

**Reports by Deputies for
Relations with
Reformed Churches New Zealand**

as submitted to

SYNOD 2006

of the

***FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF
AUSTRALIA***

West Kelmscott, Western Australia

Deputies were able to agree on the text of most of this report. However, at some significant points, including the recommendations, they were unable to come to agreement. Two deputies advocate one approach, and two another. Consequently, it is not possible to speak of "majority" or "minority" reports. At these points, two parallel versions were prepared. These appear side-by-side below, marked as "Version A" and "Version B".

THE MANDATE

Synod 2003 gave deputies the following mandate (cf. Acts 2003 Article 72.6)

To appoint deputies with the following mandate:

- a. To convey these decisions to the RCNZ
- b. To assess to what extent the triangular relationship needs to be an impediment for entering into full sister-church relations and to report back to the churches on this six months before the next synod
- c. To intensify dialogue with the RCNZ on matters of common concern and interest, also by inter-synodical visits, if the synodical budget allows
- d. To invite the RCNZ to send delegate(s) to our next synod, and to authorise deputies to send two delegates to the next synod of the RCNZ
- e. To keep the churches informed of any developments in the RCNZ and to encourage the churches to become better acquainted with the RCNZ by way of literature and visits

Regarding a: Your deputies have conveyed to the Inter-Church Committee of the RCNZ the decisions of the Synod Rockingham 2003 by letter, by sending a copy of the Acts of Synod 2003, and by personal visit to the RCNZ Synod.

Regarding b: Please see our assessment which follows.

Regarding c: In May, 2005 two deputies (br. Aart Plug and Rev. Joe Poppe) visited the three main centres in which the Reformed Churches of New Zealand exist. The intent of the visit was two-fold: a) to make the Free Reformed Churches better known to the members of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, and b) to gather information with which to make a presentation to our own churches in order to acquaint them better about the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. To fulfil the first purpose, a video made for this purpose was shown, describing the broader church life in (some of the) the FRCA to members of the RCNZ congregations. In regard to the second purpose, a report of their visit has been published in *Una Sancta*. Other than that the deputies have not had opportunity to make presentations within the churches.

Regarding d: Two delegates (br. Len van Burgel and Rev Arthur van Delden) attended the RCNZ 2005 in Hamilton.

Regarding e: Reports of the two visits to New Zealand were reported in *Una Sancta*, thereby informing the churches of any developments. These reports are appended to this report for the sake of completeness.

An Assessment of to what extent the triangular relationship needs to be an impediment for entering into full sister-church relations

A. HISTORICAL SITUATION

The deputies appointed by Synod have stated over the years that they recognise the three marks of the true church (cf. Belgic Confession Art 29) in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. This was confirmed when Synod 2000 agreed in principle to see whether the RCNZ would enter into “fraternal relations” with the FRCA. Synod 2003 decided “to confirm what the 2000 Synod said in principle, namely, to recognise that the RCNZ are true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

At the same time, past synods—(Launceston 1985 Article 75 , Armadale 1990 Article 53, Kelmscott 1996 Article 53, Launceston 1998 Article 89)—have consistently declared that the RCNZ’s relationship with the CRCA, with whom we have principle objections, is an impediment to offering sister church relations to the RCNZ. The rationale behind these decisions is as follows:

It is contrary to the unity of the holy catholic church for Church ‘A’ to have unity with Church ‘B’ and Church ‘C’, but Churches ‘B’ and ‘C’ to have no unity. Likewise, it is contrary to the unity of the holy catholic church for Church ‘C’ to unite with Church ‘A’ as long as Church ‘A’ is united with Church ‘B’ with whom Church ‘C’ can have no unity because of principle differences.

In taking this stand, we were not unique. In a letter to the RCNZ, the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands sent a letter from the hand of Rev J. de Gelder (dd. October 1988) to the RCNZ. In this letter our Dutch sisters passed on the resolution of their synod (Acta Gen. Synod Spakenburg-Noord, Article 124)

Resolution:

1. To continue the contacts with The Reformed Churches of New Zealand.
2. To charge to the deputies to be appointed:
 - a. to pay attention particularly to the relationships between The Reformed Churches of New Zealand and other churches. b. to point out to The Reformed Churches of New Zealand if there should be a sister church relationship with The Dutch Reformed Churches a similar sister church relationship will exclude the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands.
 - b. To keep up contact with the Australian sister churches on the developments concerning the relationships with The Reformed Churches of New Zealand.

Reasons:

1. The discussion on the relationships between The Reformed Churches of New Zealand and other churches has not been finished yet.
2. The Dutch Reformed Churches deviate from the Reformed Confession in Doctrine and in Church government.
3. Although The Reformed Churches in The Netherlands have their own responsibility in entering into and keeping up relationships with other churches there is also a responsibility towards sister churches

In this letter the Dutch deputies explained their reason for this decision:

Now why do our churches place so much emphasis on the relationships that other churches have? The first chapter of that booklet "For the Sake of True Ecumenicity" puts it succinctly. The answer in short is: because we strive after scriptural unity. And deviation from the Word and the Truth of God, which we discern in many another church, disrupts the unity in Christ. We trust that you will understand that it is not our churches' show we are putting up, or a dabbling in our own likes and dislikes. But at stake is the Church's task and calling in this world. And in the framework of ecclesiastical relationships we therefore have to impress upon each other the necessity of speaking what is scripturally normative. Again we trust that you will agree that this is at the very heart of the matter. It therefore affects us deeply having to write to you that a relationship with your churches would bring us into the sphere of a number of churches that we cannot have contacts with any more, but we are convinced that by not writing this we would not be advocating the truly scriptural unity that Christ demands.

The RCNZ's Synodical and Correspondence Committee expressed something similar in their report to Synod 1986 (Mangere): *"Relationships must be true in all dimensions. ... This is being consistent with the principle of a true and faithful church and consequential thinking, as otherwise there would be a triangular problem when A and B establish close relationships while C who already has an intimate relationship with A still has principle objections to B. It will thus be quite obvious that the journey towards this goal for a mutually acceptable close relationship is going to be a long one where much patience and understanding is required."*

At the last Synod, this thinking was challenged. One of the churches proposed *"that Synod accepts that the third party relationship of the RCNZ with the CRCA is being dealt with in a faithful manner by the RCNZ and that this relationship no longer forms an impediment to establish a sister church relationship with them."* Thus it was proposed to recognise the RCNZ as true and faithful churches of the LORD Jesus Christ and to offer a sister church relationship to them according to the established rules (Acts of Synod 2003, Art.72). This proposal was not adopted.

Yet Synod 2003 decided *"to confirm what the 2000 Synod said in principle, namely, to recognise that the RCNZ are true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ."* The ground for this decision was that *"all the reports of the deputies have informed us that the RCNZ has the three marks of the true church and thus the decision in principle should now be confirmed."* Synod also decided *"to ask the RCNZ for time and patience so that we can discuss the matter of third parties and the implications of an offer of sister relations with them, and that we can offer sister relations with unity and joy."* The ground for this decision was that *"the triangular relationship with the CRCA continues to be a point of division among the FRCA, although we note that the RCNZ maintain this relationship in a Scriptural manner. In order to build consensus among ourselves to what extent the triangular relations should be an impediment, it is best to take time before we offer sister relations, so that it can be done with unity and joy. Hopefully the RCNZ can accept that desire."* (Acts of Synod 2003, Art.72).

B. PRINCIPLES AND PATTERNS FOR ESTABLISHING SISTER CHURCH RELATIONS

According to Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, *“we believe ...one holy catholic or universal church, which is...joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.”* The unity of the church, then, is first of all spiritual in character.

According to Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, *“no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself...but all and everyone are obliged to join and unit with it, maintaining the unity of the church.”* The spiritual unity of the church is to be coupled with physical unity.

