

Press Release of Synod Darling Downs 2024 of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia

June 17 - 26, 2024

Opening of Synod

Although it was their first time ever, the Free Reformed Church of Darling Downs did a stellar job of hosting the 29th synod of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. For Darling Downs, the preparations began well before the day of Synod arrived as they made arrangements for the necessary infrastructure, arranged billeting for delegates, organised meals and other catering, planned some special outings for a bit of relaxation on the Saturday, put together the Synod agenda, and a host of other things besides. A special touch was the gift of a lovely pen for each of the delegates, with the logo of Darling Downs' church and "Synod 2024" printed on it.

Synod was opened by Rev. R. den Boer, who gave a meditation on Psalm 48 in which he spoke about God's greatness in the Church. Then, after calling upon the name of the Lord in prayer, Rev. den Boer and elder E. Heerema invited the Synod delegates to take their seat at the table.

Delegates and Officers

Rev. den Boer confirmed that the church of Darling Downs had examined the previously submitted credentials and that they were found to be in good order. All the primary delegates bar one from the three classes were present:

<i>Classis Central</i>	<i>Classis North</i>	<i>Classis South West</i>
Rev. AC Pol	Rev. A Souman	Rev. A Hagg
Rev. D Poppe	Rev. S 't Hart	Rev. R Pot
Rev. C Vermeulen	Rev. Anson van Delden	Rev. A Witten
Elder Roy Dekker	Elder P Kroeze	Elder P Witten
Elder W 't Hart	Elder W Spyker	Elder H Hamelink
Elder H Terpstra	Elder R vanderLinde	Elder D van Duyn (alternate)

The convening church then conducted a series of votes to select the moderamen, or officers, of synod. Rev. D Poppe was elected as chairman, Rev. S. 't Hart as vice-chairman, Elder W. Spyker as first clerk, and Rev. C. Vermeulen as second clerk. Sr. Kina vanDuyn, who perhaps has attended more synods than any of the delegates, was appointed as administrative assistant. Her work as well as the work of brs. Eric 't Hart & Alan van der Wal (deputies for Infrastructure) was greatly appreciated and aided the smooth running of Synod.

The chairman declared synod to be duly constituted and then asked the delegates to rise to express their agreement with the Three Forms of Unity. Synod was then adjourned to the following day, when work began in earnest.

Foreign Churches

A highlight of every Synod is the presence and greetings of foreign delegates who come as representatives of churches with whom the FRCA has contact. This time we welcomed delegates from the Canadian Reformed Churches, First Evangelical Reformed Church of Singapore, Free Reformed Churches of South Africa, Kosin Presbyterian Church of Korea, and the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. In addition we had representatives from two churches with whom we have official contact, the GGRC and United Reformed Churches of

North America. Each of these brothers gave greetings from their churches. These greetings were responded to by an Australian Synod delegate and their churches brought before the Lord in prayer.

Sister Churches

i. Canadian Reformed Churches

The Canadian Reformed Churches were represented by Rev. C. van Dam and br. H. de Boer. A fun fact is that Rev. van Dam graduated from the CRTS in the same year (1997) as Rev. Poppe, Rev. Pot and Rev. 't Hart. In his official greetings, Rev. van Dam reflected on the close bond between our respective churches and members. Thanks were mentioned with respect to our support for the CRTS and for the fact that Rev. R. Bredenhof, a minister from the FRCA, could be appointed as professor. Mention was also made of the CanRC's various interchurch relationships, and special mention was made of their growing relationship with the Kosin Presbyterian Church of Korea. In obedience to instructions that came from his own Synod, Rev. van Dam expressed the strong desire that we might join them at the International Conference of Reformed Churches.

Synod reflected on the strong relationship we have with our Canadian brethren, gave thanks for it, and agreed to continue our sister relationship.

ii. First Evangelical Reformed Church - Singapore

The FERC of Singapore was represented by Rev. Mark Chen & Br. Jonathan Yap. In his greetings to us Rev. Chen reflected on the fruitfulness of our sister relationship. Four ministers of the FRCA have served in various capacities in the FERC over the past few years, and their two ministers have both ministered in the FRCA. Collaboration with respect to mission is also happening. With respect to interchurch relations, in 2021 the FERC commenced exploring corresponding relations with the Heritage Reformed Congregations (North America) and the United Reformed Churches of Myanmar. These relations were formalised in June 2024.

