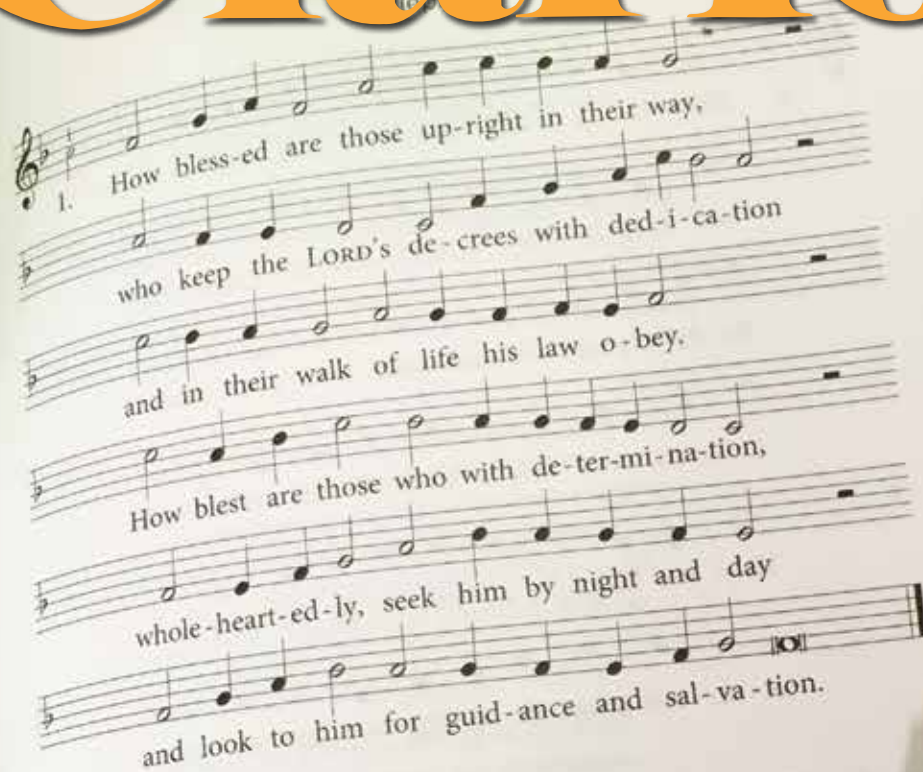


# Clarion



2. How blest are they who *shun* iniquities,  
your *holy* law with *diligence* observing.  
You *have laid down* your statutes and decrees,  
to be obeyed in *faithfulness* unswerving.  
O may I but submit myself to these  
and so go forth, a steady course preserving.

3. I know that I shall not be put to shame  
if only with attention undivided  
I heed your laws and fix my gaze on them.  
I truly thank you for the grace provided  
when I am taught the judgments you proclaim.  
Do not forsake me, leaving me unguided.

## The poetry of Psalm 119

EDUCATION MATTERS

CLARION KIDS

YOU ASKED



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# The Beautiful Poetry of Psalm 119

---

*There is perfect balance and structure on the one hand and boundless variety on the other*

---

Some time ago I had the opportunity to read a fascinating book on Psalm 119. It's called *The Exaltation of Torah*, written by David Noel Freedman.<sup>1</sup> Freedman was a renowned Bible scholar who died in 2008 at the age of 85. Over the course of a sixty-year scholarly career he produced more than three hundred books, either as main author or as editor. Freedman is probably best known for editing the Anchor Bible commentary series, including the six-volume Anchor Bible Dictionary.

According to an obituary, Freedman was a tireless spokesman for the beauty of the Bible, and this book certainly bears that out. Past scholars have sometimes criticized the poetry of Psalm 119. Sure, it's an amazing literary feat to write an alphabetic poem with eight verses for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but the result is that its poetic style is not the best. Freedman thought that this might a prejudiced view, so he decided to find out what the poetry of this psalm is like. Here's a sampling of what he found out.

## Alphabet soup

First he studied the relationship between Psalm 119 and the other alphabetic poems (or acrostics) in the book of Psalms. There are eight of them – four in the first book and the other four in the last book of Psalms. The first six acrostics can be divided into pairs according to size. Psalms 111 and 112 each have one line of poetry per letter of the alphabet, for a total of twenty-two lines each. Psalms 25 and 34 have two lines of poetry per letter of the alphabet, for a total of forty-four each. Psalms 9 and 10 were probably originally a single psalm since together they form an acrostic, though not a perfect one. In the Greek Septuagint the two psalms are actually combined into one: Psalm 9. It pairs up with Psalm 37 because both

have four lines of poetry per letter of the alphabet, for a total of eighty-eight each. When you add the number of lines for these first six acrostics together, you get a grand total of 308 lines. The seventh alphabet psalm is Psalm 119; it has 176 verses, with two lines of poetry per verse, for a total of 352 lines. That's forty-four more lines than the first six put together. And here's the really neat thing: the eighth acrostic, Psalm 145, has exactly those forty-four extra lines. In short, Psalm 119 has precisely the same number of lines as the other seven acrostics put together.

Freedman draws two conclusions from all of this. The first is that, "It would be difficult to suppose that any of this arrangement and organization could have happened by accident or random selection" (p. 3). The second is that since the first six acrostics can be paired up by size but the last one stands on its own, Psalm 145 was probably added to the book to make the numbers fit, so that the combined size of the smaller acrostics would be the same as that of Psalm 119.

## Count von Count

Next Freedman studied the poetry of Psalm 119 itself. The whole psalm is a repetitive meditation on the same theme, namely that the psalmist loves the law of the LORD. As we all know, the psalm is divided into twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each for a total of 176 verses. A less-known fact is that it uses eight key words over and over. The main word is law (*torah*), and the other seven are synonyms for law, such as statutes, commandments, precepts, sayings, words, judgments, and testimonies. Four of these are feminine nouns in Hebrew; the other four are masculine. Freedman checked out the distribution patterns for these eight words – how often they occur in each verse, in each of the twenty-two

stanzas, and in each half of the psalm. Remarkably, when you add up the total number of occurrences of these eight words, you get 176, the same as the number of verses.

