

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA
SYNOD ESCONDIDO 2024
PRESS RELEASE – THURSDAY, JUNE 20, 2024

The third full day of Synod Escondido of the URCNA was packed with productivity.

The day began with singing and a brief meditation on Romans 8:31-39 by Rev. John van Eyk, who reminded the assembly of God's sovereign care for His people, as the saving God who abides with His people to bless them. He called the delegates to focus on the great love of God, then led the assembly in prayer.

Rev. Anup Hiwale brought greetings to the Synod on behalf of the Evangelical Reformed Church of India. Rev. Hiwale described the recent growth of persecution in India, alongside the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel. Despite some discouragements, church planting efforts are being blessed. Rev. Hiwale warned the brothers against the growing threat of Hinduism in the U.S. and Canada. He also requested prayer and encouragement from the URCNA, expressing gratitude for the support the ERCI receives. Rev. Mark Vander Pol responded, leading the assembly in prayer for the Evangelical Reformed Church of India.

The assembly started its agenda matters for the day with a focus on the URCNA website. The Website Oversight Committee was commended for its work and encouraged to continue its labors to maintain and to overhaul the federational website. Mr. Gary Fisher, Webmaster for the URCNA, was reappointed with thanks for his labors.

Synod next turned to the report of its Study Committee on Digital Media and Corporate Worship. This report alerted the churches to the implications of using digital media for corporate worship. It provided pastoral advice to aid the churches in utilizing digital tools for outreach and for help in exceptional cases, while emphasizing the importance of embodied worship and the sacramental nature of in-person gatherings. The report was recommended to the churches for study, and its pastoral advice was adopted, with appreciation expressed for its wise counsel. Both the pastoral advice and the report itself will be placed on the URC's website, and the report will be distributed to the consistories for further study and use.

Shifting gears to look at missions matters, the assembly considered and adopted a proposal to create the position of Home Missions Clerk. Serving in a part-time capacity, this clerk will be charged with assisting the Synodical Committee for Home Missions in its website and social media use, distributing newsletters and communications, sharing prayer requests for home missionaries, and otherwise assisting the committee in promoting home missions within the URCNA.

A proposed change to the Church Order was next up, with the Synod rejecting a proposal that would have given ministerial candidates at least eight weeks after being declared a candidate to answer any calls extended during that time.

However, Synod approved a proposal to ensure that every committee include a statement of its synodical mandate in reports submitted to synods. This was done to

ensure that delegates understand the stated purpose and goals of the committee, while discouraging committees from straying beyond their mandates.

Synod also agreed to dissolve the appointment of an Oversight Consistory for the Website Oversight Committee. Established in 2007, this role was filled from the start by the Grace URC of Waupun, WI, which provided guidance and accountability especially needed during the years of establishing the URCNA's web presence. In recent years, it has become clear that this close level of oversight is no longer needed, so the Synod agreed to bring this position to an end.

After the morning break, the brothers heard from Rev. Richard Vander Vaart, who brought greetings on behalf of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. He reviewed the recent Synod of the ARP, including a declaration that Freemasonry is incompatible with church membership, among other challenging matters. He urged prayer for wisdom and blessing upon the ARP in these matters. He also noted that work has begun to establish a Canadian ARP. Rev. Mitchell Persaud responded, leading the delegates in prayer for the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

URCNA Foreign Missions Coordinator Rev. Rich Bout spoke to the assembly about the work of missions within the federation. He highlighted the importance of the weekly missionary prayer requests, which are intended to be included in church bulletins; as well as the missionary prayer map, a new version of which recently was distributed. Delegates heard about some of the mission works Rev. Bout has recently visited, including those in Turkey and Mexico. Showing a brief video, Rev. Bout highlighted the value of the four-week Cross Cultural Mission Training program, the second session of which recently concluded in Mexico.

Turning back to the Church Order, the assembly took up a pair of overtures addressing the appeals process in the URCNA. These overtures both sought to resolve a perceived conflict between a Church Order provision and a provision of one of its appendices, although they did so in contrary ways. After extensive deliberation, the brothers recommitted this matter to the advisory committee for further consideration.

Prior to lunch, Rev. Dan Borvan read from Psalm 68, led the assembly in prayer, and called for the singing of Psalm 100.

Over the lunch break, delegates enjoyed the opportunity to hear from Christopher Yuan, a Bible professor and author. Dr. Yuan described his journey out of homosexuality and into Christianity, emphasizing that the alternative to sexual brokenness is holiness through Christ. The presentation offered a strong reminder of God's power to redeem.

Following lunch, Rev. Brian Vos led the assembly in considering Psalm 90, recognizing God's steadfast love and care for His people. Leading the delegates in prayer for God's guidance, he then called them to sing praise to the Lord.

Before returning to business matters, the chairman recognized and expressed appreciation for several URCNA ministers who are on the cusp of emeritation. The assembly echoed the chairman's words of appreciation in its applause.

