

FINAL DRAFT – a report completed by CER of CRCA and ICRC of PCEA

Meeting of Ecumenical Committees of the CRCA and PCEA

in Melbourne on Thursday, November 14th 2013.

By the grace of God, at short notice, both the ecumenical committees of the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA) and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA) were able to meet at Melbourne airport for a three hour discussion on Thursday, November 14th 2013.

The ecumenical committee (CER) of the CRCA had been meeting in Geelong the day before and invited the PCEA to send delegates to meet with it at the airport. Rev George Ball (convenor of the ecumenical committee for the PCEA) was able in a very short time frame to get four delegates of the PCEA to come, some from interstate. The Lord indeed blessed these efforts to come together.

On behalf of the convening church (CRCA), Rev Geoff van Schie welcomed the PCEA delegates and thanked them for the effort to meet with the CER at short notice, especially for those who had travelled from interstate. A time of introductions followed.

Br. Van Schie then opened the meeting with a reading of Philippians 2:1-18. In this passage we were reminded that as we meet in Christ, our attitude needed to be the same as that of Christ Jesus – an attitude of humility, preferring each other's interest before our own. It was pointed out that the result of such an attitude should be that as Churches together, in a dark world and nation in which we serve, we stand out like light stars shining in the universe *as we hold out the Word of truth*. Br. Van Schie encouraged all at the meeting to seek to come together in this way, not just so that the way could be paved for the CRCA to gain membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC), but more importantly, the PCEA and CRCA could join together in this land to hold out the Word of truth and make Christ known. That in this way we together we may unite and provide a stronger witness in Word and Deed to the glory of God.

Rev George Ball of the PCEA then led the meeting in opening prayer.

Delegates

Present at the meeting for the CRCA were Revds. Geoff van Schie (convenor of the CER), Joe Vermeulen and Reinier Noppers.

Delegates for the PCEA were Revds George Ball (convenor of the PCEA Inter Church Relations Committee), Andres Miranda (current moderator of PCEA), Jim Klazinga (incoming moderator of the PCEA) and Rowland Ward (advisor delegate).

Meeting agenda

The occasion of this meeting was the outcome of the CRCA's application for membership to the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) at its meeting in Wales in August/September 2013. The PCEA had urged the ICRC not to grant membership status at that time but rather the status of observer. The reason the PCEA provided was that it had concerns it felt it had no time to raise on account they were not aware of the CRCA's application for membership until after the 2013 synod of the PCEA.

Due to a delayed vote at the ICRC and the absence of one of the CRCA's sponsoring churches, it failed by one vote to secure membership and was granted observer status until matters of concern could be discussed with the PCEA. The CRCA has been invited by the ICRC to reapply for membership at its meeting in 2017 and has been encouraged to continue observer status.

The meeting covered three main points of discussion in an atmosphere of brotherly respect and open heartedness. Any tension there may have been at the beginning of the meeting faded quickly as it became clear to all present that we desired to move in Christ together towards a closer bond of fellowship. This progress was to be gained through a better understanding of what had happened and how each felt about it, as well as chart a way to cultivate a better relationship for the future.

Those three main areas of discussion were:

1. The PCEA's view it did not have the opportunity to raise concerns with the CRCA prior to the ICRC gathering as it did not know of the CRCA application till after their synod in May 2013.
2. The CRCA's frustration that while this was the PCEA's understanding, that its requests for a formal ecclesiastical relationship had gone unheeded in spite of repeated Synodical decisions which had been relayed formally to the PCEA since synod 2000.
3. Matters of concern the PCEA had wanted to raise but had not done so.

1. PCEA's view it did not know of the CRCA application

From the outset, Br, George Ball (PCEA) made it clear that at the time **there was no constitutional requirement of the CRCA to inform the PCEA of its application.** (*An amendment to the ICRC constitution as reviewed in Wales in 2013, now lists this as a requirement for the applicant*).

It was also noted that officially there was no need to inform the PCEA at the time as the PCEA did not have a formal ecclesiastical relationship with the CRCA at the time.

Br. Geoff van Schie advised the meeting he had **apologised to the PCEA delegates at the ICRC for this oversight** when he also assured them it was not an intentional snub or discourtesy.

At the time of taking over as the CRCA Ecumenical Secretary in May 2012, he was still recovering from severe illness and his time was initially consumed with the official letter of withdrawal from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and subsequently answering a request from the WCRC to reconsider. He also had been busy with arranging formal letters of request for nomination to the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (RCNZ) and the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA) which then was followed by writing up the formal application to the ICRC for membership.