Furthermore, there are exactly 88 of them in the first half and 88 in the second half of the psalm. Yet each word is not used the same number of times: there are different frequencies for each word. Some occur more often in the first half, and some more often in the second half. Not every verse has one of these words: in 167 verses you find one of these words, in four you find none, and in the other

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Our editorial comes from a guest writer this time: Dr. John Smith. His editorial takes an in depth look at the poetry of Psalm 119 and discusses what we can find there.

Rev. Clarence VanderVelde recently attended the URCNA Synod Wyoming 2016 as a fraternal delegate. We publish both his report and the speech he gave while attending the synod in this issue.

A number of our regular columns are featured in Issue 18: Treasures New and Old, Clippings on Politics and Religion, Education Matters, *Clarion Kids*, and You Asked. There is also a letter to the editor and a Mission News insert.

Laura Veenendaal

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five there are two each to make up the difference. None of the twenty-two stanzas have all eight words; each stanza is missing one of them, and some are missing two, but none is missing more than two. Despite all of that, the totals work out in the end. Freedman concludes that the author must have been keeping count as he went along. He compares Psalm 119 to a musical masterpiece with endless variations on the same theme, so that it never becomes boring: there is perfect balance and structure on the one hand and boundless variety on the other.

### The magic number

Freedman's third chapter is fascinating too. There he begins with a quotation from the church father Eusebius. Eusebius had heard it said that Psalm 119 was composed in what the Greeks call "heroic meter," that is, in poetic hexameters consisting of sixteen syllables per line. This quotation is usually dismissed as ridiculous. For one thing, Hebrew poetry is not written in regular metre, and for another, anyone can see that the lines of Psalm 119 are not all the same length. But Freedman wondered if there was perhaps some substance to what Eusebius had heard. After all, there was a long-standing tradition that the Jews counted syllables. So he decided to check.

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### *Psalm 119 is first and foremost a prayer to the LORD*

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If it were true, hypothetically speaking, that each line of Psalm 119 had sixteen syllables, how many syllables would the entire psalm have?  $16 \times 176 = 2816$ . Now each line doesn't have sixteen syllables, but how many syllables does the entire psalm have? It's not easy to count syllables in Hebrew because we don't know exactly how Hebrew was pronounced at the time the psalm was written. So Freedman made allowances for that by providing minimum and maximum tallies. He calculated that the total would have been somewhere between a minimum of 2639 and a maximum of 2902. As it happens, these figures are just on either side of the magic number 2816. We have no way of knowing whether the psalm actually had 2816 syllables, but regardless of whether you take the maximum or the minimum or some number in between, it's safe to say that the average number of syllables per line is almost exactly sixteen – hardly accidental, since


sixteen is again a multiple of eight. Heroic metre? No. Line length is not consistent, and yet, longer lines are balanced out by shorter ones to achieve endless variation on the one hand and perfect balance on the other. All of that within a perfect structure of eight lines per letter of the Hebrew alphabet, to create a masterpiece complete from A to Z!

### The take-home

Freedman concludes that Psalm 119's reputation as monotonous, low-level poetry is completely unjustified. The psalm's creativity is endlessly inventive, though not according to modern standards. He writes that biblical poetry tends to be valued today for its powerful imagery, its evocative language, its raw emotion, but the creativity of Psalm 119 is that of the puzzle-builder and the crafts-person. For Freedman, Psalm 119 represents the exaltation of *Torah*. What does he mean by that exactly? In part he means that it is a literary masterpiece in praise of God's law. But he means more than that. Freedman makes some concluding remarks on the theology of Psalm 119. He observes that while the psalm refers over and over to the Torah, the Law of God, it never tells us what this law contains. There are no allusions to specific laws, no references to Moses, to Sinai, or to the covenant. Creation is not mentioned either, nor the Exodus, nor the Promised Land. Torah has instead become a concept, something that stands for God's written revelation as a whole, the perfect expression of God's will. For that reason Freedman concludes that the Psalm must have been written at a time when the law had become – or was becoming – the heart and soul of the Israelite community, possibly during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So what's the take-home? I encourage you to read (and sing!) this psalm with a renewed appreciation for the beauty and wonder of God's Word. With Freedman's findings in mind, it's good to remember that Psalm 119 is first and foremost a prayer to the LORD, written by a person in trouble. To construct a prayer like this was an act of outstanding piety, of consummate devotion to the LORD. It's an act of worship that meets the highest standard and is worthy of God himself. From that perspective it's much more than a poem that exalts Torah. It's a prayer that God has given to us so that we can give it back to him.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Noel Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Biblical and Judaic Studies, 6; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999). 





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# Complaint-Free Obedience

***“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”***  
(Philippians 2:14)

There’s the sort of complaining you do when, on just the day you are in a hurry, the line up at Tim Horton’s is much longer than normal. There’s also the sort of complaining we do that accompanies our obedience to God. I mean this: you know what God requires of you. You do it. But, as you’re doing it, you’re complaining about having to do it. For example, you know that God requires patience when one of the kids gets on your nerves. And so you are patient, at least outwardly. But you’re grumbling under your breath about these “rotten kids who never seem to listen.” Raise your hand if you are guilty of complaint-laced obedience.

It seems as if it was a struggle for the Christians of Philippi too. And yet, if you read through Philippians chapter 1 and the first part of chapter 2 you find multiple references, directly and indirectly, to their life of obedience. Just one example: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have al-

ways obeyed. . .” (2:12). Clearly these Christians were obedient. But still, in that same verse they are instructed to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Paul is saying this: “Philippian Christians, you are obedient, now keep being obedient.”

But, he says, in doing that you must “do everything without complaining or arguing.” So, I ask, is the working “out [of] your own salvation” constantly accompanied by “complaining or arguing”? Complaining in the sense of grumbling that you have to do what you know God wants you to do. Arguing in the sense of having a mental discussion in which you raise all sorts of reasons why you shouldn’t have to do what God calls you to do.

If that’s you then how do you change and learn to render complaint-free obedience? That begins not by trying harder to complain less. If you do that you’ll just end up complain-

ing that it’s not working. It begins instead by being overwhelmed by who you have as God. It begins by learning to be overwhelmed by who you have as Saviour. You see, it’s when you saturate yourself in his Word that you learn that God looks at you as one with Christ his Son. He treasures and values the relationship he has with you because he loves you as his own son or daughter! Pause right now to contemplate that for a couple of minutes. When we understand that truth by faith, then we’ll also accept with absolute delight that the rules for living that he gives in his Word are perfectly designed by him to keep us in relationship with him.