Since the FERC is a single congregation, our rules for sister churches don't quite match their situation, and we've previously reached an agreement with them on how our relationship can be maintained. Synod decided to get the deputies to review that agreement with the FERC to ensure that it continues to meet their needs, desires and expectations.

iii. Free Reformed Churches of South Africa

The FRCSA was represented by Br. G. Hagg who gave us warm greetings from the South African churches. Appreciation was expressed for the ongoing support our churches provide to South Africa, where our blessings can be used to supply their needs. Along with the CanRC, as well as the KPCK, the FRCSA encouraged us to re-engage with the ICRC.

Synod agreed to continue our relationship with the FRCSA, and that the FRCA deputies would coordinate gifts from the churches to support the various needs currently experienced by our South African brethren.

iv. Indonesian Churches

The FRCA has sister relations with the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI) and formal contact with the Calvinist Reformed Churches (GGRC) as well as the Reformed Churches in Indonesia – Timor (GGRI-T). Br. Solomon Dethan gave greetings on behalf of the GGRC and reflected on the fact that we've had a relationship with them since 1991. A letter of greeting was received from the GGRI-Timor.

Synod decided to continue our sister relationship with the GGRI. Synod was thankful to hear of developments with respect to their seminary in Waimarang and agreed to support their seminary's new building plans. Appreciation was also expressed for the work of Rev. Arthur van Delden who has been working with the seminary.

Sister relations will continue with the GGRI. With respect to the GGRC and GGRI-T, deputies are tasked with coming with recommendations to our next Synod as to what our relationship should be with these churches into the future.

v. Reformed Churches of New Zealand

Rev. Dr. Paul Archbald is no stranger to our synods and he was warmly welcomed as the RCNZ's representative. Rev. Archbald reflected on our growing ties, evident in things such as church members moving back and forth, retired ministers serving in each other's countries, and cooperation in mission in PNG. Almost a third of the RCNZ's churches are vacant and so they were thankful to recently receive a minister who had originated from the FRCA and recently graduated from the CRTS.

It was decided to continue our relationship with the RCNZ and to mandate deputies to foster opportunities for further interaction between the RCNZ and the FRCA, including pulpit exchanges, conference/workshop presentations, meeting with deputies, and mutual assistance with vacant churches.

vi. Kosin Presbyterian Church of Korea.

Synod was honoured with the presence of Rev. Dr. JH Kim of the KPCK who gave greetings to us on behalf of the current Moderator of our Korean sister church. He told us that the late Dr. Soon Gil Hur had written numerous articles of his experiences in the FRC Kelmscott, writing about the theological, pastoral, and everyday lives of people in our churches. These articles were encouraging to them as they considered their own reformed faith and life in their Korean context. The hope was expressed that our relationship with them might grow for the edification of both church federations.

Synod was well served by a detailed deputies' report on the KPCK, giving Synod confidence to acknowledge their faithfulness and to maintain our sister relationship. In response to a letter from one of the churches, Synod agreed to mandate deputies to investigate the Kosin Presbyterian Church of Oceania (KPCO), a daughter church of the KPCK that has many churches in Australia and the surrounding region. It was observed that the KPCO has 3 congregations in Perth, and that potential contact appears meaningful.

Contact Churches

i. DGK & GKN

Contact continues with two churches in the Netherlands, De Gereformeerde Kerken (DGK) and Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland (GKN). The GKN expressed their regret for being unable to attend our Synod. Both the GKN and the DGK have indicated their desire to enter into sister relations with the FRCA. It was exciting to hear that these churches are in the process of merging into one federation and we are hopeful to be able to enter a sister relationship with this merged church sometime in the future.

ii. EPC & SPC

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church and Southern Presbyterian church are two small federations based in Tasmania. Contact has been established with both, but sadly the EPC

is going through some internal challenges right now. It was decided to pause formal contact with the EPC for now and to continue contact with the SPC. We pray that these contacts might continue to strengthen.

iii. OPC

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church sent us greetings by way of a letter. They expressed their regrets for being unable to attend our Synod on account of the timing of their General Assembly overlapping our Synod. The OPC were thankful to be joining us and the CanRC in visiting the KPCK once every three years on a rotating basis.

