

16.21 REPORT 16: DEPUTIES ECUMENICITY ABROAD – NORTH AMERICA (Artt 62, 182)

- A. Rev HS Coetzee tables the Report.
- B. The Report will be concluded during the Synod session.
- C. The chairperson, dr DG Breed, welcomes dr L Duncan of the PCA in the meeting.

D. REPORT

Deputies responsible for the desk: Dr DG Breed (s), prof RS Hobyane.

1. Presbyterian Churches in America (PCA)

Ecumenical Unity

1.1 *Mandate*

- 1.1.1 Ecumenical unity with the PCA is to be further strengthened through contact and possibly visits and that this ecumenical unity becomes more practical in matters of common interest.
- 1.1.2 The PCA is to be encouraged to look at how they can optimally involve (make use of) fraternal delegates during their Synod meetings.
- 1.1.3 The PCA is to be encouraged to send fraternal delegates to the GKSA's General Synod 2015.

Decision: Points 1.1.1 to 1.1.3 noted.

1.2 *Execution of the mandate*

1.2.1 The PCA Synod meeting (17-21 June 2013)

Dr DG Breed and prof RS Hobyane attended the PCA's General Synod in Greenville, South Carolina (USA) in June 2013. The two delegates had an opportunity to convey the GKSA's greetings to the PCA and to meet with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) to discuss matters of common interest.

1.2.2 Overall outcomes and decisions of the PCA

- 1.2.2.1 It was a point of great concern to the Deputies of GKSA that the PCA does not seem to take the presence of fraternal delegates into serious consideration, during their Synod meetings. Prof RS Hobyane and dr DG Breed addressed the EIRC on this matter. Consequently, the PCA assembly unanimously decided/agreed to give this issue due attention, as it may damage their ecumenical ties with other churches, including the GKSA.
- 1.2.2.2 The Deputies of GKSA also pleaded with the PCA to send fraternal delegates to our General Synod 2015. This will enhance ecumenical ties between the churches, in striving for God-glorifying partnership in the future.

Decision: Points 1.2.1 to 1.2.2.2 noted.

1.3 *Recommendations for decision taking by the Synod*

- 1.3.1 The Synod is to take note with gratitude of the ecumenical unity with the PCA. This is to be further strengthened by possible visits of Deputies and practical cooperation, especially in matters of common interest e.g. missionary work.
- 1.3.2 The Synod is to note with gratitude the decision of the PCA to look at how they can optimally involve (make use of) fraternal delegates during their Synod meetings.

Decision: Points 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 approved.

2. United Reformed Churches of America (URCNA)

Ecumenical Ties

For notice

2.1 *Mandate*

- 2.1.1 It is to be noted with thanks that the URCNA seriously endeavours to remain true the God's Word and the Confessions.
- 2.1.2 It is to be noted with great sadness that the URCNA still decided against closer ecumenical ties with the GKSA, even after all the positive testimony about the GKSA presented to their Synod calling for ecumenical unity and collaboration.
- 2.1.3 It is to be accepted that in light of the URCNA's decision ecumenical *unity* could not be established between the GKSA and the URCNA, only ecumenical *ties*.
- 2.1.4 The GKSA is to continue to seek further ties with the URCNA, by means of contact and visits, where possible.

Decision: Points 2.1.1 to 2.1.4 noted.

2.2 *Execution of the mandate*

Ties with the URCNA were strengthened through positive contact with their delegates, during the ICRC's last meeting.

Decision: Noted.

For decision making

2.3 *Recommendation*

Continued effort should be made to develop further ties with the URCNA, through contact and visits, where possible.

Decision: Approved.

3. Reformed Church of US (RCUS)

Ecumenical contact

For notice

3.1 *Mandate*

Contact with the RCUS is to be further developed, through visits by the Deputies and practical cooperation – especially in terms of missionary work.

Decision: Noted.

3.2 *Execution of the mandate*

Meaningful contact was made with the RCUS, through discussions with their delegates at the last ICRC meeting.

Decision: Noted.

For decision making

3.3 *Recommendation*

Contact with the RCUS is to be further developed, by means of collaboration in the ICRC and, should the opportunity present itself, through visits to other churches in the USA and Canada that have ties with the GKSA.