Then, by the work of his Spirit in my life, my obedience becomes increasingly complaint-free. Because, who complains when the God who gives the command is perfect and loving? Who complains when the command he gives, he gives only because he loves me?

## For Further Study

1. Take a moment to reflect on your life of obedience before God. As you seek to live in obedience, what things cause you to complain or argue?
2. In Philippians chapter 1 Paul is an incredible example of complaint-free obedience. Read through the chapter and identify what it is that so motivates his life of obedience. Is it what motivates yours?
3. Consider your Bible reading and prayer routines. What changes do you need to make so that, by the Spirit’s work, you become increasingly saturated with the good news of Jesus Christ? In what ways would you expect those changes to impact your life of obedience?



# Synod Wyoming 2016 of the URCNA



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Synod Wyoming of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) was held from June 14-17 at Wyoming, Michigan. Rev. W. den Hollander and I attended as fraternal delegates on behalf of the Canadian Reformed Churches, and I addressed the assembly on behalf of our churches. The address has been included elsewhere in this issue of *Clarion*. What follows is an account of decisions pertaining to unity matters as well as some other matters.

## Unity matters

There were three important overtures on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016 in relation to unity efforts. In one way or another, these overtures would significantly slow down the unity process, if not halt it altogether for the foreseeable future.

First, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Central US April 13-14, 2015 seeking to change the mandate of CERCU. The mandate of CERCU currently reads: "With a view toward complete church unity, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." The overture proposed that it read: "With a desire to pursue a broader unity with churches that share a common confession and faith, and acknowledging the desirability of union with churches of like faith and practice, where feasible, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity shall pursue and make recommendations regarding the establishment of ecumenical relations with those Reformed and Presbyterian federations selected by synod and in keeping with Article 36 of the Church Order." In explanation, Ground #6 stated: "The current terminology '*With a view toward complete church unity*. . .' appears to be used

by the committee in a way which seems to keep driving toward organic union with the Canadian Reformed Churches without recognizing differences in like-faith, like-practice and the desire of churches in our federation to acknowledge them as a true church but not proceed further at this point."

Synod Wyoming 2016 decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that "While appreciating the concerns raised by the overture, the current language of 'with a view toward complete unity' has provided encouragement in our ecumenical pursuit which has borne good fruit." Another ground reads, "Some of the grounds of the overture argue against an application of the mandate rather than against the mandate itself and do not, therefore, necessitate changing the mandate." And finally, "Recent recommendations by CERCU concerning the CanRC demonstrate sensitivity to the concerns outlined in the overture" (Article 37).

Second, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 asking Synod ". . .to declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (a church order proposed for use in the prospective union of the United Reformed Churches with the Canadian Reformed Churches) is unusable for that purpose." The overture asserted that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) "vacates" a principle held dear by the URCNA, namely, that authority in Christ's church resides with the local eldership and not broader assemblies. The overture maintained that this principle is violated by such stipulations as having to maintain a seminary, licensure by Classis, counsellors appointed for vacant churches by Classis, the role of deputies of Regional Synod, having regional synods, admission to the pulpit, etc.

In dealing with this overture, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided to ". . .declare that the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) is in need of further revision in order to

comply more fully with our Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government.” Three grounds are adduced. The first ground is: “This is evidenced by many overtures requesting changes to the PJCO.” The second ground is: “Several requirements in the PJCO conflict with Principle 5, such as synodically approved hymns, synodical deputies, classical approval for table fellowship and pulpit exchanges, and the calling of ministers requiring approval from other churches.” The third ground is: “There is still significant concern in our churches about the hierarchical tendencies of a federal seminary” (Article 44).

In addition, regarding the PJCO, Synod Wyoming 2016 decided that “. . .this further revision be undertaken when the federation is ready to enter into Phase 3A with the Canadian Reformed Churches.” And for that reason, Synod Wyoming decided “. . .to dismiss the PJCO Committee with thanks, including all past members who have worked so diligently” (Article 44).

Third, Synod dealt with an overture from Classis Pacific Northwest October 14-15, 2014 “. . .to direct CERCU to discontinue all further action, advancement, processes, efforts or steps towards unification with the Canadian Reformed Churches and specifically advancement to Phase 3, Step A.” Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously decided not to accede to this overture. One of the grounds is that “CERCU has responded to the concerns of the overture by deciding to not make a Phase Three, Step A recommendation for at least six years.” Another ground is that “Synod has approved the work of CERCU, including its synodical reports in which an affirmative case for pursuing union has been made.” Yet another ground is that “the overture is inconsistent with our commitment as a member of NAPARC in which we agree with ‘the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.’” And still another ground is that “The communications received by synod on this issue speak against Overture 13 and articulate the fruit the churches have experienced through the pursuit of unity with the CanRC” (Article 54).

In evaluating Synod Wyoming 2016’s decisions on these matters, we note that things could have been worse but things could also have been better. Thankfully, the mandate of CERCU remains as it was and still includes the phrase “with a view toward complete church unity.” The mandate of CERCU still articulates the vision in a clear and strong manner. We can also be thankful that Synod Wyoming unanimously defeated the overture to

discontinue all action and efforts towards unification with the CanRC. Instead, there is a breather of at least six years before CERCU recommends stepping forward to Phase 3A, leading to merger. We should note, however, that this is to be a period of “at least” six years – meaning that six years is the minimum – and this language suggests that it may very well be longer.

Synod Wyoming did decide – as was also decided by at least the past two synods – “. . .to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA. . .” in various ways, such as pulpit exchanges and seeking dialogue regarding outstanding areas of concern (Article 55). For this, too, we can be thankful.

Regarding the PJCO, we can be thankful that Synod Wyoming did not declare it to be “unusable” – as the overture requested – but that Synod took the hard edge off the overture by deciding that it “is in need of further revision.” However, the fundamental concern remains, namely, that aspects of the PJCO are thought to “conflict” with the Reformed principle for church government that authority resides with the local consistory. This is a disappointing conclusion and shows that we are far away from agreement on some church polity matters.