This said, Scripture also shows us that the physical unity of the holy catholic church exists in degrees. Believers in one locality join themselves to a local congregation of the one holy catholic church. Believers in another locality join the church there. For example, believers in Jerusalem join the church in the land of Judea, while the believers in Antioch join that church in the land of Syria.

From the Scriptures we learn that these congregations, though separated by distance, did not exist in isolation, but exercised the communion of the saints with each other. They shared their spiritual as well as their material blessings with each other. Consider the following examples from Scripture.

In Acts 15 we read about the spiritual assistance which the churches sought from each other to determine questions about the faith. The church of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to confer with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem concerning the statement made to them by men of Judea: *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”* (Acts 15:1). After conferring together, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem determined that circumcision was no longer required in the new dispensation. They sent a delegation from Jerusalem through the cities to deliver to them the decrees to keep (cf. Acts 16:4) namely, *“that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality”* (Acts 15:29).

We also read in Scripture that the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (cf. Rom. 15:26) and Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 16:3) gave monetary gifts to aid the poor in Jerusalem.

From such texts, we derive the principle that spiritually united should not exist in isolation, but should seek to exercise the communion of saints with other congregations for the sake of mutual edification and assistance. We confess in Lord's Day 21 (Q&A 55b) *“That everyone is duty bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.”*

We have applied these scriptural principles in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. Twelve independent local churches in Australia together form a federation of churches. This federation exists primarily to facilitate the communion of saints. We make promises to each other, and make demands of each other. We assist each other spiritually as well as monetarily. We seek advice from each other in spiritual matters. We exercise a measure of mutual oversight. We give assistance to churches which are needy. Where necessary, we also cooperate with each other in mission.

By extension, this principle has induced this small bond of churches to establish “sister church” relations with other federations in the world, such as in the

Netherlands, Canada, South Africa, Indonesia and Korea. The Free Reformed Churches of Australia have received great benefit from these churches, though in different measure at different times. Things could be mentioned such as the calling of ministers, the training for the ministry, the *Book of Praise*, Christian literature, mutual encouragement and admonitions, mission. Also churches in underdeveloped countries receive monetary aid from churches in more developed countries. In this way, even churches which are geographically quite distant from each other are able to engage in the communion of saints.

Conclusion #1 — Churches which are spiritually united by faith ought to exercise the communion of saints with other churches, for mutual edification and assistance, which is an important purpose of establishing sister church relations.

Does this mean, then, that “sister relations” must be formed between all churches which are spiritually united?

The Scripture gives us the pattern of exercising the communion of saints in “concentric circles” of intensity or intimacy. For example, concerning the monetary aid to the needy, Scripture teaches us the following. Caring for the needy is first of the duty of the immediate family. Where this needy cannot be cared for by the immediate family the local congregation is to assume the duty of care (cf. 1 Tim 5:16). But when the local congregation is not able to care for their needy, then other churches are to provide the necessary care (cf. Rom. 15:26 and 1 Cor. 16:3). The concept of concentric circles in giving aid to fellow man also underlies Paul’s instruction in Galatians 6:10, “Let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

Our Church Order encourages churches in close proximity to work together most intimately through the formation of classes which meet at least every six months to deal with various matters of church life. When a church is vacant, they naturally seek pulpit supply from churches that are close to them geographically. Thus Classis arranges pulpit supply for vacant congregations. When churches seek advice on spiritual matters, it is logical that they meet with churches that are close by, which occurs at Classis. Article 50 also encourages churches which cooperate with each other in mission work to observe the division of classes, which means that churches that are close geographically work together. This certainly facilitates attendance at mission meetings and allows members of supporting congregations to be directly involved in the mission committee.

This pattern of concentric circles of exercising communion with other churches has also been adopted by the FRCA Synod of 1990 which decided “*to concentrate on relations and contacts with churches which are geographically close to us...*” (Acts, Article 58). Maintaining close contacts with churches geographically remote from us is both costly and time consuming for us as a small bond of churches. Thus we concentrate more of our time and resources in fostering a relationship with the PCEA than with the Free Church of Scotland, with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand rather than the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

Conclusion #2 — Although Christ’s church gathering work is catholic or universal, churches are not compelled by Scripture to establish “sister-church relations” with all churches over the world. Following the pattern of concentric circles of communion, a church is justified in concentrating its

time, energy and resources in promoting intimate communion with churches that are closest to them historically or geographically.

In Article 28 of the Belgic Confession we confess that no believer ought to be content to be by himself, but all believers are obliged to join the church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. Believers join the Holy Catholic Church by joining themselves to the local gathering of this Holy Catholic Church.

This same principle can and should be applied to true churches. No true church should be content to be by itself, but true churches ought to join and unite with each other, maintaining the unity of the Holy Catholic Church. It is contrary to this principle for two or more true churches to exist side by side without joining together and maintaining the unity of the church.

In the history of the Reformed Church, the doctrine concerning the unity of the church has been undermined by the so-called doctrine of “pluriformity” which acknowledges that the one holy catholic (and invisible) church exists in and is dispersed among many (visible) denominations which exist side by side (such as the Lutheran, the Presbyterian/Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, and Uniting Churches), each reflecting to a greater or lesser degree the truth and perfection of the holy catholic (invisible) church. According to the doctrine of pluriformity, the holy catholic church manifests itself in diverse forms among the various denominations.

This doctrine of the pluriformity of the church has long been regarded by our churches as a denial of the fundamental unity expressed by the apostle Paul who said, *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all”* (cf. Eph 4:4-6). The doctrine of pluriformity also undermines the principle concerning the practical expression of the unity of the church. Those who accept the doctrine of pluriformity no longer regard the division of believers into fundamentally different denominations as contrary to the ordinance of God concerning the unity of the church. Nor do they regard the separate existence of different church denominations in close proximity to each other as contrary to the confession concerning the one holy catholic church, but happily accept the different denominations as different forms of the one church.

Conclusion #3 — Two or more true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church.

In Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, we confess *“It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church.”* (cf. Num 16:23-26; Isa 52:11,12; Acts 2:40; Rom 16:17; Rev 18:4). This principle can and should also be applied to churches. It is the duty of true churches to separate from those who claim for themselves the name of church, but lack the marks thereof.

In the case of discipline of delinquent members in the church, Scripture outlines a procedure which involves admonitions (cf. Matt 18:15-18). The goal of Christian discipline is threefold: to save the sinner from

condemnation (cf. Eze 33:11; Matt 18:15; 2Pet 3:9); to keep God’s name holy (cf. Psa 115:1; Matt 5:16; 1Pet 2:12; 1Pet 3:15-16); and to keep the church pure (cf. 1Cor 5; 2Thes 3:14; Tit 3:10).

This same principle ought to be applied to churches which become unfaithful (cf. Rev 2-3). Other churches with whom they have unity ought to admonish these delinquent churches. If after repeated admonitions these churches do not turn from their errors, fellowship between the faithful and unfaithful churches ought to cease, thereby avoiding a display of false unity.

The doctrine of the pluriformity of the church undermines this call for faithful churches to separate from those which become unfaithful. The belief that all visible churches reflect the holy (invisible) catholic church in differing measures diminishes the distinction of true and false churches, and encourages churches to regard each other as more or less faithful churches of the holy catholic church. This in turn obscures the duty of faithful churches separating themselves from unfaithful churches, and encourages an unholy tolerance of doctrinal or ethical error.

Conclusion #4 True churches are duty bound to admonish churches with which they have unity, and which become unfaithful, and to separate from those assemblies that claim for themselves the name of church, but lack the marks thereof.