Decision: Approved.

4. Christian Reformed Churches in North America (CRCNA)

Ecumenical Unity

For notice

4.1 *Mandate*

- 4.1.1 The Synod is to take note, with great disappointment, of the two decisions taken by the CRCNA since 2009 that directly affect its relationship with the GKSA *without any advance consultation with the GKSA*: (i) the decision regarding the Belhar document and (ii) the decision on the new translations of the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt and the Heidelberg Catechism.

- 4.1.2 The unity between the GKSA and the URCNA is to be confirmed through unity in confession, as expressed in the three Formularies of Unity. A church community making decisions about the bond of unity, without consulting the other church, threatens such unity.
- 4.1.3 The GKSA is to accept the CRCNA's invitation to offer suitable commentary on the Belhar document and for delegates to offer input, within the framework of Scripture and the three Formularies of Unity, at the next CRCNA Synod.
- 4.1.4 The Deputies are to be instructed to conduct a thorough study of the CRCNA's translations of the confessions, to determine whether the translation is true to that which the CRCNA and GKSA agreed they confess. The study must *inter alia* also determine whether the approach taken to the translation (cf. 2.2.3) was Scripturally substantiated. The results of the study are then to be taken up with the CRCNA.

Decision: Points 4.1.1 to 4.1.4 noted.

4.2 *Execution of the mandate*

4.2.1 The CRCNA Synod meeting (08-14 June 2012)

Profs A le R du Plooy and RS Hobyane attended the CRCNA's Synod in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada in June 2012. The two delegates had an opportunity to convey the GKSA's greetings and to meet with the EIRC to discuss matters that were part of their mandate (cf. addendum 1: Greetings).

4.2.2 Overall outcomes and decisions of the CRCNA

4.2.2.1 The CRCNA assembly unanimously decided not to adopt the Belhar confession as part of the Three Forms of Unity (as a fourth confession), but to accept it as testimony/declaration of faith. This is a new category approved for this and similar declarations.

4.2.2.2 During the meeting between the GKSA delegates and the EIRC, it was reported that the CRCNA – in cooperation with the RCA (USA) – had already completed and adopted the translation of the confessions to be more gender neutral/friendly. It was further indicated that the final version of this confession will be published sometime next year (2013), together with their new hymnal.

4.2.2.3 The GKSA delegates were advised to download this document from the CRCNA's website and study it. The delegates agreed to retrieve the document, to determine whether the content of the confession is compromised in any way, to suit the gender aspect.

4.2.3 Main points of concern that arose at the CRCNA's Synod 2012

During a discussion with prof Rabali and dr Mutavhatshindi, it became clear that they had no knowledge of the official decision taken by the GKSA's General Synod of with regard to the relationship with Synod Soutpansberg and that the comments made were not in line with the Report that served on the Agenda of General Synod January 2012. Prof Rabali supplied a written copy of his greetings, which differed from the oral version he delivered to the Synod of the CRCNA – specifically with regard to the aspects of paternalism and lawsuits and the impression that the GKSA is deliberately and unlawfully taking the property of the Synod Soutpansberg.

4.2.4 Meeting of reflection of Reformed Churches: the place and meaning of ecumenical faith declarations in Reformed Churches

- 4.2.4.1 As mentioned, the CRCNA decided at their Synod in 2013, upon long consideration, against accepting the Belhar confession as an additional confession to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dordt and the Belgic Confession. This Synod did, however, decide to newly categorise the document as an ecumenical faith declaration. Subsequent to their Synod the CRCNA's Ecumenical and Faith Relations Committee invited a number of Reformed Churches, with which it has varying ecumenical ties, to consider "whether this new category could serve a broader purpose among Reformed Churches".
- 4.2.4.2 Since prof A le R du Plooy and dr DG Breed have been involved with the CRCNA's reflection on the Belhar document as confession for years and because the CRCNA invited them by name to participate in this reflection, they were sent to attend the event. This event was also attended by approximately 50 delegates from different Reformed Churches across the world.
- 4.2.4.3 The event started off looking at the role and place of confessions within the Reformed world. Then the meeting moved on to the question of whether a new category, viz. *ecumenical faith declarations*, would be of value within the Reformed world. During the discussion, it quickly became clear that the place and meaning of Formularies and Confessions differed between the churches that sent delegates to the event.
- 4.2.4.4 No formal decisions were made, but the delegates (including those of the GKSA) were nonetheless convinced that such a category (ecumenical faith declarations) "...did not convey a clearly understood meaning". Like the GKSA delegates, many of the delegates believed that "this category could implicitly discriminate among varied expressions of faith in ways that might contribute to an unhealthy hierarchical classification of the church's varied forms of witness".
- 4.2.4.5 The delegates may not have reacted positively to the possible creation of a new category, i.e. ecumenical faith declarations, but they still agreed that this event was timely and necessary.

