

ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS COMMITTEE SUPPLEMENT

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) presents this supplement of additional matters related to ecumenical relationships and interfaith interactions.

I. Nominations for membership

In keeping with the synodical guidelines and requirements for diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and ordination among the membership of the committee, the EIRC presents nominees for two Canada East positions, as follows, as well as nominees for the Canada West position.

Canada East – Position 1

Ms. Eleanor (Elly) Boersma Sarkany is a commissioned pastor and serves as pastor of worship at Covenant Church, St. Catharines, Ontario. She has a master of arts degree in worship from Calvin Theological Seminary, and a bachelor of science degree in biomedical physiology and kinesiology from Simon Fraser University. Elly has served on the CRC Worship Ministries Advisory Board (as chair), the Canadian Restructuring Team, and the search team for the interim Canadian ministries director. She is currently serving on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Writing Team (assigned by the EIRC), the leadership development team of Classis Niagara, and the Serve Niagara host team of Classis Niagara. In June 2019 she led worship for a Resonate conference in Montreal based on Muslim-Christian relations, and that piqued her interest in interfaith relations. She has thoroughly enjoyed her time serving on the writing team for WPCU and the many deep conversations she has had with other worship planners from across many denominations in Canada.

Canada East – Position 2

Rev. Anthony Elenbaas is a pastor at Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ontario. He has a master of divinity degree from Calvin Theological Seminary. He has previously served the EIRC (2013-19), including one year as chair; as a CRCNA delegate to the Canadian Council of Churches Governing Board; as part of the synodical Ad-Hoc Committee on Categories of Affiliation; as part of the Nominations Committee of the Canadian Council of Churches; and as a CRCNA Delegate to the World Communion of Reformed Churches General Council in 2017. He is currently serving on the Reformed Church of America's Commission on Christian Unity, as chair of the Classis Hamilton Campus Ministry Committee, and as chair of the TrueCity Hamilton Leadership Team (local missional ecumenical network).

Rev. Ryan Braam serves as lead pastor at Fellowship CRC in Brighton, Ontario. He has a bachelor of arts degree from Redeemer University and a master of divinity degree from Calvin Theological Seminary. Ryan has served in the following roles: Grace Welland CRC: council, worship committee, outreach, education teams; Classical Safe Church Team: board member (Niagara) 2009-2015; Celebrate Recovery, an ecumenical, city-wide ministry: board member (Welland, Ont.) 2012- 2015; Classical Home Missions: board member (Quinte) 2016-2021; Synod 2023 Advisory Committee 2: Church Order and Related matters: reporter. He currently serves on the council, worship, and outreach teams at Fellowship CRC, as a board member for Geneva House Campus Ministries (Queen's University), and as vice chair of the Classis Quinte Interim Committee.

Canada West

Rev. Roy Berkenbosch is retired from King's University, where he taught in the theology program, directed the interdisciplinary studies program, and founded and directed the Micah Centre. He has served as a pastoral/theological advisor for World Renew, both in Canada and the United States, as reporter for the task force to study the role of deacons at major assemblies, on the CICW advisory committee, on the EPMC committee, and as a member of the ecumenical Edmonton-based Social Justice Institute for 20 years. He currently serves on the Bangladesh/ India transitional team for World Renew. He is one of several ordained members who share in leadership roles at his church, Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alberta. He has served as chair of the coordinating committee, as a member of the pastoral committee, as a special advisor to council with respect to classis meetings, and as a team leader for preaching and pulpit supply. He has a longstanding commitment to and interest in the global church, especially regarding the relationship between the North American churches and those in the global South and its missional implications.

Rev. Marno Retief is the lead pastor at Emo (Ont.) CRC. He has a Ph.D. in homiletics (North-West University, South Africa, 2012-2016). He served on the Distance Learning Steering Committee of the Full Gospel Church of God, Peninsula Region, while a member in the Full Gospel Church of God in South Africa. He also served on the board of Wheels for God's Word. While serving as an assistant pastor at AFM Bellville (South Africa), he served on the missions committee and welfare committees. He served on a steering committee of Cornerstone Institute (based in Cape Town, South Africa) that sought to develop a new certificate in Christian ministry program. He served on the board of Metswalle Outreach in South Africa. He also served on the board of Veritas Christi Evangelistic Association (as founder). He later founded and served on the board of Marno Retief Gospel Alliance, a media ministry. He served on

the church council of Friend of God Goodwood (AFM Goodwood) in South Africa and as the campus pastor of Friend of God Goodwood. He currently serves on the council and the worship and education committees at Emo CRC. He has a passion for ecumenical dialogue.