In addition, the PJCO committee – the only committee left of the ones established back in 2001 – has now been dismissed also. There is no longer a Songbook Committee, a Theological Education Committee, and a PJCO Committee. Without any committees left to discuss the issues, most likely the six or more years of breather will not be very productive in overcoming the obstacles to merger. It is hard not to conclude that after six or more years we will be no further ahead and that, in fact, we will be even further behind in our relationship. Since Synod London 2010, every successive URCNA Synod has taken steam out of the merger efforts: all committees were gradually dismissed, it was decided to work with the OPC on a common songbook rather than with the CanRC, a decision was made to “table indefinitely” any encouragement for CERCU to move toward proposing to enter Phase 3A, and it was decided to have a breather of at least six years before CERCU makes a Phase 3A recommendation. As far as URCNA mechanisms and URCNA collective drive with a view toward merger are concerned, we are worse off in 2016 than we were in 2001 when it all started. It is hard not to be discouraged by all these developments.




## Other matters

Synod Wyoming 2016 unanimously adopted the proposed hymns to be the hymn portion of the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. Synod Visalia 2014 had already adopted the Psalm section. The proposed hymns for the hymn section were already approved at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's (OPC) 2016 General Assembly. This means that the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* – a combined effort between the OPC and the URCNA – is ready to be published (Article 46).

With respect to the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (RCN), Synod Wyoming 2016 agreed with the recommendation of the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) and decided to remain in Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) of ecumenical relations. Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Contact (Phase One) with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI-NTT) and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA). Synod Wyoming decided to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (EF) (Phase Two) with the Calvinistic Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRC-NTT) and the Free Church of Scotland Continuing (FCC) (Article 38).

Interestingly, Synod Wyoming also agreed with the recommendation of CECCA and decided by a fairly close margin of votes to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) with the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA). This generated some discussion because the GKSA have women deacons, although a recent Synod of the GKSA “. . . confirmed by a substantial majority their practice of prohibiting women from the offices of Elder and Minister. This reflects their Scriptural conviction that women should not participate in the governing body of the church.” In the GKSA, deacons are not part of the ruling body of the church. The discussion was partly generated by the fact that the GKSA is still in fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), although “. . . the GKSA continues to give a clear witness to the CRCNA regarding matters relating to the authority of Scripture, including the prohibition against ordaining women into the teaching and ruling offices of the church” (Article 38 and 41).

Decisions by Synod Wyoming to enter into Ecumenical Fellowship (Phase Two) must be ratified by a majority of consistories by December 31, 2016 in order to go into effect.

The next URCNA Synod is scheduled to be held, the LORD willing, at Wheaton College in Illinois, in June 2018. 

*Tetons Mountain Range, Wyoming*





# Address to Synod Wyoming 2016 of the URCNA



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## Dear brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

It's a privilege and pleasure to once again be among you as you gather for another synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URNCA). My colleague Rev. William den Hollander and I are here to bring you greetings from the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). May God bless you in all your deliberations and decisions. May you seek his will in everything on the agenda.

First a little bit about what has transpired in the CanRC federation since we brought fraternal greetings at your last synod. The CanRC also had a general synod recently – in May 2016 at Dunnville, Ontario. Lasting nine days, it was our shortest general synod in recent times.

Several important decisions were made at Synod Dunnville 2016. Over the last forty years there has been discussion in the CanRC about women voting in the churches. Synod 2010 decided to leave it in the freedom of the local churches. Synod 2013 overturned that decision and said that women should not vote in the churches. Synod 2016 decided to go back to the decision of 2010 to leave it in the freedom of the local churches. This topic has generated much discussion in our churches, and the last two synods received many appeals about this matter. Hopefully the churches can be at peace with Synod 2016's decision to leave it in the freedom of the local churches.

Another notable decision of Synod Dunnville 2016 is the decision pertaining to our Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) with the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (RCN). Over the last number of years, we have been concerned about the direction of the RCN. Concerns about hermeneutics – as manifested at the federational seminary in Kampen as well as in discussions about the role of women in the churches – led Synod 2013 to write a letter of admonition to the RCN. Since there was no change in course, Synod Dunnville 2016 decided to suspend

temporarily several of the privileges associated with EF. Members of the RCN seeking membership in the CanRC and guests visiting the CanRC will no longer be admitted to the Lord's Supper simply on the basis of an attestation from their home church. In order to safeguard soundness in doctrine and life, ministers within the RCN can now only be called by a local CanRC church with the concurring advice of Classis. Consistories are urged to exercise careful diligence before allowing visiting RCN ministers into the pulpit. The CanRC still have EF with the RCN, but the suspension of these two rules for EF – pertaining to admission to the Lord's Supper and access to the pulpit – indicates that the relationship is under strain. The committee dealing with issues surrounding the RCN was mandated to give special attention to the question whether or not to continue EF with the RCN when reporting to our Synod 2019. These are difficult and painful decisions for the CanRC, since the RCN is the federation from which the CanRC originated in the post-World War II immigration to Canada. We know that the URCNA are also concerned about the direction of the RCN and have been hesitant to move toward EF with the RCN. Let us together pray that the RCN may turn from their course and abide by the Word of God.

Turning our attention to the unity efforts between the CanRC and the URCNA, we realize that there are some very significant overtures about this on the agenda of Synod Wyoming 2016. In one way or another, these overtures are about significantly slowing down the unity process, if not halting it altogether for the foreseeable future.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium at Synod Visalia 2014 on the doctrine of the covenant and the conclusion that there are no sig-

nificant differences in covenant views between the CanRC and the URCNA was another important step on that road. Our increasing contact as Coordinators for Church Unity with churches and classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. We have visited all of the classes in the USA. We hope and pray that there will be more opportunities to build on the progress made.

Therefore, much depends on what Synod Wyoming 2016 will decide with respect to these overtures. May the vision of Synod Escondido 2001 – which set this unity process in motion – not be lost. May these overtures be an opportunity to do some deep soul-searching regarding the ecumenical imperative of Scripture. We all preach a gospel of reconciliation and fellowship between God and sinners saved by God's grace. Shouldn't this same gospel of reconciliation and fellowship be a motivating factor for a drive toward organic unity between church federations which share this gospel? What are we indicating to the world when our two federations which are so similar in faith, practice, and history can't get it together in a unity process? Wouldn't a determined and persistent pursuit of unity resulting in a merger be honouring to the Head of the church?