Br. Van Schie also advised the meeting at the time of the application he was unaware of the PCEA's membership of the ICRC. As a member of the CER since 2000 this no doubt must have come up at some time but he did not recall that at the time of the application.

The CRCA delegates raised the question **how the PCEA did not know of the CRCA application since:**

- a) The outgoing clerk of the ICRC had confirmed by email, he sent out all agendas and supporting documents to delegate churches in the first week of March 2013, some two months before the PCEA synod.
- b) Br. Geoff van Schie was given access to the provisional agenda on the ICRC website and saw notification of the CRCA application already in February.

The PCEA delegates responded they could not answer this and would have to check to see if they had in fact received the ICRC agenda before their meeting. [Subsequent to the meeting, Br. George Ball has checked and extended his apology as the email from the ICRC had been received on March 14th 2013 and somehow the application of the CRCA was overlooked and so not taken to their synod in May].

The matter of the **choice of sponsoring churches** was also discussed – why the GKSA and the RCNZ? The CRCA

delegates informed the meeting:

- a) Both these churches are in full ecclesiastical relationship with the CRCA and have been so for many years.
- b) Both these churches have sent delegates to CRCA synods for the full duration of the meetings as has the CRCA to their synods – in these relationships the bonds are close and these churches are in prime position to provide strong nominations.
- c) The RCNZ nomination was of great importance as being a church with whom the CRCA has worked through some strains over many years, its nomination would carry extra weight.

The CRCA delegates advised the PCEA the choice of these churches as nominees was in no way to be read as a snub to the PCEA, and the PCEA did not take it that way. They were disappointed that the delegate from the RCNZ at the PCEA Synod in May 2013 had not mentioned the application, and of course the oversight in not receiving an invitation to send a delegate to the CRCA Synod of 2012 had not helped awareness of the situation.

A last point of discussion on this first point was **the statement in Br van Schie's preliminary report to the CRCA** as to the ICRC application outcome. It was stated that one of the grounds for the **PCEA objection to the CRCA gaining membership right away, was that its application was late** – ie. not in twelve months prior to the ICRC gathering.

Br. Van Schie informed the meeting he stood by his report for three reasons:

- a) *He was advised by the application committee of the ICRC that this had been a point raised by the PCEA with them as they sought to make their concerns known.*
- b) *Br. Van Schie himself heard Br. Ward of the PCEA speak to this matter informing the ICRC meeting there was a reason for the twelve month rule, and if it had been followed in the application of the CRCA, then it would have given the PCEA time to raise its concerns with the CRCA before the ICRC gathering in Wales.*
- c) *Various delegates at the ICRC meeting spoke to br. Van Schie after brother Ward's address and shared the view that they did not agree with this. Indeed that night the ICRC delegates made it clear they rejected the findings of the application committee and desired instead to have a recommendation for full membership to vote on. The same sentiments have been shared with Br. van Schie in personal emails sent to him by ICRC delegates since the ICRC meeting.*

The PCEA delegates to the ICRC assured the CER brethren that in their mind, the timing of the application was not a major factor in their objections. When the chairman advised the ICRC gathering in Wales that constitutionally the meeting could vote to accept late documents, the PCEA voted with the rest of the gathering to do so. The PCEA would not have objected on the grounds of a technicality, their focus being on the concerns they had which they felt they did not have time to raise with the CRCA prior to the conference.

The meeting resolved there was a much better understanding of each other's actions and motives and that on this matter the air had been cleared and we could move on to the next main item of discussion. It was agreed that with better communication on both sides all of this could have been avoided.

2. The CRCA's Frustration at Unheeded Formal Requests for Mutual Formal Ecumenical Relationship

Br. Van Schie clarified that in 1999 the CRCA through its ecumenical secretary at that time (Rev. David Groenenboom) had formally written to the PCEA advising that upon a search of CRCA correspondence, it had been discovered that while the CRCA synods had requested formal ties with the PCEA, these requests had not been formally passed on by the CRCA through its committee for ecumenical relationships. Br. Groenenboom apologised and ask for forgiveness and requested that from that time onward, the two churches seek to build a closer relationship. The PCEA 1999 Report to the Synod of April that year reproduced the 1987 PCEA Synod decision as follows:.