Synod decided to maintain contact with the OPC and to mandate deputies to use the suggested Guidelines for Church Relations given by Synod Darling Downs 2024 to give direction to Synod 2027 regarding this relationship.

iv. URCNA

Br. G. Swets gave greetings on behalf of the United Reformed Churches of North America. He told us that the URCNA is a federation of about 25,000 members and 140 churches spread throughout Canada and the United States. With respect to their interchurch relations, they have a two-phase approach towards establishing relationships with other churches. The focus of Phase 1 is to study matters of mutual concern and to exchange information and publications, and this is how they are approaching the FRCA at this point of time. Synod responded to this warmly, giving a mandate to deputies that effectively matched the intentions of the URCNA's Phase 1 contact.

Interchurch Relationships

Synod Albany 2021 art. 48 mandated deputies to develop and propose to synod guidelines with whom, how, and when to establish sister church relationships. As part of this mandate, deputies were to investigate whether it can ever be legitimate or beneficial to have two sister churches in one country including cases when those two churches are unable to find unity, and to consider the merits of an alternate form of ecclesiastical contact with churches of Reformed confession with whom a sister church relationship is not immediately feasible. Synod Darling Downs agreed with the recommendations of deputies and decided to adopt a new category of relationship, that of Ecclesiastical Contact, designed for churches whom the FRCA have recognised as true and faithful but for whom the relationship, although meaningful, is deemed not sufficiently manageable to establish a sister church relationship at this point of time. On account of the dynamic nature of Christ's church gathering work, it was also seen legitimate to pursue a relationship with a church in geographic proximity of a recognized true and faithful church, unless it is unwilling or shows no evidence of seeking and expressing unity with that church.

After due consideration Synod also decided to send observers to the next two ICRC meetings.

Training for the Ministry

The FRCA has been richly blessed by our partnership with the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS), and this was emphasised in various ways on the floor of Synod. At the same time, we are looking forward towards to having our own seminary in the future, should that prove to be feasible. Synod decided to keep working towards an Australian Reformed Theological Seminary (ARTS), with a long-term goal in mind. Deputies were mandated to keep working on this and to further engage our churches in Australia as well as churches in the Asia Pacific Region about this.

Support for the CRTS is continuing, with our financial commitments matching that of the CanRC. Synod modified rules surrounding the Pastoral Training Program and adopted new guidelines for a vicariate program. This Vicariate program is open to all Australian students going to CRTS, offering them a 12 month internship following their seminary studies.

Appeal

Synod dealt with an appeal concerning various decisions of Synod Albany 2021 regarding an alleged partiality of some of those voting. It was alleged that Synod Albany erred when it did not remove the privilege of discussion and voting from delegates who had prior involvement in those decisions. Although the appeal was denied it was helpful for Synod to carefully reflect on the biblical norm of impartiality in decision making.

Proposals from the churches

i. Safe Church Standing Committee. On account of the growing awareness in our churches for the need to be pro-active when it comes to preventing and addressing child abuse, a proposal came via Classis North for Synod to appoint a standing committee to establish and maintain a Safe Church program in the FRCA. Most, if not all, of our churches do have policies regarding this but it was felt that a consistent federation-wide abuse policy which complies with both the legal requirements and our spiritual needs was warranted. Synod recognised the value of this but ultimately decided not to adopt the proposal. This decision would not prevent churches from collaborating on safe church policies etc outside of a synod mandate.

ii. Ecclesiastical feast days. The FRCA Church Order stipulates that church services be held on days other than Sunday on Christmas Day, Good Friday and Ascension Day. It was proposed that this Church Order article 65 be re-worded to say that the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit be commemorated “in the manner decided upon by the consistory”. Synod discussed this at length but decided not to adopt the changed wording to the C.O as the proposal did not adequately demonstrate the need for such change (cf. C.O art 81).

Closing of Synod

Synod Darling Downs’ agenda had a number of weighty and significant matters to be discussed, and each delegate came with his own convictions and context. At times these discussions were difficult as strongly held views were expressed, but a brotherly spirit prevailed. In his concluding remarks Rev. Poppe expressed his thankfulness for the manner in which Synod could be conducted with the prayer that the decisions made might be found to be pleasing to our Lord and for the wellbeing of His Church.

Rev. Stephen ‘t Hart
(Vice-chairman during Synod Darling Downs 2024)