I would like to quote from the Press Release of Synod Dunnville 2016. It says the following about the unity efforts: "In regard to the merger process with the United Reformed Churches of [sic] North America, Synod recognized that the work has proceeded more slowly than was originally expected when Synod Neerlandia 2001 initiated the process toward merger. Synod also took note of voices within the URCNA calling for a complete halt to the merger process. Nonetheless, Synod reappointed coordinators for the work of promoting unity with the URCNA and, in view of the workload and the importance of the issues at stake, even increased their number from two to four. In this way, our churches have said very clearly that we want to continue the unity process. We desire our present relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship to become one of ecclesiastical unity. We feel this is a matter of Christian love and obligation."

In its report to Synod Wyoming 2016, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) states that it will not make any recommendation to step

## CALL ACCEPTED AND CALLS DECLINED

Accepted the call to serve as co-pastor at Blessings Christian Church in Hamilton, Ontario and declined the calls to the Emmanuel American Reformed Church in Denver, USA, Owen Sound CanRC, London CanRC, and Hope Reformed Church in Brampton, ON (URCNA):

### Candidate Hilmer Jagersma

Accepted the call to the Canadian Reformed Church of Elora, Ontario:

### Candidate Jonathan Chase

## CALLED

Called by the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church to serve as a third missionary for the work in Brazil:

### Rev. A. Witten

of Vernon, BC

## DECLINED

Declined the call to serve as missionary for Lighthouse Ministries from the Pilgrim Canadian Reformed Church in London, ON:

### Candidate HanGil Lee

## CHURCH NEWS

forward to the next phase of relations with the CanRC for at least the next six years. We recognize that it may be necessary to have such a breather for the long-term well-being of unity efforts, but we also appreciate that CERCU is suggesting a general time frame. This is important so that the whole endeavor does not end up off the radar screen. We also appreciate CERCU's recommendation of "the patient pursuit of unity" and CERCU's commitment to assist churches in overcoming what they consider to be obstacles to merger. If there is to be a breather, let the years be filled with positive activity intended to solidify and cultivate the existing relationship.

The four Coordinators for Church Unity – Rev. William den Hollander, Rev. Dr. Andrew Pol, Rev. Bill Slomp, and myself – are willing and ready to come to any classis or local church to help overcome obstacles to merger. Our Synod Dunnville 2016 also kept in existence the various subcommittees for church unity. If Synod Wyoming 2016 would decide to reinstate subcommittees with a view to continuing the discussions without the pressure of moving to the next phase of relations in the near future, our subcommittees would be willing and ready to enter upon such discussions.

May all your deliberations and decisions be to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church!





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# The Son of God Gathers Muslims to Himself

For some time now there have been media reports of many Muslim refugees in Europe converting to Christianity. Not surprisingly, observers have somewhat cynically noted that by becoming Christians they improve their chances of being granted asylum. After all, they can claim that if they are sent back to their Muslim homeland, they will face persecution as Christians. We cannot and thankfully need not judge the sincerity of Muslim conversions in Europe. However, there are indicators that globally far more is going on than a simple pragmatic switching of allegiances from one religion to another. Muslim conversions to Christianity are also taking place in countries where the Islamic faith is dominant and where conversion to Christianity is strongly discouraged or even forbidden.

## Muslims questioning their faith

The Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF) keeps a finger on the pulse of events in the Islamic world and it regularly reports that many Muslims, especially young ones, are being convicted by the gospel. Their website notes that the rise of Islamic fanaticism and militancy has had positive effects for the gospel because of growing disenchantment with Islam. “Many more Muslims are boldly raising serious questions about Islamic teachings. There are many who are disquieted about the application of 7th century eastern Arabian living norms from Mohammad to 21st century societies.” And so the upheavals in the Middle East are being used by the Lord to attract more Muslims to new life in Christ. The communal suffering of Muslims and Christians due to radical Islam is providing “additional opportunities for the light of Christ and his love to impact the lives of many Muslims already disenchanted with their religion.”

It should be noted that the current level of interest in and turning to Christianity in the Muslim world appears to be unprecedented in the history of Islam. Since

its founding by Mohammad, the religion of Islam has moved aggressively with the sword to expand its reach. Over the past 1,400 years it has assimilated tens of millions of Christians with very few conversions from Islam to Christianity. Islam had momentum and has reached into the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and beyond. The result is a religious empire stretching from Africa to Indonesia called the House of Islam. It encompasses over one and a half billion Muslims, nearly a quarter of the world's population. The advance of Islam continues even today, especially in Europe and ironically facilitated and largely paid for by the Europeans.

Humanly speaking, it is not surprising that in the past one rarely heard of a conversion to Christianity. Muslims are kept in Islam through fear and intimidation. Those who convert to Christianity pay an enormous price. The Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, states that those who convert are to be killed (4:89). Mohammed is reputed to have said: “Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him” (Bukhari 9.84.57). Strict Muslims do not hesitate to murder family members who have dishonoured them by being un-Islamic, and that includes conversion to Christianity. Such killings also take place in the West. At the very least, a convert in a Western country is totally disowned by his or her Muslim family. Yet, in spite of that and the even greater dangers faced by converts in Islamic countries, many are currently turning to the Christian faith.

Dr. David Garrison, a veteran Baptist missionary to the Islamic world, estimated that over the last twenty years between two to seven million Muslims have converted to Christianity. He gave these figures in an interview with *World* magazine two years ago before the European migrant crisis started and documented them in his book *A Wind in the House of Islam* (2014).



*The gospel above a door in a Christian orphanage for boys in Khartoum, Sudan*

## God is love

What brings these people to the Christian faith? As mentioned, the Lord is using a growing disillusionment with Islam in its radical form to draw Muslims to the true peace that surpasses all understanding. Even a former Muslim turned atheist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, understands the attraction of Christianity. In her book *Nomad* (2010), she writes that “many Muslims are seeking a God or a concept of God that in my view meets the description of the Christian God” (239, also see page 250). Hirsi Ali notes that many Muslims are confused. There is much talk of Islam being a religion of peace, but they hear of terrorism and killing in the name of Islam. They do not know the contents of the Qur’an and when they are told of a passage in the Qur’an that speaks of freedom of religion they do not realize that “its authority is nullified by verses that descended upon the Prophet later, when he was better armed and when his following had grown to great numbers” (240). These later verses justify killing and terrorism in order to spread Islam.