Version A	Version B
<p>In Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, we confess <i>“It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church, and to join this assembly wherever God has established it.”</i> From this we learn that there is a proper order regarding separating and joining. A true believer must first separate from the false church, and then join himself to the true church. This is in accordance with the scriptural norm laid down in Numbers 16:23-26; Isaiah 52:11,12; Acts 2:40; Romans 16:17; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Revelation 18:4.</p> <p>We conclude from this that one of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia must not receive into the church a true believer who remains a member of a church which we regard as lacking the marks thereof. Rather, according to Article 28 of our Confession, we must point out the duty of this believer to first separate from those who do not belong</p>	<p>The question now arises: can a church establish “sister-church relations” with a church that has unity with another church that may be becoming (or is) unfaithful? Article 29 of the Belgic Confession teaches us to recognise the true church on the basis of the marks of the church: <i>“It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself by the pure Word of God...”</i> Faithful adherence to the Word of God both in doctrine and practice forms the basis for establishing unity with another church.</p> <p>Doesn’t the continued existence of a relationship with a third party which is (becoming) unfaithful form an impediment to this? Not necessarily. Please consider the situation where a true believer has a brother or sister who is straying (or has strayed) from the</p>

Version A	Version B
<p>to the church. Only when this has occurred can he be granted membership in a Free Reformed Church of Australia.</p> <p>This principle also applies to churches. A classis of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia must not receive into the federation a local congregation which has reformed its doctrine, worship and government, but continues to maintain its unity in a bond of churches which we regard as lacking the marks of true churches. Rather, according to Article 28 of our confession, we must point out to that congregation its duty to sever its bond with these unfaithful churches. Only when this is done can they be given a place in the federation of true churches.</p> <p>This principle also applies to federations of churches. We, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, must not enter into sister church relations with a federation of true churches, as long as that federation continues to maintain its unity with a federation of churches which we regard as unfaithful. Rather, according to Article 28 of our confession, that federation must first sever its relationship with the federation of churches which lack the marks of true churches. Only when this is done can they be offered sister church relations.</p> <p>Conclusion #5 The Free Reformed Churches of Australia may not establish sister-relations with churches that maintain unity with another church that we regard as lacking the marks of true churches.</p>	<p>ways of the Lord. Do we reject a true believer because he maintains a relationship within which he admonishes his straying brother or sister? Scripture shows that when the gospel was preached in the early Christian church, many were converted from darkness into God's marvellous light (cf. 1Peter 2:9-10). They were not refused membership of the church because they had relationships with family members outside the church. The key fact was not the relationship itself, but how they conducted themselves within such relationships. What Scripture demands is a primary allegiance to Christ and His church rather than to family members or this world (cf. Matthew 10:37; 1 Peter 2:11-12; 1 John 2:15). It is striking that the apostle Paul commands those who are married to unbelievers not to divorce them, but to uphold their marriage vows as much as it depends upon them (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16). Similarly, Peter commands believing wives to work within their existing marriages to witness to the grace of Christ, with a view to winning their unbelieving husbands to the faith (cf. 1 Peter 3:1). We need to be careful not to apply these analogies wrongly to inter-church relations. Yet they do make it clear that it is not the <i>existence</i> of a third-party relationship that prohibits unity. Instead, what is important is how that relationship is <i>exercised</i>.</p> <p>To make a third party relationship itself into an impediment as a principle matter goes beyond the teaching of Scripture and confession. That such a relationship needs to be weighed is true. In weighing such a relationship it is important to consider the following. Entering into a sister-church relationship is not the same as being received into one federation of churches. The respective federations are not "joined" to each other in the sense that believers are "joined" to the church, or a congregation is "joined" to the federation. They are voluntary</p>

Version A	Version B
	<p>associations between equal partners, and one is not received into another as a member of the other. Each of the partners has their own responsibility towards the Lord of the Church, bound as it is by Scripture and Confession.</p> <p>Each of the partners undertakes obligations in regard to the other (as agreed upon in the Rules for Exercising Sister Relations). And within this context, the relationship each federation of churches has with third parties is primarily the responsibility of <i>that federation</i>.</p> <p>Conclusion #5: It cannot be said that as a matter of principle, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia may not establish sister-relations with churches that for certain reasons maintain sister-relations with another church that we regard as lacking the marks of the true church.</p>

In the Apostles' Creed we confess *"I believe a holy catholic church."* In the Nicene Creed we confess that *"we believe one holy catholic and apostolic church."* According to Article 27 of the Belgic Confession *"we believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers."* One of the attributes of the church is that it is to be holy.

The fact that the church is holy means that it is set apart, or dedicated to the service of God. The church is sanctified, or made holy, through Christ's blood and Spirit (cf. Eze 36:25-27; Joh 3:5-8; Rom 6:1-14; 1Cor 6:11; 1Pet 1:2; Rev.1:5; 7:14). Because of this the church is also called to live in holiness before God (cf. Lev 19:2; Rom 6:19,22; Rom 13:12-14; Eph 4:24; 1Thes 4:7; 1Pet.2:9; Heb 12:14).

We recognise the holiness of the church by considering whether or not it has the marks of a true church. In Article 29 of the Belgic Confession we confess that *"The true church is to be recognised by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head..."*

Version A	Version B
In establishing "sister-church relations" with a church it is necessary to consider	When considering or developing a relationship with another federation,

Version A	Version B
<p>the relationships which this potential sister-church maintains with other churches. For the errors of an unfaithful church can easily spread to its sister-churches, and so indirectly enter into our own bond of churches through the back door. To safeguard the holiness of the church—both the church with whom we are considering entering into a sister-church relations and our own church—it is necessary to consider whether this potential sister-church is faithful in admonishing a sister church that develops unscriptural teachings or practises. Is it willing to break with such a church if it is not willing to heed these admonitions?</p> <p>Conclusion #6 When offering sister relations to another federation, the manner in which that federation exercises sister relations must be considered because of the impact that sister relations have upon that federation itself and on our own federation.</p>	<p>churches that desire to be faithful must consider the third-party relationships that the other federation engages in. However, it is not so much the <i>fact</i> of such relationships as their <i>nature</i> that needs to be taken into account. Factors to consider may include, among others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the historical context, • the way in which the third-party relationship is conducted, • the influence (direct or indirect) of the third party on our (prospective) partner, • the influence of our partner on the third party, • the willingness of our partner to break with an unfaithful sister-church if repeated admonition has proved to be unavailing, • the influence the third party may have - by way of our partner - on our own members or church life, • the influence we may have – by way of our partner – on the third party. <p>Each of these factors certainly will be governed and informed by the application of Scriptural principles, but these factors are not principles <i>in and of themselves</i>. They must be counted and weighed, and within the totality of the teaching of Scripture a faithful church may make its own evaluation concerning them, leading to a responsible decision: responsible, first of all towards the Lord of the Church, then also towards the churches and members of its own federation, and finally towards its (prospective) partner. However, in making this evaluation it must always be remembered that the final responsibility for the way in which this third-party relationship is conducted rests with the (prospective) partner.</p> <p>Conclusion #6 In keeping with the instruction of Scripture, the church must weigh third-party relationships in coming to a responsible decision of its own. Care needs to be taken in establishing sister-church relations</p>

Version A	Version B
	with churches that maintain unity with another church that may be becoming (or is) unfaithful.

C. THE APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES AND PATTERNS

Deputies mandate is: *To assess to what extent the triangular relationship needs to be an impediment for entering into full sister-church relations and to report back to the churches on this six months before the next synod.* To do this we want to apply the conclusions reached above to our relationship with the RCNZ, weighing to what extent their relationship with the CRCA should be an impediment to us entering into “sister-church relations” with the RCNZ.

Conclusion #1 — Churches which are spiritually united by faith ought to exercise the communion of saints with other churches, for mutual edification and assistance, which is an important purpose of establishing sister church relations.

We have recognised the RCNZ as true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. As such we ought to exercise the communion of saints with them for mutual edification and assistance. There would be definite advantages to establishing sister church relations with the RCNZ.