II. Right of comment on Overture 15 in the *Agenda for Synod 2024*

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee exercises its right of comment by endorsing the response presented in Appendix A regarding Overture 15: Reexamine Ecumenical Relations with the Reformed Church in America (Classis Iakota).

III. Recommendation

That synod by way of the ballot elect three new members from among the nominees presented to serve on the EIRC for a first term of three years, effective July 1, 2024.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee
William T. Koopmans, chair
Zachary J. King, general secretary (ex officio)

APPENDIX A

EIRC Comments regarding Overture 15

MEMO

To: Synod 2024

From: The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC)

Re: Overture 15: Reexamine Ecumenical Relations with the Reformed Church in America

Date: April 2024

At its meeting on April 25, 2024, the EIRC took note of an overture from Classis Iakota (Overture 15: Reexamine Ecumenical Relations with the Reformed Church in America, *Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 450-54). While acknowledging that it was within the guidelines of the Church Order and synodical procedure for Classis Iakota to make this overture, the EIRC finds it regrettable that the classis made no preliminary correspondence or communication with the EIRC regarding implications of the overture if it were adopted by synod. Therefore, as a standing committee of the CRCNA, the EIRC has decided to follow the “Right of Comment” guidelines of our denomination, calling attention to several principles and practical implications related to the recommendations of this overture:

1. If the overture were adopted, the CRC would be going against its Ecumenical Charter.

The preface to the CRC's 2019 Ecumenical Charter reads, in part, as follows:

Historically, ecumenical contacts of the CRC were exclusively with denominations in the Reformed tradition who shared the viewpoint that ecumenical partners assume responsibility for keeping each other confessionally Reformed. Not only did synods consult each other on important theological issues, but the one partner could hold the other partner accountable for deviations or practices that were considered to be objectionable.

The CRC has learned that requiring such uniformity for ecumenical relationships is no longer a meaningful option. The requirement that ecumenical partners think biblically, theologically, and confessionally like the CRC can soon make the circle of ecumenical relationships very small. Furthermore, such a demand for similar perspectives exposes the risk of being perceived as theologically arrogant. . . .

These changes in ecumenical relationships prompted Synod 2006 to revise its Ecumenical Charter. The Charter was revised again in 2010. The CRC is less insistent than it once was that our ecumenical partners understand issues in the same way as those issues are understood in the CRC. The CRC does not endorse every position taken by ecumenical partners; nor do we need to (cf. Church Order Art. 50-c). Rather, the present understanding in ecumenical circles is that churches learn from each other and discuss differing perspectives. Ecumenical relationship can be built on common interests and commitments to the ministry of the gospel and the mission to which that gospel calls the whole Christian church. . . .

Were Overture 15 to be adopted, the EIRC would have to operate contrary to this stance in the Ecumenical Charter, which would itself be a violation of Church Order Article 49-a: "Synod shall appoint a committee to encourage ecumenical relationships with other Christian churches, especially those that are part of the Reformed family, *as articulated in the synodically approved Ecumenical Charter of the Christian Reformed Church* so that the Christian Reformed Church may exercise Christian fellowship with other denominations and may promote the unity of the church of Jesus Christ" (emphasis added).

2. If the overture were adopted, the CRC would be violating the 2014 Pella Accord with the RCA.

The CRCNA and the RCA share a common confessional heritage in the three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort), and both denominations affirm the value of the Belhar Confession as a contemporary statement of faith. As the overture notes, this common commitment culminated in 2014 with the RCA and CRC synods agreeing in

the so-called Pella Accord to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately” (*Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 504). This agreement is based on the Lund Principle, a standard that has guided ecumenical relations between Christian churches since 1952 and has been affirmed by the CRC. The Pella Accord is a significant statement of shared commitment and agreement for our two branches of the Reformed Christian family. In those areas where we can work together with the RCA, we should continue to do so. We thus bear witness to bringing churches in the same theological tradition together in unity with a bond of peace.