The divine person Hirsi Ali alludes to is the God who is loving and compassionate. The Islamic faith does not know Allah like that. The Qur’an says very little about his love. What it does say is that “Allah loves those who do good” (Surah 2:195), but, given the whole context of the religion, the expression can also be translated as “approves those who do good.” Nowhere in Islam is there a God who loves a world lost in sin. Nowhere is there any indication of Allah’s love as that of a father for his children. Indeed, Islam has no concept of God as Father. Typically, a Muslim has no feeling of affection for Allah, only dread and fear of possible eternal punishment and a passive resignation to Allah’s will whatever that may be. Small wonder then that the Lord our God uses his identity as a loving Father to draw Muslims to himself. Muslims caught in a religion that promotes terrorism on the basis of their holy book are searching for comfort that cannot be found in the Qur’an. The biblical description that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) captures what their restless hearts need to have peace now and forever.

## The challenge

The late Muammar Gaddafi once bragged that “Islam will conquer Europe without firing a shot.” That may still very well happen given the alarming demographic trends and the swelling number of Muslim refugees flooding into Europe. Politicians need to become less politically correct and seek the long term well-being not just of the refugees, but also of their own country and its Christian past.

We do not know what the Son of God who guides history to its end has in mind. He is calling all people to repentance, also Muslims. At the moment he is drawing by his Word and Spirit many of devotees of Mohammed to himself. There is a growing hunger for the gospel in the Middle East. Churches in Europe have the opportunity to share the gospel with refugees who look for a sure hope and comfort. Also Canada is welcoming many refugees, some sponsored by our churches. As we have opportunity, may we also be ready to share the gospel with our Muslim neighbour and so be co-workers in the great harvest!





## God Provides in the Desert

### Exodus 15:22 - 17

While Israel was travelling through the desert they complained A LOT! They were never happy with what God had done for them. God gave them special bread that came from heaven each night. It was called manna and it tasted delicious and sweet. He also gave them quail to eat for meat. Quail is like a small chicken. The people were so greedy that they ate them without cooking them, which made them sick. God also provided water all along their journey. Sometimes he miraculously turned bad water into delicious water for the Israelites to drink. God provided all these things but the people were not grateful like they should have been.

Go to [www.clarionmagazine.ca](http://www.clarionmagazine.ca) to print and colour this picture!



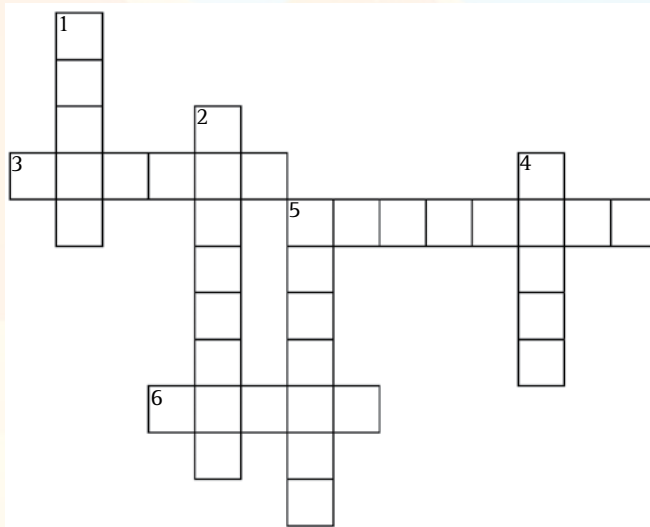
#### Across

3. The Israelites were travelling in a hot \_\_\_\_\_.
5. All the Israelites did was \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The meat God gave the Israelites.

#### Down

1. God made bad \_\_\_\_\_ into good for the Israelites.
2. The Israelites were not \_\_\_\_\_ for what God provided.
4. The special bread God gave the Israelites.
5. The Israelites ate the quail without \_\_\_\_\_ them.

**Crossword Puzzle:** Solve the clues on the left to fill in the puzzle below.



by Emily Nijenhuis



# Principals: Why, What, and How?

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As is amply evident from the multitude of principal advertisements in *Clarion* over the past few years, our schools are in need of more school leaders. Anecdotally, there is evidence that schools struggle to find a deep pool of qualified candidates when positions are published. As well, a closer look at principal turnover in our schools suggests that a not insignificant number of principals depart for negative reasons, including their own disillusion or the dissatisfaction of their school board.

The intent of this article is to shed a little light on the role of the principal. Hopefully by providing insight into why individuals choose to take on the role of principal, what tasks consume their working hours, and which factors have the greatest negative impact on their work, school communities can work together to create environments which foster the development and retention of great school leaders. Much of the content of this article comes from survey data collected from current and former principals of Canadian Reformed schools.

## Why do people become principals?

Why would anyone want to take on the role of principal in our schools? In order to provide a detailed answer, a survey on the topic was constructed and sent out in the early months of 2016; twenty-six current and former Canadian Reformed principals responded. The school leaders had worked in a range of schools: 19% in schools with less than 100 students, 23% in schools with student populations between 100-199, 54% in schools with 200-399 students, and 4% in schools with 400+ students. The respondents also had a range of experience: 19% were in their first year as principal, 35% had 2-7 years in the role, 12% had 8-14 years, and 34% had 15 or more years in the role of principal.

The most significant reason for individuals stepping into the role of school leader in our schools was a

deeply held desire to serve. Many of the principals who responded expressed a recognition that within them they had a desire to serve God, their communities, and their students, and they saw the role of principal as an opportunity to do so. This was expressed through survey comments such as, “Strongly believe in Servant-Leadership and it was a natural extension of the desire to serve our community,” “A desire to give back,” and “I was motivated to serve the Lord with the gifts He has given me.”

Some secondary reasons that appeared in the responses spoke to the simple reality of necessity. These individuals had been working as teachers when the role of principal opened up at their school and they volunteered or were encouraged, persuaded, or pressured to apply. Some comments which exemplified this included, “They needed someone,” “The absence of an abundance of leaders,” and “I was asked to take the job- the board was desperate.” Principals also acknowledged that in some cases they had taken additional leadership training and were looking for opportunities to advance their career.