RELATIONS WITH THE REFORMED CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA

[Synod 1987, Minutes, pp. 11/12]

It was resolved that Synod affirm:

1. that while we are pleased to recognise the Reformed Churches of Australia as a church in which the true marks of the church may be found, at present we are less than certain that there is a whole-hearted concern by the RCA to maintain the confessional standards, and discipline in accordance with them.
2. that the RCA's membership of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod is a positive barrier to the development of closer relations; and
3. that we desire that more be done by the RCA to overcome their differences with the FRCA. We make these comments very mindful of our own weaknesses and past failures, and in a desire to speak the truth in love to other brethren. Synod would encourage contacts at the local level with a view to promoting understanding, and furthering true unity.

Two RCA delegates were present at the 1999 PCEA Synod - Messrs Don Baird and Martin Geluk, so from the PCEA side the decision was communicated to the CRCA, but from the CRCA side this was not a written communication that was able to be acted on.

In any event, further formal requests from the CRCA in 2002 and 2004 received no reply from the PCEA and apparently had not been followed up by then PCEA Convener or outstanding matters handed on to the new Convener in 2006. Br. George Ball asked Br. Geoff to provide a summary of the CRCA synod reports, decisions, and correspondence, as he did not have this in his possession. Br. Ball also shared that when he took over as convener of the PCEA Inter Church Relations committee in 2006, he did contact Revd. Henk de Waard (CRCA ecumenical secretary at that time) to get an idea of the current status of the relationship between the two churches. Br. De Waard informed him that there was no formal ecumenical relationship and that the relationship, as much as it did exist, operated on a level of attending each other's synods and local churches cooperating where they could. Br. George Ball shared that Br. De Waard had not alerted him to the earlier history from the CRCA side. While delegates had attended each other's synods in most years, there had been no invitation to the PCEA to send a delegate to the CRCA Synod of 2012.

[Subsequent to the meeting Br. Van Schie has shared the summary as requested by Br. Ball. Also, a history of email correspondence from the PCEA side has been provided by Rev. Peter Gadsby (former convener of the PCEA ecumenical committee – 2000 to 2006). Br. George Ball has agreed that both these sources of documents verify the CER account].

Br. Van Schie informed the PCEA brothers that the CRCA required formal documents to be exchanged and the CRCA did not simply depend on reports of attendances at each other's synods.

In a point of clarification, the PCEA delegates wish it noted, that **while the report of the CER to the CRCA Synod of 2009 spoke of the PCEA having declined requests for full ecumenical relationship, this had never been decided by any PCEA synod.** In response Br. van Schie shared that perhaps the CER had come to that *assumption* because of a lack of formal response to the CRCA ecumenical committee over three CRCA synods (2000, 2003, 2006). It was agreed to note the PCEA had not ever declined to enter into a formal ecclesiastical relationship with the CRCA, and that in fact a special, if somewhat undefined, relationship though not formalised had always existed.

It was further noted by the PCEA delegates that they were unaware that **in all the time the CRCA had been waiting for a response from the PCEA, the CRCA had given it the status of a church in full ecclesiastical**

fellowship.

It was agreed by all that as we seek to build the relationship from this time, there must be formal exchange of correspondence, especially when it comes to requests and responses between the synods of the two churches. It was also agreed that there needed to be more careful attention given to placing items on the agendas of each church's synods to ensure requests were properly dealt with at synod level.

3. Items of Concern Shared by the PCEA

The final area of discussion had to do with areas of concern the PCEA had, as mentioned at the ICRC gathering. The PCEA delegates to the ICRC reiterated what they had said at the ICRC meetings, that these concerns may simply be a matter of perception and may not be justified but they were not to know without discussing them with us.

The areas discussed were:

a) Membership of the former REC when others had left, as well as membership of the WCRC and CRCA withdrawal from it.

Br. Van Schie had sent to Br. George Ball documents pertaining to these matters which had also accompanied the application for membership to the ICRC. Br. Ball had said these were very helpful in clarifying this issue for them.

b) Perceived charismatic tendencies in the CRCA – the PCEA delegates shared that visits to some of the CRCA churches led to the perception the CRCA was 'loose' in its commitment to the Reformed faith on this issue.

