

Appendix A

Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers—Christian Reformed Church in North America and Reformed Church in America

I. Preamble and history

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) have a lengthy history of cooperation and interaction, in spite of an occasional fracture in their relationship. Desirous of healing any remnant of past tensions and of lifting up a joint witness of unity in these present days and into the future, the two churches have taken mutual actions that have led to the exploration of ways to move toward greater unity between these two churches in their ministry and mission.

At the RCA General Synod of 1995 an overture from Classis Grand Rapids North encouraged “full programmatic and organizational union” between the RCA and the CRC by June of 2000. The overture resulted in a vote by the RCA General Synod “to encourage agencies of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America as well as the Commission on Christian Unity to maintain regular correspondence with the Christian Reformed Church in North America and its Interchurch Relations Committee and further, to explore avenues of reconciliation between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America for additional programmatic cooperation” (Minutes of the General Synod 1995, R-5, p.189).

In its continuing response to this encouragement, the RCA Commission on Christian Unity met with the Interchurch Relations Committee of the CRC on February 28-29, 2000. The Interchurch Relations Committee expressed its strong interest in working with the Commission on Christian Unity.

There was mutual agreement that there were advantages to joint theological study in several areas, including the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa’s Belhar Confession and Roman Catholic and Reformed dialogue. The Interchurch Relations Committee and Commission on Christian Unity agreed to meet again on September 23-24, 2001 for further conversations. This meeting was postponed due to the event of September 11, 2001, when the New York World Trade Towers were felled by an act of terrorism and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., was attacked and damaged. Still, the desire was there for conversations that would continue to explore avenues of reconciliation and cooperation.

At the RCA General Synod of 2002 an overture was received from the Synod of the Great Lakes encouraging the CRC and the RCA to “enter into a greater dialogue for the purpose of exploring ways to move toward a seamless ministry and mission.” Responding to the overture, the RCA General Synod voted “to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to enter into dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, exploring ways of moving toward greater unity between the CRC and the RCA in their ministry and mission, beginning with a discussion of the orderly exchange of

ministers, and to report to the 2003 General Synod; and further, to encourage the agencies of the RCA to continue to expand their cooperative efforts with their CRC counterparts” (Minutes of the General Synod 2002, R-38, p. 179).

Through comparable action, the CRC, at Synod 2002, voted to “instruct the IRC, in consultation with appropriate agencies of the CRC to engage in a dialogue with the Commission on Christian Unity of the RCA, to ascertain how our ministry and mission throughout the world might be strengthened by greater cooperation between our two denominations” (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 498).

Responding to the actions of the synods of both churches, the Reformed Church of America Commission on Christian Unity and the CRC Interchurch Relations Committee met on December 11, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. Together, they reviewed the action of each synod, the ecumenical charters of both churches, current cooperative efforts among agencies or congregations, exchange of clergy, and the Belhar Confession and its relationship to both churches. There was agreement that the mandate of each synod was to engage in a dialogue to find areas of consent where the ministry and mission of both the CRC and the RCA would be strengthened by greater cooperation. Unity was seen as a gift of God to which the church is called to bear witness. An ecumenical witness by the CRC and the RCA was evident in shared ministry ranging from food pantries, neighborhood services, pulpit exchanges, small community union churches, resource distribution, and campus ministries. The gift of unity was seen as an integral goal for each church, expressed in ministry and mission.

A present sign of greater cooperation between the CRC and the RCA was identified. In the year 2004, both churches entered into a new relationship establishing Faith Alive Christian Resources, as the overarching entity for full partnership for publication of resources, selecting resources from other denominations for promotion, marketing, customer service, order fulfillment, warehousing, and distribution as a supplier of materials to support the ministry of CRC and RCA congregations.

In its Ecumenical Mandate, the RCA affirms the call to seek to manifest God’s gift of unity. “We of the Reformed Church in America resolve to manifest the God given unity of the Church by working to overcome our divisions. The ways and means to unity are not always known. The goal of unity is a venture of faith. Therefore, trusting in the Holy Spirit for guidance, we shall be open to his counsel, willing to converse with any church, ready to cooperate with all Christians, committed to participate in councils of churches on all levels, prepared to merge with any church when it is clearly the will of God, eager to heal the brokenness of the Body of Christ in all ways known to us, until all are one, so that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son as Savior and Lord” (An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America, p. 21).

The Christian Reformed Church also affirms, in its ecumenical charter that the “unity of the church is a precious gift. The biblical challenge is to treasure, preserve, deepen, and demonstrate this given unity. The unity of Christ-followers is a flesh-and-

blood testimony to God's reconciling work in Christ" (Ecumenical Charter of the Christian Reformed Church, p.1).

After a general sharing of ecumenical charters and the mandates of each church, consensus was reached that the orderly exchange of ordained ministers should be the initial focus of conversations. A dialogue group was identified by each church and assigned the top priority of furthering the discussion on pastor exchange. It was agreed to formulate a set of principles and steps each church would have to take to allow for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers.

The following is an agreement of principles for the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America.