## What do principals do?

From the outside looking in, the days and nights of a principal seem to be taken up with meetings, financial decisions, spreadsheets, scheduling, reports, classroom visits, discipline cases, and conflict resolution work. But is this in fact what principals spend their day doing? To discover what it is that fills the days of the principal, survey respondents were asked to rank a list of items in the order of greatest to least, as it pertained to their work.

The results show three very distinct areas of focus. 76% of respondents indicated that educational administrative work (described as policies, board and committee work, scheduling, etc.) either took up the most or the second most amount of time in their work. The next greatest area of focus was educational leadership (teacher growth,

supervision, evaluation, reviewing assessment, or curriculum) with 61% indicating this to be in the top two areas of priority. The last area that required significant time investment was the task of teaching, which 34% of principals indicated as one of the top two demands on their time. Areas that received a lesser focus included communicating with students and parents, and non-educational administrative work such as maintenance, transportation, or capital project related tasks.

It is interesting to note that 76% of the principals indicated that the task which took up most of their time was either educational administrative work or educational leadership. Much of this type of work occurs behind the scenes. It may not be what jumps to mind when those outside the role consider what it is that a principal does. While this article provides only a simple snapshot into the work, it does stir up other possible questions for consideration. Do our school communities actively seek individuals with skill sets which match the most significant tasks required of a principal? Do our school boards give deep consideration as to what work they want their principals to be busy with, and then ensure the proper structure and supports for success? Are schools creating opportunities for teachers to develop these skills prior to entering a leadership role?

### **What challenges do principals face?**

Much academic research has been done on principal retention and recruitment. A scan of some of this research suggests that the educational system, conflict with students and parents, too much red tape, gender bias, inadequate salary, and the impact on personal and family life were all deterrents to acquiring and keeping school leaders. In faith-based institutions the challenge of leading a faith-based institution where one's faith commitment, personal life, and religious practices come under scrutiny was found to be an additional deterrent. Once in the role, research shows that principals struggle with staff issues, work load, stress, isolation, lack of recognition, frustration with inability to create change, difficulty of balancing teaching and administrative work load. Canadian Reformed principals were similarly asked which factors had a negative impact on their work.

The results showed some strong correlations to the broader body of research. The factors which weighed most

heavily on Canadian Reformed principals were workload (70% indicated they either strongly or somewhat agreed that this was a negative factor), staff issues (62%), and stress (58%). There were a number of factors that indicated more moderate levels of negativity: frustrations with bureaucracy (35%), conflict with parents (42%), isolation (41%), and difficulty with being a teacher and principal (41%). More positively, only 4% were concerned about a lack of recognition, only 12% indicated insufficient compensation, and none of the principals surveyed strongly agreed with the statement that student discipline or the inability to create change were negative factors.

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### ***There is a need for recruiting and retaining more principals in our schools***

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Hopefully these results will make our school leaders aware that others in their role share very similar challenges. Hopefully, these results will also provide our school boards and communities some perspective on what keeps their school leaders awake at night. When boards are evaluating their principals, they would do well to also consider whether necessary supports are in place to ensure that their principals aren't being held back in their leadership efforts by factors such as insufficient administrative time, lack of an appropriate administrative structure, or insufficient policy and direction.

### **How can we recruit and retain more principals?**

In many ways we end this article similarly to how it began, by indicating that there is a need for recruiting and retaining more principals in our schools. When Canadian Reformed principals were asked how these areas could be improved, they highlighted a few key themes. It was interesting to see that many principals were introspective and reflected on their own responsibility to model the role in such a way as to make it appealing for others. Although there were many comments to this effect, one summarized it beautifully: "As a principal-colleague, model that you: 1. Celebrate God's goodness - as you experience it personally, in your colleagues, in your students, in the school's parents, the board and its committees. 2. Speak positively about the importance

of Reformed Christian education: Consider its impact to be a blessing. 3. Speak positively about the role you have as principal.” While the positive aspects of the work should be highlighted, a number of principals also cautioned that recruitment should articulate the reality that the role is a significant one, and would likely require a certain amount of sacrifice and a high degree of commitment.

The other consistent message regarding principal recruitment in the survey was that potential future leaders should be actively targeted before a vacancy becomes available. Teachers who show an aptitude and interest towards leadership should be encouraged to pursue further studies, and also be given opportunities to serve in informal roles. Mentoring would also be valuable; schools could do this on an internal basis, but there would also be value in collaborating with other schools to create broader exposure to different school structures and cultures for aspiring, or inexperienced school leaders.

On the topic of retention, a central theme focused on the need for clarity. Principals repeatedly stated the need for clear direction from the school board. Specifically, it was noted that the difference between the visionary role of the board, and the management and day-to-day leadership of the principal, must be understood by all parties. While written descriptions of the role of the principal were mentioned as being valuable, a few principals also

noted that there was value in having the flexibility to tailor the job to the specific skill set of the person filling the role. Expectations for professional development should be part of the job description of the principal, and there should be an intentionality as to what areas principals choose to develop further in. Other suggestions that were put forward were very practical: ensure adequate time for the role, boards should be specific and intentional in supporting professional development for the principal, create links to other schools so that principals don’t work in isolation, and ensure board training so that those responsible for the school have informed expectations for their principal.

Overall, the survey data revealed some very positive perspectives. Most principals indicated that they entered the profession for altruistic and faith-based reasons. Many spoke about the enjoyment and satisfaction their work provided, as well as the positive relationships and support they received from school boards and school communities. Survey respondents were also eager to express suggestions for how to foster even better leadership in the years to come. Hopefully the data shared provides for a little deeper understanding of the essential role of principal in our Reformed schools, and fosters discussions among the school boards, principals, staff, and school communities to continue to support a strong educational model which brings God the glory. **C**







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**Q I have a question about the process whereby a congregation decides whether or not to call a particular minister. In the case of office bearers most often there is a secret ballot. However, when it comes to calling ministers, this is often not the case.**

**There may be a show of hands, the congregation may be asked if anyone is opposed to calling a particular minister, or there may be a simple question of whether there are any objections (i.e. no vote at all). Given that neither the Belgic Confession, nor the Church Order, nor our liturgical forms seem to make any distinction between the calling to the office of elder or deacon and the calling to the office of minister, is this legitimate? Or should the calling of a minister also be done with an election, as is the case with elder or deacon?**

**A** It is indeed correct that the calling to office of elders and deacons is organized by way of “local regulations for the election of office-bearers.” It is important to have such regulations rather than organizing it differently every time or making changes in the regulations haphazardly. Normally this kind of election takes place at least once a year, so to do the same in the way as decided and regulated makes for an orderly process of election of office-bearers. The Church Order establishes some of the features of these regulations, such as “the election to any office shall take place with the cooperation of the congregation, and after preceding prayers.” This cooperation usually consists in the request to submit names, to participate in the voting, and in the approbation by the congregation. The Church Order also keeps the way open for the possibility of the nomination of just as many candidates as there are vacancies, or at the most twice as many, from which number the congregation shall choose as many as are needed.