Decision: Points 4.2.1 to 4.2.4.5 noted.

For decision making

4.3 *Recommendations*

- 4.3.1 The Synod is to note with gratitude the decision of the CRCNA not to adopt the Belhar confession as part of the standards of unity (as a fourth confession), but accepted it as a testimony/declaration of faith.
- 4.3.2 The Synod is to take note of the study headed by the CRCNA on the place and meaning of ecumenical faith declarations in Reformed Churches.
- 4.3.3 The Deputies are to follow up on previous discussions with the CRCNA about their translation of the Confessions.
- 4.3.4 The unity between the GKSA and CRCNA is to be further strengthened by visits from the Deputies, where possible, and practical cooperation – especially in terms of mission work in some of the African countries where the GKSA and CRCNA are involved.

Decision: Points 4.3.1 to 4.3.4 approved.

5. Orthodox Presbyterian Church in America (OPC)

Ecumenical Unity

For notice

5.1 *Mandate*

5.1.1 It is to be noted with gratitude that the unity between the GKSA and the OPC is also practically expressed at ecumenical level.

5.1.2 The unity between the GKSA and the PCA is to be further developed through visits by Deputies for possible and practical collaboration, especially in terms of missionary work.

Decision: Points 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 noted.

5.2 *Execution of the mandate*

The unity between the GKSA and the OPC was strengthened through discussions between delegates of the GKSA and the OPC, at the ICRC. The GKSA and OPC also collaborated on a commission for the amendment of the ICRC's constitution (dr DG Breed and br Mark Bube of the OPC).

Decision: Noted.

For decision making

5.3 *Recommendations*

5.3.1 The unity between the GKSA and the OPC should be noted with thanks.

5.3.2 The unity between the GKSA and the OPC should be further developed, by means of visits by Deputies for possible and practical cooperation.

Decision: Points 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 approved.

6. Heritage Reformed Church (HRC)

Ecumenical Contact*

For notice

6.1 *Mandate*

The GKSA is to explore the possible ecumenical contact with the HNRC, seeing that this denomination already have two ministers (dr B de Vries and rev A Miskin) serving within the GKSA.

Decision: Noted.

6.2 *Execution of the mandate*

6.2.1 The visit to PRTS (Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary) in Grand Rapids – USA (21 June 2013).

During the visit to the PCA in June 2013, prof RS Hobyane and dr DG Breed had an opportunity to also meet with the brothers of the HNRC in Grand Rapids at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS). First, the Deputies met with the mission Deputies of the HNRC (rev Mark Kelderman and rev Maarten Kuivenhoven) and later, the two representatives of PRTS (dr J Beeke and rev Maarten Kuivenhoven) where they train their students for ministry.

6.2.2 *Summary of discussions*

The GKSA Deputies discussed a range of issues with the abovementioned representatives of the HNRC. The discussion included issues related to missionary work, theological training, etc. The Deputies hope to continue with discussions of this nature once ecumenical ties are affirmed.

Decision: Points 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 noted.

For decision making

6.3 *Recommendations*

- 6.3.1 The GKSA Synod is to note with gratitude the possibility of ecumenical ties between the HNRC and the GKSA.
- 6.3.2 Formal ecumenical contact between the GKSA and HNRC is to be established and further strengthened by visits from Deputies, where possible.
- 6.3.3 Practical cooperation, especially in terms of missionary work, is to be seriously considered.

Decision: Points 6.3.1 to 6.3.3 approved.