1. Our close proximity of these two federations would allow members to visit at half the cost of travelling to sister churches in the northern hemisphere. We have over the last few years seen more membership “transferrals” occurring with at least one of our members joining the RCNZ and a number of members of the RCNZ joining the FRCA.
2. The RCNZ have been cosupporters (together with the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia) of the Reformed Theological College (RTC) in Geelong, Victoria, Australia. The students from New Zealand studying at the RTC have not had any of the difficulties which some of the FRCA students face when studying in Hamilton Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches (HTC) such as applying for visas, being restricted from working during the summer vacations, costly airfares preventing regular returns to Australia during the course of studies. Although the RCNZ have adopted an agreement for continued support of the RTC in Geelong, their relationship has been under strain, and alternative theological training has been considered. Establishing a theological college is one area in which the RCNZ and the FRCA could work well together.
3. The calling of ministers between these two federations would not be subject to the tedious and sometimes expensive immigration process.
4. Already the RCNZ have a mission worker in Port Moresby, and the RCNZ are asking our sister churches in Canada to assist them in their work. It would also appear that they will be asking the churches in Australia who engaged in mission work in Lae to support their work.
5. Christian education has been a strength of the FRCA since inception. At the same time, some congregation of the RCNZ are struggling in this matter. We could be of assistance to them in this matter.

Conclusion #2 — Although Christ’s church gathering work is catholic or universal, churches are not compelled by Scripture to establish “sister-church relations” with all churches over the world. Following the pattern of concentric circles of communion, a church is justified in concentrating its time, energy and resources in promoting intimate communion with churches that are closest to them historically or geographically.

The RCNZ is a church that is in close geographical proximity with us. The ease of trade and the lack of barriers to immigration provide good reasons for concentrating our time, energy and resources in promoting intimate communion with these churches.

Conclusion #3 — Two or more true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church.

It is this principle that has caused some in our churches to push for entering into a sister church relationship with the RCNZ. They feel that not enough consideration has been given to our inherent unity of faith. When weighing this principle against the impediment caused by the RCNZ’s relationship with the CRCA, they consider that this principle should have priority. We believe in *one* holy catholic Church. The reason why they believe this principle should have priority is that as churches we have recognised that the RCNZ exercises their relationship with the CRCA in a faithful manner.

Others in our churches understand the principle that true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church. Yet they do not consider our refusal to join together with the RCNZ as acting contrary to the ordinance of God. They say that we are not refusing to enter into sister church relations. The amount of time and resources which we have spent over the past years indicates that we seriously desire to join with the RCNZ in a sister church relationship. Yet they consider that we are prevented from doing so by the impediment of the RCNZ’s continued relationship with the CRCA. For them it is not a matter of unwillingness but of inability.

Conclusion #4 True churches are duty bound to admonish churches with which they have unity, and which become unfaithful, and to separate from those assemblies that claim for themselves the name of church, but lack the marks thereof.

Over the years the RCNZ has shown faithfulness in admonishing churches with whom they had unity when they became unfaithful. They have separated themselves from churches that have taken unscriptural stands on various issues.

At the RCNZ’s Synod held in 1986 they broke their correspondence relationship with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Synodical) (Acts, Art.104). They also warned that their membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) would be withdrawn if this body allowed the GKN (synodical) to remain a member of this counsel. At the RCNZ’s Synod held in 1986 they also decided to open contacts with the GKN (liberated).

When the RES met in 1988, it refused to deal decisively with the GKN (synodical) on its new way of interpreting Scripture, and on its position allowing members to enter into homosexual relations, and even serve as an office-bearer as a practising "Christian" homosexual. The result was that the RCNZ, as well as other churches withdrew their membership from the RES.

At the RCNZ's Synod held in 1995 they decided to apply for membership of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) of which we and our sister churches were/are members. They decided to suspend ties with the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA). This Synod also recognised us as the FRCA as true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ, and asked us to make a similar acknowledgement about their churches. It expressed a desire, on the basis of such an acknowledgment, to offer a sister church relationship.

The RCNZ's 1995 Synod also came to the decision to place the RCNZ's relationship with the Reformed Church of Australia (now known as the CRCA) under strain. This was because of concerns about three major issues: women in office, "Word and Spirit," and the acceptance of worship innovations contrary to Reformed liturgy and practise. As a result, if churches within the RCNZ called ministers or candidates from the CRCA they were to be questioned thoroughly in these areas.

The RCNZ's Synod held in 1998 restored the RCNZ's relationship with the CRCA. This was caused by favourable decisions taken by the CRCA's 1997 Synod about the matters of "Word and Spirit," women in office, and worship practises.

The RCNZ's Synod held in 2001 decided to accept an offer of a sister church relationship with the GKN (Liberated) if, as expected, it was offered by Synod Zuidhorn. A sister relationship was also established with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia. Moves towards sister relations with the Canadian Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches of North America were also agreed to.

The RCNZ's 2001 Synod decided to again put their relationship with the CRCA under strain. The basis for this decision was threefold. First, that the CRCA decided to open the way for women to serve in the office of deacon (although they will not be part of session). Second, because younger children (no younger than 10 years of age) who have a mature understanding of the confessions and demonstrate faith and love for the Lord may profess their faith with a modified version of the form for public profession of faith and then be allowed to attend the Lord's Supper. And third, because of continued acceptance of worship practises which are a departure from traditional Reformed practises.

Further, this Synod also decided to give notice that the RCNZ no longer wished to be bound to the contract under which it supported the Reformed Theological College (RTC) in Geelong, the CRCA's main training school for men desiring to serve as ministers of the Word. The current contract, which involved confessional subscription, would be dissolved after the three-year period for giving notice came to an end. This was because of difficulties that had arisen with two of the professors on the "Word and Spirit" issue. The level of funding support would also be considered at the next synod.

The RCNZ's Synod held in 2005 decided to keep their relationship with the CRCA under strain, primarily due to the CRCA's decision to allow women to serve in the office of deacon. Our delegates to the RCNZ synod have noted that there is

increasing support within the RCNZ to break off sister-church relations with the CRCA.

From all this it is evident that the RCNZ conducts itself faithfully in exercising its inter-church relationships. When churches stray from Scripture or confession, the RCNZ exercises warnings and admonitions. When churches refuse to break with sinful decisions, the RCNZ has been consequent and suspended ties with them.

Over the past years the RCNZ has been moving to and fro in its relationship with the CRCA. In 1995 their relationship was declared to be under strain. In 1998 the relationship was normalised again, because of favourable decisions taken by the CRCA. In 2001 the relationship was again placed under strain, and this was maintained by the last synod. Because of the close historic and family ties between these bonds of churches, this bond is not an easy one for the RCNZ to sever. Yet we may be confident that if the CRCA continues on its pathway of deformation, the RCNZ will be consequent in its actions.

