

Guidelines for the proper submission of reports to synod

Report approved by Synod 2009 of the Free Reformed Churches of North America

At various junctures during Synod 2007, concerns were raised in the discussion regarding the form and process behind various documents that had been submitted to Synod by consistories and committees. At the conclusion of the Synod, it is reported that “Pastor Schouls is appointed to make some templates for Synodical reports as well as Article 41 reports submitted by committees and consistories.” (Article 53). Rev. Schouls did prepare a few templates in response to a request that was made of him during the year. Given that no formal report had been made on these matters, Synod 2008 assigned the Church Order subcommittee “to follow up on these matters.” (cf. 2008 Acts, Article 8, p. 7).

1. Article 41 Reports

Three concerns have been raised in conjunction with Article 41 reports:

- i. The appropriate form of these reports and approval required before their presentation;
- ii. The content of these reports;
- iii. The relationship of these reports to Article 44 reports and church visitation.

Article 41 reports are ecclesiastical reports that ought only to be submitted after having been appropriately approved by the local consistory at a meeting (whose minutes should reflect this.) The reports ought to be dated and officially addressed. Although it is understandable that they are prepared and signed by the clerk, they are formally the report of one ecclesiastical body to another and hence they need to be presented (for eg. on official letterhead) and addressed to reflect that reality. It should be kept in mind that these reports are submitted and kept as part of the archives.

The content of Article 41 reports ought to include whether “consistory meetings are held, if the church discipline is exercised, if the poor are cared for, and lastly if they need the judgment or help of the Classis for the proper government of their church.” The concern was raised that some of these reports have become someone formalistic, reporting on the outward activities (their essence amounting to “we were able to worship x times last year, the consistory met y times, our membership rolls are at z, and there are no matters for which we seek Synod’s advice) but not speaking to the spiritual essence of the congregational life.

It is difficult to develop templates that will address the concerns. Instead, drafters of these reports should be mindful of the historical and biblical reasons for these reports. As Monsma and VanDellen helpfully point out, “The Reformed position that supervision in the Church of Christ should be mutual in character certainly has the whole tenor of the New Testament Scriptures for its support, and also finds its parallel in Romans 15:14 “...able also to admonish one another.”¹

That this is better accomplished by making a greater priority of church visitation is a point that has been repeatedly raised on the floor of Synod. The presentation of Article 41 and 44 reports has become more confused in recent years since some are given at the Combined Consistory meetings and there has been a lack of clarity regarding what was expected at Synod. The proposal adopted by Synod in 2006 clearly places Article 41 and 44 reports as matters to be dealt with at the combined consistory level whereas Synod should only deal with “matters arising out of Church Visitation reports which Combined Consistories believe merit the attention of all the churches at Synod.” (2006 Acts, p. 125). This would imply that rather than receiving reports from the individual churches or church visitors, Synod ought to receive a summary report from the clerk of the Combined Consistories highlighting those matters which require Synod’s attention. Given that our practices have not followed this decision, the entire matter requires clarification as part of any decision as to how the Combined Consistories will function in the future.

2. Overtures

¹ VanDellen and Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1965), p. 169.

An overture is a request by a consistory for Synod to take a particular action. An overture ought to be formally drafted and addressed to the synod. In its opening paragraph, it ought to briefly provide the context or circumstances which give rise to the request and then, in precise language that can be incorporated into a Synodical motion, make the request of Synod.

The balance of the overture should contain the necessary background and arguments which the consistory is submitting in support of its request. The document ought to make reference to any previous Synodical decisions that impact on the matter being raised, make clear why this is a matter which appropriately falls within synod's jurisdiction, and provide enough detail and background to the argumentation that allow other churches to clearly discern the background for the request so that they can appropriately prepare themselves for Synod's consideration of the matter.