In comparison, the process of calling a minister to the congregation does not happen often at all (or sometimes never even in some twenty-five plus years!). Yet, in this process too there are similar steps, such as requesting the congregation to submit names of ministers deemed suitable for the congregation, and in the decision-making process toward the actual calling of a minister. It is indeed at this point that the Consistory with the deacons could decide beforehand in what way the congregation will be involved. At the time of the discussion of the proposal of a particular minister the congregation could be asked to give input and feedback, or the congregation could be asked whether there are any objections to calling this minister, and as a result of this discussion the Consistory with the deacons could decide either to proceed to the calling of this minister or they could decide to withdraw their proposal, given the feedback and/or objections. When they proceed with the proposal it would be prudent and advisable, I think, for the Consistory with the deacons to have a secret ballot giving the congregation the opportunity to express whether it is in

favour or against extending the call to this minister (voting on persons is normally done by secret ballot in any and all ecclesiastical assemblies). Regarding this vote the Consistory with the deacons could also have set beforehand a ratio or percentage of the congregation that has to be in favour of the call, e.g. 2/3 or 70% or so). As per the Church Order, this vote by secret ballot should again be preceded by prayer.

So just as there are with the process toward the election of elders and deacons, there also are in the process

toward the calling of a minister certain steps that are agreed upon as per the Church Order (involvement of the congregation in submitting names and voting by secret ballot, prayer, and approbation), there also is room for variables that are established as per the discretion of the Consistory with the deacons (the number of candidates for elders and deacons, the approach to the hearing of the congregation in the case of the calling of a minister: asking for feedback, or for objections, and setting a required minimum of 2/3 or 70% or so).



**Is there something  
you've been wanting to know?  
An answer you've been looking for?**

**Ask us a question!**

**Please direct questions to Rev. W. denHollander  
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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Letter to the Editor

In his letter to the editor in *Clarion*, Vol. 65, No. 13, July 1, 2016, Br. David Schriemer correctly observes that the topic of Women's voting for office bearers has consumed our broader assemblies for decades. And it is his expectation that the decision of Synod Dunnville 2016 will not put the matter to rest either.

He then goes on to explain why – in his opinion – this is such a difficult topic that does not seem to go away. I quote from his letter: “Quite simply, our church order is failing us in this matter. We appeal to a document that is

very vague on the topic. Whether by design or omission, Article 3 provides very little guidance on how to resolve the matter.”

I can appreciate Br. Schriemer's efforts to move the discussion forward, but I am puzzled by his assumption that the vagueness of Article 3 of the Church Order is an obstacle here. I do not believe



that the Church Order is failing us in this matter. In fact, Article 3 is not vague at all. It is clear, straightforward and does not need to be adjusted or improved.

Here is why. In connection with the calling to office Article 3 uses the word “congregation” five times. But there is something inexplicable with the manner in which some of us interpret the word “congregation.” In four out of these five cases there has never been any misunderstanding or any need for clarification as to what this word means. In four out of these five cases no one has ever questioned that the word “congregation” simply refers to all the (communicant) members of the congregation.

So, why is it then that suddenly, when Article 3 mentions the congregation for the fourth time, it becomes vague or unclear? Why is it that in the phrase: “the congregation shall choose as many as are needed from the number of candidates presented. . . ,” the word “congregation” must or could or should be interpreted as “only the male communicant members”? At least – according to some.

Nowhere in Article 3 is it implied that here, in this phrase, the word “congregation” does not have the same simple, straightforward meaning as it has throughout the rest of this article: “all (communicant) members.” And I have never heard a good argument that compels us to read it differently.

It is indeed true – the question whether the sisters of the congregation should participate in voting for office bearers triggers ongoing debate in our churches. But let’s not blame the Church Order for this. Revising Article 3 will not fix the problem and end the debate. If it would only be that simple! Efforts to come to such a revision in one direction or another would most likely stir up new and more controversy.

But this means that Br. Schriemer’s question is still without an answer. “Why is it that the topic of women’s voting is so difficult?” It’s a good question.

I have come to the conclusion that the main reason for this difficulty is that emotional arguments often play an important role in the discussion. We should not dismiss these offhand as irrelevant or invalid, but the problem is that emotional arguments cannot be addressed or countered by rational biblical reasoning, synodical considerations and decisions, or by clarifying the rules in the Church Order.


Will the decision of Synod Dunnville 2016 in this matter end the debate? Probably not. But the good thing about this decision is that it brings the debate back to where it belongs: in the local church. The emphasis in the decision of Synod Burlington 2010, which has been confirmed by Synod Dunnville 2016, is on the rule in Article 3 of the Church Order, that the election of office bearers must take place *according to the regulations adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons*.

This reinforces the idea that the debate about women’s voting for office bearers – if needed – must take place in the local church. In that setting the consistory, which knows the congregation, can guide and facilitate this discussion, driven by pastoral love for all the members, interacting also with the emotional aspects. This is something synod decisions can never accomplish.

Scriptural wisdom, patience, and understanding may then lead to a decision to either implement women’s voting, or not, or not yet. As long as it serves the mutual trust and the unity and harmony in the congregation, and the glory of God.

In that sense there are some remarkable similarities with the discussions in many of our churches, not that long ago, about the use of individual cups versus the common cup at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Jan DeGelder

Pastor emeritus of the Flamborough CanRC 

*Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.*

*Submissions need to be less than one page in length.*