3. The overture misunderstands RCA church polity.

The overture states that the RCA has in many cases failed to address “*practices* by [RCA] congregations and classes which do not align with the *positions* of the RCA General Synod that are shared by the CRC” (p. 451). Not only does the overture not present evidence in support of this claim, but it also reflects a misunderstanding of RCA church polity. According to the unpublished paper “Thirty Differences between the RCA and the CRC” (9/26/23), by Dr. Daniel Meeter, probably the RCA’s foremost expert on RCA history and polity, RCA polity differs from that of the CRC in some significant ways:

2. The RCA has a *Constitution*, [which] consists of the Doctrinal Standards, the Government, and the Liturgy. . . .

4. Compared with the CRC, the RCA Constitution *limits the authority of synods*, and the RCA has no equivalent of the CRC’s Article 29—no RCA synod can make any ruling that is “settled and binding.” Only the Constitution is settled and binding. No synod has the authority to force an interpretation of the Standards (or Scripture) on the classes or congregations. The firm backbone of the Constitution allows for greater local discretion in the RCA and therefore more diversity. For example, the General Synod has a policy against same-sex marriage, and this policy is observed by General Synod staff and its specific agencies, but this policy does not bind the next General Synod, nor does it bind regional synods, classes, or consistories, which are free to follow that policy or not, provided they are satisfied that they observe the Constitution. . . .

9. The RCA has more *judicial restraint* than the CRC, and there is no cross-judicatory discipline. Ministers, consistories, and boards of elders may not be charged by anyone outside the membership of their own congregations and classes. The synods are strictly courts of appeal. In the RCA, synods have no authority to intervene in the discipline of classes and consistories—no RCA synod could tell a classis

how to discipline one of its consistories, nor try to discipline the consistory itself. (This judicial restraint was a frustration of some leaders who have subsequently seceded from the RCA.)”

So the implications in the overture that certain RCA congregations are being disobedient by engaging in unaddressed practices that do not align with the positions of the General Synod and that the General Synod is being remiss in not calling these congregations to account or punishing them misunderstands how the RCA General Synod, classes, and congregations function in relation to each other.

4. Adoption of the overture would have some unfortunate practical consequences.

In addition to matters related to the CRCNA’s ecumenical mandate and practices, Overture 15 also raises some important practical considerations. First, even if synod were to suspend or eliminate Church Order Article 8-b (including Supplement, Article 8, D), the Church Order would continue to permit RCA ministers to serve according to Article 8-c and -d (including Supplement, Article 8, E-F), which govern the calling of non-CRC ministers. However, RCA ministers and CRC congregations in this scenario would find the calling process more cumbersome.

Second, the rules governing the orderly exchange of ministers already require that an RCA minister respect and submit to the polity, theology, and traditions of the CRCNA. Church Order Supplement, Article 8, D, section 4 states that “such a person [i.e., RCA minister] would preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in a manner consistent with the polity of the inviting church.” Furthermore, the Supplement states that “orderly exchange is always . . . subject to that church’s polity” (section 5) and that an RCA minister serving a CRC congregation will “demonstrate . . . a knowledge of and appreciation for the theological and liturgical identity, history, polity, and discipline of the [CRC] church” (section 6). Therefore, Church Order Article 8 already requires RCA ministers to be aligned with the CRCNA’s convictions.

Third, it is important to note that it is quite common for RCA pastors to serve in the CRC and vice versa. In fact, there are currently 20 CRC ministers in the RCA and 46 RCA ministers in the CRC. Additionally, the CRC and RCA have nine “union” congregations, in which denominational affiliation is shared (Art. 38-g and Supplement). Suspension or removal of Article 8-c (including Supplement, Art. 8, D) would be very disruptive at a time when the CRCNA is experiencing a shortage of ordained ministers. Moreover, such a change could affect shared services like the Reformed Benefits Association (health insurance for ministers and denominational employees) and other collaborative ministry projects between the two denominations.

Therefore, based on the CRC's Ecumenical Charter, the Pella Accord with the RCA, the overture's misunderstanding of RCA polity, and several practical considerations, the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee requests that Synod 2024 not accede to Overture 15.