approved in principle pursuing the incorporation of the Australian Free Church into the FC(C) and requested the Committee to prepare mature proposals for the 2022 Assembly. Further, the 2021 General Assembly authorised the Committee to correspond with the Australian Churches with which the FC(C) have contact, informing them of the Church's intention to erect a Presbytery of Australia and inviting them to associate with this Presbytery, should they so wish, and otherwise to maintain active ecumenical relations with the FC(C).

The Committee appointed a Sub-committee to take the matter further and they began their work by making contact with individual ministers in the Southern Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of

Eastern Australia to inform them of the thinking that lay behind the 2021 Assembly findings. Subsequently, the Sub-committee indicated to the Committee a very negative response to the proposed erection of an FC(C) Presbytery in Australia. In particular, it was felt that such a move on the part of the FC(C) would only hinder, rather than help, the realignment of the PCEA with the various smaller Presbyterian bodies in Australia and that such a realignment should be encouraged rather than hindered. Further, there was a concern regarding the practical implications of such a development on the mutual eligibility arrangement with the PCEA.

Consequently, the Committee are therefore now recommending to the 2022 General Assembly that the suggested erection of an Australian FC(C) Presbytery be passed from and that instead, the General Assembly encourage the various sister Churches in Australia to work towards realignment. While there is ongoing contact with the Australian Free Church and fruitful dialogue is maintained, we continue to encourage them to look at the possibility of the union of like-minded denominations within the Australian continent. Having noted a response from the Australian Free Church to the Committee's recommendation, the Committee remain of the opinion that there appears to be no insurmountable barrier to a coming together of the AFC and the PCEA and that this may be done without any loss of integrity or change of practice on the part of the AFC.

Presbyterian Reformed Church (America)

Apart from one Congregation in England, the majority of the PRC Congregations are located in North America. Over the last few years there have been ongoing talks between the PRC and the FC(C) Presbytery of the USA, with a view to a closer relationship being forged which could bring about a union between the brethren in North America. However, it appears that such a development may not be feasible at this time. Concerned that momentum be not lost, the Church Relations Committee of the PRC made contact with the Committee and, subsequently, some representatives of the FC(C) met via Zoom with the said Committee. Discussions were helpful and went some way towards clarifying why they are looking for union at this time. It is hoped that contact can be continued and progress made. The ultimate goal of any such union would be the development of an indigenous, independent, North American sister Church, with presumably the PRC Congregation based in England becoming part of the FC(C).

Free Reformed Churches of North America

The Committee have relationships with a variety of North American denominations including the Free Reformed Churches of North America. The FRCNA are close to the FC(C) in theology and experimental preaching and relations have now strengthened to the extent that some FRCNA ministers have preached in FC(C) congregations and also been invited to the USA Presbytery's Colloquium. These developments are to be welcomed. It is expected that Mr Connor Keuning of the FRCNA will be present at the Assembly.

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (North America)

The Committee maintain active contact with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and are thankful that the Presbytery of the USA have often been able to send one of their number as the FC(C) delegate to the OPC General Assembly. This year the OPC Assembly is due to meet from 8th to 14th June in St Davids, Pennsylvania, and Rev. Brent Evans expects to attend on behalf of the Committee. The Committee are thankful to report that Rev. Iain Wright of the OPC expects to be a fraternal delegate to the Assembly this year.

Heritage Reformed Congregations

The Church has received an invitation to send a delegate to the 2022 Synod of the HRC and Rev. Brent Evans has agreed to attend this meeting which takes place in Grand Rapids from 6th to 8th June. Rev. Ian MacLeod, now a minister of the HRC, expects to be their delegate to the FC(C) Assembly.

Canadian Reformed Churches

The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) was represented at the 2019 General Synod of the Canadian

Reformed Churches and a note of appreciation had been received from them. They have also sought permission to reprint Rev. William Macleod's 2019 Assembly Moderatorial Address in *Lux Mundi*, now a publication of the CRC.

Dutch Churches

There have been no new developments in regard to relations with any of the Dutch Churches with which we are in contact.

Affinity

The Committee have maintained their involvement with Affinity and Rev. Timothy McGlynn has been active in attending meetings. During 2022 there was a change of structure in their charitable status, and Affinity is now a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, with an Executive, a Council and membership. Mr McGlynn is an active member of the Council.

International Conference of Reformed Churches

The ICRC was postponed in 2020 and again in 2021, due to the pandemic. However, it is now due to be held from Thursday, October 13th to Tuesday, October 18th, in Windhoek, Namibia, with the Reformed Churches of South Africa hosting the meeting. The Committee have received an invitation to send two voting delegates, the cost of which is covered in the present budget. Attending meetings of the ICRC has proved most beneficial in the past and enables personal contact with a whole range of reformed Churches from throughout the world in one location and for a relatively modest sum of money.

European Conference of Reformed Churches

The Committee noted that the next meeting of the EuCRC is due to take place in 2023.

KENNETH M. MACDONALD, *Convener*

TIMOTHY J. MCGLYNN, *Vice-convener*

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and thank the Committee, and especially the Convener and the Clerk;
2. The General Assembly note the ongoing discussions between representatives of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland and encourage the Committee to continue dialogue and to bring a finalised report to the 2023 Assembly; The General Assembly note that Rev. Greg MacDonald has agreed to represent the Church at the upcoming Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland;
3. The General Assembly note their ongoing relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia;
4. The General Assembly note that that the proposed incorporation of the Australian Free Church into the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) as an Australian Presbytery is unlikely to promote but rather to hinder the realignment of the various reformed confessional churches in Australia and therefore pass from the matter. Whilst valuing highly their relationship with the Australian Free Church, they encourage them to seek a closer relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia and express their desire to do all in their power to seek the realignment of the reformed confessional Churches in Australia and that the Lord would bless his cause in that land;
5. The General Assembly encourage further dialogue between the Church and the Presbyterian Reformed Church (USA) and instruct the Committee to report to the 2023 General Assembly on progress, including possible mature proposals relating to future association;

6. The General Assembly continue to encourage relationships with the Free Reformed Churches of North America;
7. The General Assembly continue to encourage relationships with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (North America);
8. The General Assembly continue to encourage relationships with the Heritage Reformed Congregations;
9. The General Assembly continue to encourage relationships with the Canadian Reformed Churches;
10. The General Assembly note the Church's ongoing involvement with Affinity and, while aware of a change of structure in their Charitable Status, note that our denomination still has a member on their 'review committee'. The Assembly are especially thankful to Rev. Timothy J. McGlynn for his continued work as the Church's representative on the Council of Affinity;
11. The General Assembly note the Church's ongoing involvement with the International Conference of Reformed Churches, and continue to pray and seek, where possible, to contribute with it to the worldwide work of the Gospel. They appoint Rev. Kenneth Macdonald and Rev. Graeme Craig as their delegates to the 2022 Meeting of the ICRC in Windhoek, Namibia, in October 2022.