Rev. Dr. Bryan Estelle then brought greetings to Synod Escondido on behalf of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He rejoiced in the joint commitment of the URCNA and the OPC to caring for the flock and noted our cooperating in publishing the *Trinity*

Psalter Hymnal. He requested prayer for the members, deliberations, and decisions of the OPC General Assembly, especially concerning challenging matters that will require humility and a just spirit; and he sought prayer for more laborers for the work of missions. Rev. Brian Vos responded and led the Synod in prayer for the OPC.

Returning to agenda matters, the assembly received a report from the Stated Clerk of the Federation, Rev. Ralph Pontier, for whose service gratitude was expressed. Several amendments to the URC's *Regulations for Synodical Procedure* which were recommended by the Stated Clerk also were adopted. These changes aimed to ensure that the *Regulations* are consistent with prior synodical decisions and past practice.

Synod next tackled a few proposals relating to the URCNA's synodical assemblies. The Synod approved an overture seeking to establish a synodical organizing committee. The goal of this action is to ease the burden of hosting synod.

The assembly declined an overture that would have established a synodical travel fund. This overture sought a way to share travel costs for synod among the churches.

Turning next to the ecumenical work of the federation, Synod – noting that the classes have been faithful in appointing representatives to serve on the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity – agreed to discontinue the appointing of at-large members of the committee, expressing thanks for its outgoing members-at-large, Rev. William Boekestein and Rev. Calvin Tuininga. The assembly also noted several options to potentially deepen the relationship between the URCNA and the Canadian & American Reformed Churches. Synod took up the committee's urging to remind the churches of our mutual responsibility to engage one another in our ecumenical task through prayer, classical dialogue, local efforts, and expressions of concerns.

Following an afternoon break, Rev. Steven Vande Velde brought greetings on behalf of the Canadian & American Reformed Churches. Rev. Vande Velde noted the need to develop our mutual relationship by pursuing familiarity actively, rather than relying on past impressions and assumptions. He noted some of the struggles that the CanRC has endured, urging candid discussion of hard matters, so that our people might gain a deeper and more honest love for one another. Rev. Jason Vander Horst responded, leading the assembly in prayer for the Canadian & American Reformed Churches.

Returning to business matters, Synod took up the report of its Study Committee on Human Sexuality. This committee sought to address the Biblical teaching concerning human sexuality, with a focus on the nature of sin, temptation, and repentance. After spending some time polishing the committee's report, the delegates commended the it to the churches for study. They also adopted as pastoral advice two sections of the report: "Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality" and "Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality." These will be published on the federation's website, that this advice might be readily accessible to the churches. Rev. Simon Lievaart led the assembly in prayer, thanking the Lord for His Word and asking Him to bless this application of the Word, both as a witness to the world and as a help to the churches.

Having completed this weighty matter, Synod then turned to the report of the Canadian Board of Directors. Noting the desire of Mrs. Pam Hessels to conclude her work as Canadian Treasurer – which position she has held for about 20 years – the

assembly rose in applause to express its appreciation. The Synod then made appointments to the Canadian Board of the URCNA, while also confirming the appointment of Mr. Johnathan Fennema as Canadian Treasurer.

Turning to the United States Board of Directors, the Synod made appointments to the board. It then approved a proposal from the U.S. Board of Directors to establish a Litigation Fund. This fund would serve essentially as self-insurance to prepare for the costs of defending against litigation filed against the federation. The brothers also voted to ratify restated Articles of Incorporation and amended By-Laws for the U.S. Board.

Having come to the end of the afternoon, the assembly was led in closing devotions by Rev. Quentin Falkena. Rev. Falkena read Psalm 73, pointing out the privilege that belongs to Christians in being able to draw near to God, knowing that we belong to Him. Having prayed, the brothers closed with song.

After supper, Rev. Nick Smith led the Synod in singing Psalm 42 and read Revelation 5:1-10. He pointed out the victory of Christ over the darkness of this age, whom we as Christians reflect to the world. He then led the assembly in prayer.

Turning to matters of business with a financial angle, Synod approved an overture seeking to establish a study committee to determine the feasibility of establishing a building loan fund for the URCNA. The brothers then approved financial reports from the past two years, expressing gratitude to the U.S. and Canadian treasurers for their diligent work.

Synod then considered the second of two overtures that requested numerous relatively minor changes to our church order, most aimed at improving the internal consistency of the language of the URCNA Church Order. Painstakingly plodding through 40 of the 65 proposed changes, Synod approved most of them (although they will need to be ratified by two-thirds of the consistories of the federation).

Rounding out the day, Rev. Jaren Beaird read John 1:29-36, commending the example of John the Baptist, who was willing to become less so that Christ might be revealed. He then led the assembly in a closing prayer and song.

Synod Escondido recessed until 8 a.m.