

Guidelines for Church Relations

A: Criteria for Church Relations

1. In our contact with another church, each of the three following criteria must be met to determine whether or not to proceed to a sister church relationship:

- a) **Faithful.** The church must be a true church faithful to Scriptures and bearing the marks of the church (BC Art 29):

"The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head."

This criterion is mandatory for all church relationships.

- b) **Meaningful.** A church relationship must have a purpose and substance to it. The following identifies such purposes:

- i. Catholic. The first purpose is, of course, to maintain the unity of faith and recognise the catholicity of the church. It is an expression of putting into practice Christ's high priestly prayer of John 17, Eph 4:4 and Art 27 BC.
- ii. Historical. Historical church relations involve those that we have recognised from across the world with whom we share a common history or with whom we have had relations over a considerably long period of time. We have come to know these brothers and sisters and share in the struggle of faith to live before the Lord, show thankfulness for the grace and unity in Christ, and together fight the secularity in the world around us. As we have grown over many years and decades in getting to know and interact with our historic sister churches, we build up a responsibility and obligation to these brothers and sisters in mutual assistance in the struggle of faith. These are not contacts that are broken off lightly or easily.
- iii. Need for mutual assistance. There may be requests for assistance from other churches or we may require assistance from other churches. These are opportunities that need to be examined to decide if a church relationship provides an appropriate foundation to respond to and assist in such requests. Kamphuis (p. 204) comments that churches need to bear each other's burdens and assist each other, not just when asked to help.
- iv. Ability to communicate. Being able to communicate, and that on a regular basis, is important to be engage with each other and be mutually active in maintaining the rules for relations. Such interaction should preferably be face to face and include visits, meetings, sharing information with each other and informing our own churches. Are we able to maintain a reasonable level of communication? If there are differences in language and culture, is it possible to translate written material and have effective communication in meetings to engage and understand each other?
- v. Level of interaction. What is the current level of interaction of our churches and members with these churches? Is there regular contact between individual churches in either bond? Are there activities happening between the churches at the local level? Are there interactions among individual members including visiting, attending worship services, and sharing in common struggles and challenges of faith? Even if only one or a few local churches or a few individuals are engaged, this small level of interaction may be a reason to have a church relationship that is maintained by the FRCA bond.
- vi. Cooperation in mission. There may be churches with whom we may come into contact via mission work, conduct mission work in regions near our own mission fields, or are the result of mission work that we have been involved with in the past. Church relations with them may be beneficial in

order to work together with them on the mission fields and/or help each other for mutual encouragement and exhortation.

- vii. Church polity. Although different churches have different histories that have led to differences in church polity and practice, the need to mutually struggle to maintain our reformed heritage and build on how the Lord has guided and led His church through church history is important. We need to stand on Scripture and what our church fathers have fought for to maintain a true and faithful church of Christ. Differences in church policy such as reformed and Presbyterian as long as they are based on the foundation of Scripture and reformed confessions, need not be an obstacle to unity. There may need to be patience and encouragement to acknowledge that there are differences in history and practice and we need to learn from each other and grow. With churches of similar polity and worship to our own, our relationship with them may be deeper and more meaningful as a result.
- viii. Worldwide. It is worthwhile to have sister-churches in various regions e.g., Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, to better understand the needs of each part of the world, support missions and have a faithful church through whom aid can be sent in the event of a crisis. This criterion would be particularly used for churches in regions where we have no existing church relationships.

c) **Manageable**. When moving forward in a church relation, we must be able to manage the relationship and do justice to the rules for maintaining the relationship. This may involve the following aspects:

- i. Geographical proximity. It is important to maintain a good and appropriate level of contact in a church relationship and this involves interaction and visits on a regular basis. Although there are very good virtual and online means for communicating, there is no substitute or better interaction than through direct face to face communication. Churches closer together geographically or in the same country are better able to manage contacts and communications than churches more distant or dispersed geographically. For example, note that our FRCA bond of churches is geographically located in one country, Australia, albeit some 1000s of kilometres apart from west to east. As another example, note how the contact of FRCA with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Tasmania lies essentially with the churches in Tasmania and not via the other churches located elsewhere in Australia. Our focus should start locally in our own country, before going further abroad in the Asia/Pacific region, and then in the rest of the world.
- ii. Language and culture. Where there are differences in language and/or culture, there may be much work required in translating materials and speeches or researching history and culture to understand, be informed and build a better appreciation and awareness of each other within a church relationship. Are we able to put in sufficient time and effort with appropriate tools and persons to manage this relation?
- iii. Ability to resource. Are we able, as a relatively small bond of churches, able to resource the time and effort needed to maintain our church relationships and even increase the number of church relations? We must be mindful that our ministers and elders need to, in the first place, spend sufficient time and energy in their own congregations and in our own bond of churches. Many relations mean many trips, visits, meetings, readings and writings for which we must ensure we have sufficient attention, time and energy in order to do justice to our relationship according to the rules.

B: Ecclesiastical Contact

- a. Is extended to a church 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.
- b. Is maintained on an ongoing basis by the FRCA by having some contact directly with the church, meeting them at synods or meetings of our churches or sister churches, or using other opportunities for contact that are available to us. This level of interaction would be substantially less than that for churches who are in a sister church relationship with us.
- c. Can be changed to a sister church relationship should the FRCA deem that the relationship is sufficiently meaningful and manageable.

Rules for Exercising Ecclesiastical Contact

1. Ecclesiastical contact shall be used, as much as opportunity for contact arises, to be informed about one another and grow in the understanding of each other, assisting, encouraging and exhorting one another to live as churches of God in this world.
2. The churches shall inform each other of the decisions taken by their broadest assemblies, if possible by sending each other their Acts or their Minutes and, otherwise, at least by sending the decisions relevant to their respective churches (if possible in translation).
3. The churches shall acknowledge one another's attestations and additionally interview these members in their doctrine and conduct (CO Art 57); this also applies to admitting the members of the respective churches to the sacraments.
4. The churches shall ordinarily not open their pulpits to ministers with whom we have Ecclesiastical Contact, unless due diligence is undertaken by consistory, and where it is only for one or two Sundays. Where it is for a more extended or recurring period of time (e.g. several weeks or months), concurring advice be requested and received from classis.
5. The churches shall receive each other's delegates at their broadest assemblies and invite them to sit as observers according to the Rules for Synods.

C: Multiple Churches in Geographic Proximity

The FRCA may consider and 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.

Adopted by FRCA Synod Darling Downs 2024 (Acts of Synod, article 95)