Version A	Version B
<p>Conclusion #5 The Free Reformed Churches of Australia may not establish sister-relations with churches that maintain unity with another church that we regard as lacking the marks of true churches.</p> <p>Conclusion #5, as stated above, indicates that the Free Reformed Churches may not enter into sister church relations with the RCNZ as long as the Reformed Churches of New Zealand continue to have relations with the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia which the FRCA regards as lacking the marks of the true church. If the FRCA were to enter into sister church relations with the RCNZ at this time, we would become an otherⁱ Australian sister to the RCNZ, and both of us as sisters of the RCNZ would have differing "forms." Thus we would willingly buy into the doctrine of the pluriformity of the church.</p> <p>ⁱ In actual fact, we would become the third sister with the RCNZ since the RCNZ also have sister church relations with the PCEA. This triangular relationship, however, is different since we ourselves are striving for unity with the PCEA.</p>	<p>Conclusion #5 It cannot be said that as a matter of principle, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia may not establish sister-relations with churches that for certain reasons maintain sister-relations with another church that we regard as lacking the marks of true churches.</p> <p>Conclusion #5, as stated above, indicates that the continued sister-church relationship of the RCNZ with the CRCA is not in itself a principle impediment to the exercise of a sister-church relationship. Previous Synods of our churches have recognized that the RCNZ displays the marks of the true church (as outlined in Art 29, B.C) and clearly desires to conduct itself in all things in accordance with the instruction of God's Word. Consequently, the principle stated in Conclusion #3: <i>"Two or more true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church"</i> gives clear direction to the course the churches ought to take. In this connection, it must be understood that we are not talking about the development of a relationship with just any church. We are dealing with a federation of churches that we have been able to recognize as true and faithful churches of the Lord Jesus</p>

Version A	Version B
	<p>Christ. We acknowledge that, like ourselves, they have a genuine and informed desire to do all things in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. We express trust that this federation will conscientiously honour this commitment, also in the exercise of relationships with third parties.</p>

Version A	Version B
<p>Conclusion #6 When offering sister relations to another federation, the manner in which that federation exercises sister relations must be considered because of the impact that sister relations have upon that federation itself and on our own federation.</p> <p>In this respect there are some factors that need to be considered when offering sister church relations to the RCNZ while they have sister relations with the CRCA.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Currently the RCNZ can still call ministers and candidates from the CRCA, and has many of its students for the ministry trained at the RTC in Geelong. It is very difficult to gauge whether, or to what extent, the deformational trends within the CRCA have an influence on the RCNZ. Yet we need to beware of Scripture’s warning about how easily a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1Cor.5). 2. The RCNZ could/would address travel/membership attestations to either the CRCA or the FRCA, which promotes the doctrine of the pluriformity of the church. Members from the RCNZ would come to Australia with the notion that they are able to choose either church which differ substantially in “form.” 3. Ministers would be permitted to preach in and celebrate the Lord’s 	<p>Conclusion #6. In keeping with the instruction of Scripture, the church must weigh third-party relationships in coming to a responsible decision of its own. Care needs to be taken in establishing sister-church relations with churches that maintain unity with another church that may be becoming (or is) unfaithful.</p> <p>Notwithstanding what was said in regard to the previous conclusion, Conclusion #6 requires us to weigh the sister-church relationship between the RCNZ and the CRCA. We point to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The RCNZ has a long-standing historical obligation to its erring sister-church. 2. The RCNZ has faithfully and Scripturally discharged this obligation. They have regularly admonished the CRCA about deviations from Reformed doctrine and practice, and continue to do so. They recognize that there is resistance within the CRCA to unreformed trends, and believe that they still have opportunity, by means of their sister-relationship, to support this faithful segment within the CRCA, and to call the CRCA back to sound Reformed thinking and practice. 3. There is some evidence of potential and actual influence from the CRCA on the RCNZ. This is not surprising,

Version A	Version B
<p>Supper in both the CRCA and in the FRCA. This could promote the doctrine of pluriformity in our own churches, giving our members the idea that both are churches of Lord Jesus Christ, and that God can be worshipped in both the FRCA and in the CRCA. Members of the FRCA might be tempted to attend the CRCA in which this New Zealand minister is preaching, since what is permissible for the leaders of the church of Christ must also be permissible for the members thereof.</p> <p>4. If our (young) members attend conferences in the RCNZ, they will have fellowship with and perhaps even establish relations with (young) members from the CRCA who may also attend these conferences.</p> <p>From the above considerations it is our conclusion that as we weigh the practical implications in establishing a sister church relationship with the RCNZ, the responsible conclusion is that such a relationship would present pastoral and other internal difficulties for the FRCA. These difficulties would only lessen or be removed if the RCNZ moved further away from the CRCA or broke off the relationship altogether.</p>	<p>given their long-standing historical association, and the deep and extensive personal connections that exist between members of the two churches. This influence can be seen, for example, in some variations in worship practice within the RCNZ. Currently the RCNZ can still call ministers and candidates from the CRCA, and has many of its students for the ministry trained at the RTC in Geelong. It is difficult to gauge whether, or to what extent, the deformational trends within the CRCA have an influence on the RCNZ. Yet we need to beware of Scripture's warning about how easily a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1Cor.5). At the same time, there is a strong movement within the RCNZ to limit and counter this influence by, for example, strengthening links with conservative Reformed churches overseas. Ministers and candidates are being called from North America and elsewhere, and prospective candidates for the ministry are often encouraged to complete their studies at Reformed colleges there. In addition, significant progress is being made by the RCNZ in developing their own book of worship.</p> <p>4. The exercise of sister-church relationships includes accepting one another's attestations, opening the pulpit to each other's ministers, and allowing each other's members to participate in the sacraments. Concern has been expressed within our churches that situations might arise that would compromise our position with regard to the CRCA, and weaken our own witness in this respect. We note the following as examples:</p> <p>a) The RCNZ could/would address travel/membership attestations to either the CRCA or the FRCA, which promotes the doctrine of</p>

Version A	Version B
	<p>the pluriformity of the church. Members from the RCNZ would come to Australia with the notion that they are able to choose either church which differ substantially in “form.”</p> <p>b) Ministers would be permitted to preach in and celebrate the Lord's Supper in both the CRCA and in the FRCA. This could promote pluriformitarian thinking in our own churches, giving our members the idea that both are churches of Lord Jesus Christ, and that God can be worshipped in both the FRCA and in the CRCA. Members of the FRCA could be forgiven if they attend the CRCA in which this New Zealand minister is preaching, since what is permissible for the leaders of the church of Christ must also be permissible for its members.</p> <p>c) If our (young) members attend conferences in the RCNZ, they will have fellowship with and perhaps even establish relations with (young) members from the CRCA who may also attend these conferences.</p> <p>These concerns are real and should not be minimised. But they should be viewed within the broader perspective, as just part of a number of factors. They should not be allowed to take on a life of their own, or dominate our thinking.</p>

D. SUMMARIZING CONCLUSION:

Version A	Version B
<p>We as deputies remain positive towards maintaining a relationship with the RCNZ and working to develop that relationship further. The recognition of the RCNZ by Synod as a true and faithful church provides the basis from which further progress can be made.</p>	<p>The principle set out in Conclusion #3: <i>“Two or more true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church”</i> provides the basic template for the course of action which the churches</p>

Version A	Version B
<p>From this report it can be seen that we confirm the principle in conclusion #3: <i>“Two or more true churches who live in close proximity act contrary to the ordinance of God if they refuse to join together and maintain the unity of the church”</i>. However conclusion #5: <i>The Free Reformed Churches of Australia may not establish sister-relations with churches that maintain unity with another church that we regard as lacking the marks of true churches”</i> and conclusion #6: <i>“When offering sister relations to another federation, the manner in which that federation exercises sister relations must be considered because of the impact that sister relations have upon that federation itself and on our own federation”</i> are important principles too. Conclusion 5 is a doctrinal position whilst conclusion 6 is a consequence of practical considerations. We believe the doctrinal and practical considerations are serious enough to prevent the implementation of conclusion 3 – the establishing of sister church relations. It is our view that the offer of sister relations, whilst that continues to be our aim, cannot be responsibly made whilst the RCNZ relationship with the CRCA continues. Synod 2003 required that the offer of sister relationship should be done with “unity and joy”. The difficulties associated with the triangular relationship remain of such significance that the desired unity and joy which would accompany an establishment of sister relationship is still not evident within the FRCA.</p>	<p>ought to take. Having recognized in the RCNZ a true and faithful church of the Lord Jesus Christ, living in our close proximity, the exercise of sister-church relations should be the default position. There would need to be compelling reasons for us to decide otherwise.</p> <p>It is open to our churches to decide that, on balance, we would not do well to undertake a sister-church relationship with the RCNZ, perhaps not at this time, perhaps not at all. That is a choice we might make, in good conscience, having regard for all relevant factors, and giving each the weight we believe they deserve. It is not so that we are <i>unable</i> to extend such an offer, but that we make a deliberate choice not to. That is a choice for which we ourselves must take responsibility.</p> <p>In our view, while the reasons to exercise caution are not insignificant, they do not constitute compelling arguments to withhold an offer of a sister-church relationship. The weight of the evidence available to us does not support such a position.</p> <p>On the contrary, there are strong reasons (as outlined above) why engaging in sister-relations with the RCNZ would benefit both federations, would honour the Lord of the church, and would strengthen the church’s witness in our part of His world.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Version A	Version B
<p>1. To renew the mandate of deputies to for strive relations with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand by:</p> <p>1.1. Monitoring the relationship between the RCNZ and the CRCA, and to encourage the</p>	<p>1. To declare that while the continued sister-relationship between the RCNZ and the CRCA is a matter of significant concern to us, it does not constitute a compelling reason for us to continue to withhold an offer of</p>

