Prospectus for the Catholic-Reformed Dialogue

Round Nine

The Ecumenical Officers (or their designees) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops met via video conference on February 5 and 9, 2018 to review the eighth round of dialogue and consider proposals for the ninth round. The following Prospectus is offered to our Churches for consideration and approval of a ninth round of dialogue between our Churches. It is expected that each Church will review and authorize through the appropriate ecclesiastical channels a ninth round of dialogue based upon this Prospectus.

Reformed Churches in the United States and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (and their predecessor bodies) have been in formal dialogue for over fifty years. The last twenty years have focused on theological convergences and divergences around Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. Three significant papers were produced from Rounds Seven and Eight—These Living Waters; This Bread of Life, and The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World. Round Seven also produced an Agreement of Mutual Recognition of Baptism between the USCCB and the participating Reformed Churches.

A major achievement of the most recent round of dialogue was the mutual acknowledgement of each other’s ministries and the affirmation that we “recognize in one another the work of God, the presence of Jesus Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit, our mutual service to a broken world, and our fidelity to the gospel that we all profess” (The One Body, 70). The mutual acknowledgement of ministry presents a historically significant moment and a germane occasion to consider anew how our ministry to the church and the world is informed by our understandings of justification and justice. It presents an opportunity to build upon the immediately previous rounds of national dialogue on the sacraments and ecclesiology by considering the relationship between Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry and our commitments to justification and justice.

Furthermore, turning our attention to the relationship between justification and justice presents an opportunity for this national dialogue to connect with the international dialogue. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Communion of Reformed Churches’ most recent dialogue focused on “Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice” (2011-2015). In July 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches signed an Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. We intend to “build upon the faithful labors of these dialogues to discern and claim the gifts and challenges of our current situation” by continuing conversation around “church unity, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics” (The One Body, 65, 67).

It is the expectation that signs of hope for visible unity might be found as we turn our focus to our mutual calling to live as a people justified by faith giving witness to God’s intention of a world marked by justice.
We envision that the proposed dialogue will begin in the fall of 2018 and conclude no later than 2023. Among the tasks that the dialogue will carry out are the following:

1. Review the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and the WCRC Association with JDDJ and consider the implications for our Churches within the context of the United States.

2. Building on the work accomplished in the previous rounds of our dialogues, explore how justification and justice are related to the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and to mission and ministry.

3. Examine the ways in which the discovery of new areas of convergence and our joint work in justice offer fresh possibilities for understanding unity. What are the implications for ecclesiology?