II. General principles of agreement

A. Unity is a gift of God

Ecumenism is a movement within the church that seeks to give visible expression to the unity that all believers have in Jesus Christ. In the Nicene Creed, we confess our belief in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." The Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 54 concerning the holy catholic Church states: "I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it."

Article 27 of the Belgic Confession states: "We believe and confess one single, catholic, or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed in his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit."

In Jesus' prayer (John 17:11), we learn that Christian unity is derived from the fellowship shown in the Trinity. It originates in the triune God and is a gift to be received and made manifest through the church.

B. Unity draws people to Christ

In the gospel of John 17:20-21 (NRSV), Jesus prays "not only on behalf of these, [his disciples] but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

The Ecumenical Mandate of the RCA states: "Here Jesus prays that the spiritual unity of the church will be something that the world can see, so that the world might

believe. The spiritual unity of the church must never be separated from its visible expression in the institutional church” (An Ecumenical Mandate for the RCA, p. 8).

The CRC Ecumenical Charter states: “Division contradicts the good news of reconciliation in Christ. The call to unity is a summons to manifest the unity of God himself and the reconciling power of God’s love in Christ” (Christian Reformed Church Ecumenical Charter, p. 7).

C. Unity’s chief aim is to manifest the saving work of God in the world

Jesus’ prayer lifts up special concern for the proclamation of the gospel. The mission also takes into account our Lord’s particular concern for the poor and the disenfranchised of the world and the broader, biblical concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

“Focusing on the continuation of Christ’s ministry and mission in the world, Christ prays for the unity of the church, a unity as deep and wondrous as that between him and the Father: “that all of them may be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21 NIV). At stake in the unity of the church is the witness in and for the world to the unity of God, the one Father of us all (Eph. 4:6) (Christian Reformed Church Ecumenical Charter, p. 1).

“We live in a fragmented world. Excessive individualism and corporate greed are tearing apart the fabric of our human relationships. The dignity of human life and respect for diversity of different peoples is severely eroded. Throughout the world, nation lifts up sword against nation, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, and the suffering of the poor increases. We are out of harmony with the created world that God has entrusted to us. The church’s disputes and divisions have contributed to some of these problems. We are unable to sit down at the Lord’s Table and set an example to the world. A fragmented Christian witness exacerbates the fragmentation of the world” (An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America, p. 7).

D. Christian unity is to be lived out

The Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America are called to live out their unity. Christian unity is to be lived out. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-6 NIV).

III. Principles of agreement for orderly exchange

A. Provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers is a visible expression of unity. The RCA and the CRC have recognized each other’s ministry, and the orderly

exchange of ordained ministers gives expression to and provides for full pulpit and table fellowship.

B. Orderly exchange is intended for ordained ministers to engage in extended service (a call) in another church (the inviting church) while remaining a member of his/her own church where he/she is carried on the roster.

2.1 An ordained minister of the CRC, in good standing, is eligible to engage in extended service (a call) in the RCA, and an ordained minister of the RCA, in good standing, is eligible to engage in extended service (a call) in the CRC.

2.2 Extended service is understood to mean that an ordained minister of the CRC may be invited to serve as a minister of an RCA congregation for an extended period of time while maintaining status as an ordained minister of the CRC, and, vice versa, a minister of the RCA may be invited to serve as a minister of a CRC congregation for an extended period of time while maintaining status as an ordained minister of the RCA. Such a person would preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in a manner consistent with the church polity of the church to which the congregation belongs (the inviting church).

C. Orderly exchange of ordained ministers allows for responsible stewardship of our church's ordained leaders and the enhancement of creative options for congregations such as union churches, or the sharing of a pastor in a two-point charge where one church is CRC and the other RCA. It allows for shared gifts of ministry to meet the needs of mission.

D. Orderly exchange allows an ordained minister to express the desire, through appropriate channels, to serve in another denomination as an ecumenical witness. However, orderly exchange is always at the invitation of the inviting church and subject to that church's polity.

E. To be able to serve in another church, an ordained minister will demonstrate to the appropriate body of the inviting church knowledge of and appreciation for the theological and liturgical identity, history, polity, and discipline of the church.

F. Approval for extended service must be done in consultation and with the concurrence of the sending body. The minister remains accountable to the sending body for continuation of ministerial status.

G. Responsibility for the pastoral care of ordained ministers and their families is to be initiated by the served congregation, which will also inform both the sending and inviting bodies of the CRC and the RCA who will then share in that pastoral care.

H. The ordained minister is under the jurisdiction of the sending body with regard to a disciplinary review or judicial process. The inviting body shall have oversight of the congregation in which the minister serves. Both the inviting and sending bodies shall be in communication and participate as appropriate.

I. Each church will make provision for an ordained minister's being granted participation in the appropriate bodies of the church in which he/she is serving (the inviting church).

J. All ordained ministers shall continue to participate in the pension and benefits program of the church where they are carried on the roster (the sending church). The inviting church has the obligation to cover the pension and benefit costs.

IV. Conclusion

It is agreed that the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America will make the required changes in their respective polity to accommodate the principles of orderly exchange. Each church will be familiar and conversant with the polity and provision of the other and recognize the need to continue dialogue to enhance this process.