Version A	Version B
<p>RCNZ to continue to admonish the CRCA where necessary.</p> <p>1.2. Authorising two delegates to attend the next Synod of the RCNZ, in order to convey greetings, discuss matters or mutual interest.</p> <p>1.3. Reassure the RCNZ that it is our sincere desire to enter into sister relationship with them but the matter of triangular relationship with the CRCA remains an impediment.</p> <p>1.4. Inviting delegates of the RCNZ to our next Synod as observers with the privileges mentioned in rules 6 of our “Rules for Synods” (Acts 1998, Appendix 12).</p> <p>1.5. Providing information to the membership of our churches about the Reformed Churches of New Zealand.</p> <p>2. To encourage consistories to take note, and act on, Synod’s positive view towards the RCNZ in regard to practical support and interaction where these are not restricted to those between sister churches only e.g. application of membership from former members of the RCNZ, matters pertaining to the mission field and theological and Christian education.</p> <p>3. To convey Synod’s decisions to RCNZ.</p>	<p>sister-church relations with the RCNZ.</p> <p>2. To extend, with thankfulness to the Lord, an offer of sister-church relations to the RCNZ, in accordance with relevant rules adopted for the purpose by the Free Reformed Churches of Australia.</p> <p>3. To renew the mandate of deputies to maintain contact with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand by:</p> <p>3.1. Carrying out the activities that belong to the establishment and maintenance of relations with sister-churches.</p> <p>3.2. Monitoring the relationship between the RCNZ and the CRCA, and to encourage the RCNZ to continue to admonish the CRCA where necessary.</p> <p>3.3. Authorising two delegates to attend the next Synod of the RCNZ, in order to convey greetings, and discuss matters of mutual interest.</p> <p>3.4. Inviting delegates of the RCNZ to our next Synod, with the privileges accorded to delegates of sister-churches as outlined in our “Rules for Synods” (Acts 1998, Appendix 12).</p> <p>3.5. Providing information to the membership of our churches about the Reformed Churches of New Zealand.</p> <p>4. To convey Synod’s decisions to the RCNZ.</p>

Submitted for the Consideration of Synod,
The Deputies for Contact with the RCNZ,
Rev A van Delden
Rev J Poppe
Br. L van Burgel
Br. A Plug

Attachments:

1. Report of the visit by brs J Poppe and A Plug to the RCNZ, May 2005
2. Report of the attendance of brs A van Delden and L van Burgel at the RCNZ Synod, September 2005.

**ATTACHMENT 1
REPORT OF THE VISIT BY BRS J POPPE AND A PLUG TO THE RCNZ,
MAY 2005**

THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA

Deputies for Relations with Other Churches (Reformed)
P.O. Box 191, Armadale, Western Australia. 6992.

To: Deputies for Contact with RCNZ
From: J Poppe, A Plug
Date: 23 August, 2005

Re: Report on Visit to the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, May 6-16, 2005

Dear brothers,

As per the instruction of the Deputies, we visited the Reformed Churches in New Zealand for 10 days early in May, 2005.

The intent of this visit was:

- To allow the brothers and sisters in the RCNZ to get to know us on a personal basis, and so to acquaint them with our churches, with a view to strengthening the relationship between the RCNZ and the FRCA.
- To give the visitors, both of whom were new to the Deputyship, an opportunity to develop first-hand knowledge of the RCNZ, and of the circumstances of their church life.

What follows is a report of the visit.

It is not our intention to provide a detailed, point-by-point account of all our experiences. Rather, we wish to provide a broad overview, outlining our itinerary, highlighting some points of particular note or interest, and coming to a brief summary of conclusions.

We will be happy to elaborate verbally on what follows at our next meeting of Deputies.

Our itinerary:

- We left Perth on Friday, May 6, and arrived at Auckland the next morning. We spent the first weekend of our visit in the Auckland Presbytery, where we attended church services at North Shore and Avondale. We also attended an outreach event and spoke at a congregational meeting in North Shore, and had a number of private conversations. We also had the opportunity to visit some Christian schools in the Auckland/Hamilton Area.
- On Tuesday, May 10, we travelled to the Wellington Presbytery, spent the night with Rev and Mrs Hoyt in Hastings, met with the consistories of the Masterton and Silverstream congregations, spoke at a meeting in Silverstream, had a number of private conversations with ministers and office-bearers, and again, visited several Christian schools.

- On Friday, May 13, we travelled to Christchurch, where we spent the second weekend of our visit. We attended worship services at Dovedale and Bishopdale, met with brothers from the Committee for Interchurch Relations of the RCNZ, spoke at a congregational meeting, and had a number of private conversations with ministers and office-bearers.
- On Monday morning, May 16, we left Christchurch, and arrived in Perth that evening.

Points of Note:

- **Overall:** We were very hospitably received, and made to feel welcome wherever we went. Once we had explained the purpose of our visit, people spoke to us freely and openly. At every level, we developed a good rapport with brothers and sisters, ministers, office-bearers and ordinary members, including young people. They showed a good deal of interest in us and in the FRCA, and responded positively to our desire for good contact on a personal level.
- **Worship Services:** We attended worship services in four different congregations, led by three different ministers and a vicar. Without exception, it was a joy to be present in the worship services. Services were well-attended. The preaching was true to Scripture, clear, and focused on the unity of doctrine and life. Two of the sermons were taken from the Heidelberg Catechism.
In most congregations, the selection of songs was from the Psalter Hymnal or from a supplementary selection of hymns approved by the RCNZ synod. The Psalms figured prominently, but only a few of them were sung to Genevan tunes. The order of worship was consistent with traditional Reformed practice, but contained elements not found in our services: the call to worship at the beginning, brief additional prayers at specific points (confession of sin, prayer for the opening of the Word, prayer after the collection), an active role for the duty elder during the service (leading the congregational prayer in the church served by a vicar), and a closing doxology sung by the congregation.
On one occasion, we witnessed the Public Profession of Faith of a member and the baptism of two children. This was clearly experienced as a joyful event for the entire congregation, and a cause for thanksgiving.
- **Congregational Life:** We witnessed a high level of engagement in the life of the church by ordinary members. Meetings were well-attended; there is a strong focus on the church's witness to the world, and a willingness to give for the promotion of the Gospel, work in the Kingdom, and the needy neighbour. (Even the most common-or-garden-variety congregational decisions are made with the church's calling in the world in mind.) In this respect, the NZ churches appear to be rather more outward-looking than our own.
While it is true that the RCNZ has drawn its membership from a broad spectrum of believers, we noted a strong sense of unity among all those we met.
- **Meetings with members:** We were able to make presentations to members in three separate locations: Auckland, Silverstream and Christchurch. They were well-attended and those present showed good interest. Questioning was pointed and outspoken, but never hostile. Our sense is that those who attended, left with a clearer understanding of who we are and what we stand for. We were able to correct some misconceptions, and convince those present of the genuineness of our desire for a close and meaningful relationship.