3. Committee Reports

The only reference to committees in our Church Order is in Article 49, which is not operative in the FRCNA because it refers to Particular Synods which, due to our size, we do not have. The language, nonetheless is instructive. Committees (referred to as deputies in the article) are appointed "to execute everything ordained by Synod." They are to provide "help...in order that the proper unity, order and soundness of doctrine may be maintained and established." They are to "keep proper record of all their activities to report thereof to Synod, and if it be demanded, give reasons." In the case of disputes, it is clear that the committees do not carry the authority of synod but rather, that the specific matter in dispute needs to be brought back to the Synod for resolution.

The carrying out of synodical responsibilities through a series of standing committees has been practiced throughout FRC history and functions well and efficiently. Standing committees all have clear mandates that have been approved by Synod and are in the Church Order Supplements. A great deal of work gets carried out through these synodical committees and the bulk of Synod's agenda is spent dealing with the various committee reports. The concerns that have been voiced at Synod regard not so much the form of these reports, but rather underlying assumptions about the committee's authority and its relationship to Synod.

The argument has been made that our system has evolved such that committees sometimes go beyond their "execution" role and that a "committee caucus model" is in the early process of evolving. It is helpful to remind ourselves of the four elements that belong to decision-making in any institution: the legislative part (the establishment of basic policy); the executive part (the responsibility to carry out a decision); an administrative part (following through on the day-to-day details of the decision); and a judicial part (making a decision regarding any disputes that may arise in the process.) In Reformed ecclesiology, the legislative and judicial roles must be carried out by office bearers in ecclesiastical settings. This has implications for how we view and what we should expect of our synodical committees.

In practical terms and addressing the concerns that committees at times may go too far in proposing matters to synod or using their reports to "sell" their recommendations, the following guidelines should be kept in mind.

- Committees should be clear to explicitly frame their reports in the context of their mandates or specific assignments from Synod. Committees are executors of policy and therefore should always remind themselves and the body of the decisions which they are executing.
- Committees are servants of Synod and exist to assist, expedite and inform decision-making, not steer it. There is the perception that has sometimes arisen that committee members are bound at Synod to follow the "committee line" and not speak against a proposal if they were part of the committee that has recommended it. This is mistaken. Delegates at Synod are there as office-bearers sent by their church to a deliberative assembly. Notions of "caucus solidarity" in a synodical assembly are not compatible with Reformed ecclesiology.
- It has become the practice of committees to conclude their report with a list of recommendations, which is very helpful to the synodical process. For the most part, where these recommendations involve straightforward "execution" matters and so there is no issue. However, when the recommendation involves a matter on which there has been some dispute, it would be more appropriate and consistent with the direction suggested by Article 49 that committees summarize the arguments pro and con and not seek to steer Synod's decision with a recommendation, but rather provide synod the necessary background and information so that Synod can make the decision. Although, especially when the matter involves persons or sensitive matters, there is an

understandable reluctance to have details generally known in the larger body, it is inappropriate for a committee to withhold information out of sensitivity if that information is relevant to the decision which synod is being asked to make. Committees have an executive and administrative task, not a legislative or judicial one.

- Committee members have right (even the responsibility) to draft and submit minority report when substantive differences arise (“After a thorough discussion of the issues, the committee could not come to a consensus on the matter and therefore we are submitting both a majority and minority report regarding this matter.”)
- On occasions, this “committee caucus model” has evolved to an even further generation whereby the executive of a committee is considered to have the authority to make decisions of behalf of the committee. Committee reports to synod should have the signoff of the entire committee and not just the executive. Executives are to serve the body by shaping and preparing agendas and facilitating the conduct of the committees business, not to serve as an alternative decision-making structure.

4. Recommendations

- i. That Synod accept this report “in principle” as a completion of the mandate given to the Church Order Subcommittee “to follow up on these matters;”
- ii. That the Church Order Committee be instructed execute this decision by amending Supplement C-2 (Guidelines for Synodical Procedure) of the Church Order as necessary to incorporate the content of this report.