The CRCA delegates shared that it was important not to make judgments based on perceptions from experiences on a local level in some CRCA churches. The following was asked by the CRCA to be noted by the PCEA:

i. It is the Synodical decisions that any church in ecclesiastical fellowship needs to judge another church with whom it has such a relationship. The CRCA has a long standing Synodical position on Pentecostalism which the PCEA would know and would be in conformity with the Reformed Faith.

ii. As to experiences on a local level in some CRCA churches, care needs to be taken not to confuse some worship practices with charismatic theology. The CRCA delegates informed their PCEA counterparts that the CRCA holds to the covenant dialogue that is unique to Reformed Worship and has made Synodical decisions regarding what is appropriate for the liturgy in each of its churches. Likewise the Church Order of the CRCA upholds the same and requires all churches to adhere to Synodical decisions. Furthermore, the CRCA continues regular church visitations, where Sessions are questioned on their worship practices and adherence to the Church Order and Synodical decisions. Br. Van Schie provided examples where local churches had been pastorally corrected when deviating from CRCA decisions and in each case, the relevant Sessions had humbly complied with advice that had been given.

The PCEA brethren agreed it was true of any denomination that the church as a whole could not be judged by the actions of some and that every denomination had churches from time to time that needed help in conforming to Synodical decisions and Church Order. It was also agreed the larger the denomination the more likely it would be that such remedial pastoral work would be needed.

iii. Discussion as to CRCA relationship with the CRCNA – there was some discussion raised by the PCEA as to the relationship of the CRCA not only with the CRCNA, but other churches that appeared to be questionable to

the PCEA. The CRCA was asked in answering this to give some idea as to how they saw ecumenical relationships.

Br. Van Schie for the CRCA informed the delegates that CRCA did not approach ecumenical relationships as one partner dictating to another how they must behave 'or else'. The CRCA understood ecumenical relationships to be a 'walking of the road together', so that each church could help the other to remain true to Scripture and the Confessions.

The CRCA also did not see the time of fraternal greetings on the floor of synod to be the place to share concerns, but the place for this was at the meetings of the ecumenical committees. Concerns raised in these joint committee meetings should then be raised by way of the reports and recommendations so they could be properly debated by all Synodical delegates and voted upon. Br. Van Schie shared that his experience in overseas synods was the frustration and anger of delegates of the synod visited when they were being cautioned by an overseas delegate with no right of reply. He noted that synods are 'blunt' instruments and not the place for overseas delegates to raise matters of concern – the sharp end of the work needed to be done at committee level.

Br. Van Schie for the CRCA did note that if a time did come in walking the road with another church, that church made a decision thought to be in error as to Scripture and Confessions, if through committee level work and these concerns raised at synod through its ecumenical committee went unheeded, then respectfully and sadly, eventually the CRCA would have to notify that church they had arrived at a fork in the road and now they needed to part company. It was shared by the CRCA delegates that the CRCA was prepared to do this as in fact it had done with its mother church the GKN in 1984.

It was agreed by those gathered that this concern had also been now clarified.

4. Conclusion

The meeting concluded we had covered all that needed to be aired at this meeting.

It was agreed it was a most helpful discussion and that from this point on the two churches needed to get a formal process back on track to achieve formal ecclesiastical ties.

To that end it was agreed that:

- a) Br. Noppers would provide Br. Ball a summary of all the reports, decisions and correspondence of CRCA synods from 2000 onwards concerning matters pertaining to the PCEA.
- b) The CER would provide a table of CER relationships the CRCA has with other churches with the understanding, the CER is mandated by the CRCA to review all relationships to ensure all its relationships have a practical 'edge'.
- c) Br. Van Schie would write a new formal letter to the PCEA requesting a mutual formal ecumenical relationship and that Br. Ball would ensure this was brought to the next synod of the PCEA.
- d) Both ecumenical committees would consult with their synod organizing bodies to ensure future synod times did not conflict so as to allow delegates to attend each other's synod for the full duration.

It must be said the Lord of the Church was gracious and merciful and heard our prayers. The meeting was edifying and constructive and the delegates parted as friends and in a positive frame of mind. We give thanks to the Lord for His goodness towards us.

Rev. George Ball on behalf of the PCEA expressed heartfelt thanks to the CER for organizing the meeting and providing both the venue and the refreshments.

Rev. Jim Klazinga of the PCEA then closed the meeting in prayer.

For the CER

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Rev G van Schie (Ecumenical Secretary)

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Rev R Noppers

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Rev J Vermeulen

For the PCEA

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Rev G Ball (Covenor Inter Church Relations committee)

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Rev A Miranda (Moderator PCEA)

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Rev J Klazinga (Incoming Moderator PCEA)

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Rev R Ward (Advisor/ICRC delegate)