- **Private conversations:** Due to the nature of these conversations, we cannot go into detail. However, we found them, without exception, to be positive and very stimulating. Those who spoke to us radiated a strong sense of devotion to the Lord, a commitment to Biblical thinking within a confessional framework, and thankfulness and enthusiasm for what the Lord is doing within the RCNZ. They were very open with us about their own views and concerns on a number of points, and gave us a unique look into what makes the RCNZ tick. In this connection, we noted a lively interest among young people in the work of the Lord, and we saw evidence of their willingness to think deeply and Biblically about their place as believers in a Reformed community.
- **The Ministry:** We ran into two developments of particular interest:
 - *The Vicariate:* the appointment of a ministerial graduate as a vicar, alongside a serving minister in an existing congregation. This enables the sharing of the workload, as well as the mentoring of a new minister until he has reached the point of taking charge of his own congregation.
 - *Church Planting:* the establishment of a very small core congregation with its own minister, supported by a larger congregation or the bond of churches, with the explicit intention of building a congregation through local outreach.
- **Relationship with the CRCA:** There appears to be a variety of views regarding the relationship with the CRCA, ranging from moderate misgivings to serious concern. We are well aware of the causes: the influence of the “Word-and-Spirit” document, the question of women in office, and some ambivalence concerning the authority of Scripture. As we see it, there is broad agreement within the RCNZ on each of these matters; the difference in view has more to do with the weight that should be given to them. As a result, while some congregations have still recently called ministers from the CRCA, others have been actively looking elsewhere, especially North America.
- **Support for Geelong Reformed Seminary:** The previous comments also apply to the views within the RCNZ concerning the Reformed Seminary in Geelong. At this point, there is keen interest in what will be done to fill upcoming vacancies at the seminary; the quality of choices made will strongly influence the future of the relationship between the RCNZ and the Geelong seminary.
- **Education:** A great area of concern for the brotherhood in the RCNZ is the future of Christian education. Very few Reformed parents see government schools as an option for their children, but because of their small numbers and hostile Government policy, Reformed schools such as we have them appear to be out of reach for most Reformed parents. The range of choices parents make includes:
 - Cooperation with other Christians: In some cases, these are schools that were started by Reformed parents. However, over time, financial pressures and a shift in numbers has led to changes in the identity of the schools. We witnessed clear examples of that.
 - Integration with the State system. Some Christian schools have in effect become state schools, with state funding, but with their own control of staffing and of the identity of the school. The level of control exerted in the school by the state varies, depending on the terms of the agreement struck between the state and the relevant school board.
 - Home-schooling. This can be prompted by a principled choice against either of the above, but may also be influenced by the financial burden of enrolling children at a Christian school. The prevalence of home-

schooling is a source of tension within a number of communities, especially where it threatens the viability of already-struggling Reformed schools.

In addition, there is a chronic shortage of Reformed teachers. We visited two schools that are run by Reformed school boards for Reformed children; both had to appoint principals (and one of them appointed teaching staff) who themselves are not members of the RCNZ, simply because there was no-one else available.

Summary and Conclusions:

From the perspective of our stated intentions, this was clearly a very successful visit.

Our visit strengthened the bond that is growing between us. The opportunities we had to meet ordinary members in a number of different locations has allowed them to put a face to a name.

At the same time, we were given a unique opportunity to get to know the RCNZ bond of churches, and to get a first-hand look at them as they really are. We are very grateful for the open and hospitable reception we received, and we recommend that our appreciation for that be placed on record.

Our experience confirms the recognition by previous deputies and endorsed by our Synod that the RCNZ is a true and faithful church of our Lord.

We experienced unity of faith with the brotherhood there, and a desire in all things to regulate their life and faith according to the instruction of Scripture.

We had a busy, but thoroughly enjoyable time, and we are thankful that the Lord has given us this opportunity. May this visit serve to further develop strengthen the bonds between our churches.

Submitted for your consideration,
Joe Poppe
Aart Plug

ATTACHMENT 2

REPORT OF VISIT BY A VAN DELDEN AND L. VAN BURGEL TO THE SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NEW ZEALAND HELD SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 3 TO FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 9, 2005

We (A van Delden and L. van Burgel) departed Perth early Friday morning for a flight to Auckland via Sydney. We arrived safely to be met by Rev S. Bajema from the Reformed Church of Auckland. We stayed overnight with a widower Mr Posthuma before being driven to the Synod by Rev Bajema. The Synod was held in the Reformed Church of Hamilton. Hamilton is a city of about 160,000 people about 2 hours drive southeast of Auckland.

The Synod opened with the usual preliminaries and the election of the moderamen who were Rev J. Haverland moderator, Rev M. Flinn vice moderator, Rev B. Hoyt first clerk and elder R. de Vries as second clerk. In the evening a prayer service led by Rev J. Goris was held. He preached on Revelation 1:9:20 on the "Vision of the Church". We then traveled to the home of Rev Reinier Noppers and his family (wife Trudy – nee Swarts) where we would be excellently looked after. Also staying with the Noppers were Rev J Plug and his wife Marijke. Rev Noppers is minister of the second New Zealand Reformed Church in Hamilton at Hukanui. He and his wife originate originally from Perth.

On Sunday we visited the Hukanui church where Rev Noppers is a pastor. The morning service was led by Rev J. Klazinga formerly a URCNA minister called to the Church at Christchurch. In the evening Rev H. Vaatstra from the Reformed Church at Dunedin led the service. Although there were some differences to our order of worship, we could feel at home with the service, the preaching and the people. The afternoon service seemed well attended. The main differences in the worship service were the use of the old (grey) Psalter hymnal from the CRC, which includes the Psalms but also a large selection of hymns. Although Psalms sung to the Genevan tunes are in the Psalter hymnal, we had understood from previous visits that they are not frequently used in the RCNZ. In between services we had an opportunity to observe some of the attractive features of Hamilton.

On Monday the Synod reconvened. Sessions were set to commence at 9am and finish at 9pm in the evening. There were generous breaks for refreshments and mealtimes during which we could freely discuss a variety of matters with delegates. We were warmly and openly received. From these discussions an impression could begin to be gained what lives within the various Reformed Churches in New Zealand.

At the Synod the delegates from sister churches were: Rev G. Van Schie and F van der Bom (CRCA), Rev J. Plug (GKN–Lib), Rev D. van der Zwaag (CRC-Neth), Rev P. Kloosterman (URCNA), Mr M. Bube (OPC) and Revs H. Stoker and B. Fourie (GKSA). Prof H. de Waard attended as delegate on behalf of the Reformed Theological College at Geelong. Apart from us as delegates from the FRCA, other delegates included a delegate (Rev P. Boyd) from the Grace Presbyterian Church in New Zealand and Rev Q. Kim from the Korean American Presbyterian Church in Auckland. Some of these delegates presented greetings but attended only a few sessions of Synod.

This was not the first Synod of the RCNZ we had attended so we were quite familiar with the Synod way of working. Each of the 18 RCNZ churches had two delegates. In addition quite a number of people were afforded speaking rights. One could expect that with a full agenda the business would not be completed within a week, but nevertheless this was the case. The rules of debate are governed by "Robert's Rules" and this seemed to help expedite discussion and lead to an orderly way of conducting the business. With every church represented, most often speakers would introduce their remarks "our session is against, or our session decided...". Nevertheless we had been assured previously, and this

was on occasions evident, that delegates were able to vote contrary to their session's opinion, although clearly this did not happen often. Some items on this Synod agenda would not appear on a FRCA Synod e.g. Overseas Mission Board, Emeritus Fund, and Long Service Leave Fund

Items of interest to us were the Reports from the Interchurch Relations Committee, the RTC deputies, the Psalm and Hymnody committee, and the committee for Revision of the Forms and Confessions.

1. Interchurch Relations Committee Report

Sister church relationship was continued with the CRC(Neth), OPC, RCN (Lib), PCEA, GKSA and the CRCA.

i) **GKSA.** The deputies reported that the 2003 GKSA Synod decided to allow the ordination of women in the office of deacons. The deputies report that *"there are strong voices within the GKSA to allow for the ordination of women as elders and ministers and Synod 2003 clearly wanted these issues further investigated"*. The RCNZ Synod decided in addition to continuing the sister church relationship also

"to express our deep concern to the GKSA concerning its decision to allow women to be ordained as deacons."

ii) **CRCA.** The 2002 RCNZ Synod had decided *"to advise the CRCA our sister church relationship is again under strain because of the decision on Women as Deacons, Children at the Lord's Supper, and continued acceptance of worship innovations which are a departure from traditional Reformed practice"*. Since that time, the IRC of the RCNZ and the CER of the CRCA have met to discuss differences and also two delegates (Revs Haverland and Flinn) attended the CRCA Synod in 2003. The outcome of these meetings and the report of the CRCA Synod was reported on positively by the IRC. In essence the three areas of concern were narrowed to one: the issue of women in the office of deacon. It is not known why the concerns re the innovative worship practices was not mentioned. The matter of "children at the Lord's Supper" was clarified as being not an issue of allowing children at the Lord's Supper without a profession of faith (paedo-communion) but rather at what age children could confess their faith and thereby have access to the table. The CRCA Synod 2003 had rejected a proposal to adopt a special form for children over the age of 10 years professing their faith but instead re-affirmed the same form must be used. They did add the qualification that the second question in the profession of faith form *"1) does not require a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the confessions and 2) the aim of this question is that, through ongoing instruction, we may grow in unity in the truth for which our Lord prayed in John 17:16,23"*. The CRCA decision to remain with one form seemed to satisfy the RCNZ and therefore this issue of concern has fallen away. The one remaining issue of women in the office of deacon (and in some cases deacons being part of the session) was sufficient for the RCNZ Synod to make the following decision: *"to advise the CRCA that our sister church relationship is still under strain because of their decisions on Women as Deacons and their rejection of appeals against this decision"*. A stronger motion to declare the sister church relationship with the CRCA suspended, although receiving support from a number of delegates, was rejected.

iii) **FRCA.** The IRC in their report made note of our decisions of Synod Rockingham 2003 to *"to ask the RCNZ for time and patience so that we can discuss the matter of third parties and the implication of an offer of sister church relation with them and that we can offer sister relations with unity and joy"*. The IRC report mentions that the FRCA did not ask for the RCNZ to change their way of thinking or action with the CRCA. According to the report *"their synodical decisions speak only of allowing more time so that they can come to a more unified decision to offer sister us relations"*. Accordingly the IRC did not

see any mandate for them, as it *“was very much an issue for them to sort out amongst themselves”*. The adopted recommendation then also does not include provision for a delegate at the next FRCA Synod. The decisions were:

1. To continue the offer of a sister relationship with the FRCA
2. To convey by correspondence the offer of a sister church relationship to the FRCA deputies for consideration at their Synod 2006.

In addition the IRC had made some comments in their report that our recognition of the RCNZ as true and faithful churches without offering sister relations i.e. the separation of the nexus of true churches and sister church relationship would allow us to return to the ICRC. They recommended to the RCNZ Synod for it to request the FRCA to consider rejoining the ICRC. However following our explanation that the IRC observation was an oversimplification of the issues involved and the general consensus that this was an internal matter for the FRCA, this recommendation was withdrawn.

2. Deputies Reformed Theological College Report

The previous Synod of the RCNZ had decided to dissolve the partnership agreement (contract) between the New Zealand churches and the ACTE, the organization which administers the Reformed Theological College over issues relating to “Word and Spirit”. In the place of the contract the deputies proposed a memorandum of understanding which still allowed meaningful input into the college but no longer hold each other responsible to the strict adherence to the Confessions. The issue that remained was the level and manner of supporting the College financially. After extensive debate it was decided to support the College by way of recommended contribution (which was set at \$63,000pa). This allowed any churches who on grounds of conscience objected to support, the freedom to ‘opt’ out.

3. Synodical Psalm and Hymn Selection Committee

This committee which was charged with “preparing our own selection of psalms and hymns for worship in our churches” had done an enormous amount of work and had prepared for consideration a selection of Psalms 1-120 with the exception of Ps. 119. They expected to finish the full selection in 6 months and proposed to print a “provisional psalter”. Synod approved the use of the selected psalms in the worship services and also decided that it was the ultimate goal to produce a book of psalms and hymns. This meant the provisional psalter would not be printed for the time being but once copyright issues are resolved CD’s and other printed material can be provisionally used.

4. Committee for Updating Forms and Confessions

This Committee was mandated to update the liturgical forms and to assess any available language-updated versions of the BCF, WCF and the Canons of Dort. After investigating several versions the committee recommended the adoption of the 1989 edition of the CanRC version of the BCF. Similarly it also recommended the adoption of the 1986 edition of the Canons of Dort as produced by the Canadian Reformed Churches. In respect of the WCF, the committee recommended that the churches stay with the current edition in use. Synod decided *“to reappoint the committee and charge it to continue its study of the CanRC translations of the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort, interacting with the churches and the CanRC and bring final recommendations to the next Synod”*.

5. Bible Versions

Synod decided *“That two other Bible versions be considered for pulpit use in our churches by the committee to study Bible Versions along with the NIV and NASB versions, namely the English Standard Version and the New King James Version.*

6. Grace Presbyterian Church

The Grace Presbyterian Churches of New Zealand is a national Presbyterian church. It is in the process of initiating formal relationships with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, the Presbyterian Church of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of America.

The RCNZ Synod decided:

1. *That the Interchurch Relations Committee have meetings with the Grace Presbyterian Church to:

investigate how the Grace Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Churches of New Zealand can seek closer bonds,*
2. *That the Interchurch Relations Committee report to the sessions and synodical standing committees outcomes of its meetings with the Grace Presbyterian Church during the intersynodical period.*

7. Overture on Abortion

Synod was asked by a Presbytery to 'ratify' a decision it had made regarding abortion. This unusual step generated a lot of discussion and distress when failure to at first meet with consensus could have left the impression the churches were not prepared to issue a firm statement against the evils of abortion. The Synod although having decided against the overture by a narrow margin decided to allow a committee to revisit the decision and subsequently a unanimous decision was made as follows:

1. *That the earlier decision regarding Overture 1 be rescinded, and the record of that decision and the protests lodged as a result be expunged from the minutes.*
2. *To endorse the following statement:

Since human life begins at conception, wilful abortion is contrary to the sixth commandment, the only possible exception being cases where the life of the mother is in jeopardy, and every reasonable effort has been made to save the life of her unborn child.*
3. *That the present understanding of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand is that conception takes place at fertilisation.*
4. *That a study committee be appointed and mandated to study the following questions:*
 - a) *What is conception and when does it occur?*
 - b) *Does the 'morning after' pill, and other emergency 'contraception' prevent conception and/or act as an abortifacient?*
 - c) *Are there steps that may legitimately be taken to prevent conception after rape?*

The study committee shall seek advice from medical doctors in our denomination, and where necessary or desirable, also seek advice from others having expertise with respect to these issues.

8. Conclusion

The undersigned delegates found the experience of visiting the New Zealand churches and the opportunity to observe their Synod enlightening and helpful in an appreciation and understanding of what lives in these churches. We were able to renew old contacts and acquaintances and establish new ones. Discussion on and off the floor of Synod gave valuable insights. We were cordially received. The excellent hospitality extended by our

hosts and others was much appreciated. All in all it was a fruitful visit. May the Lord bless the outcome to the mutual benefit of our churches.

L. van Burgel

A van Delden