

Report to the Great Lakes City Classis
(GLCC) From the University Transfer
Committee (UTC)
On the Petition from the Consistory of University Reformed
Church (URC) January 7, 2015

The Consistory of University Reformed Church (URC) of East Lansing, Michigan has filed a written petition for withdrawal from the Reformed Church in America (RCA) for the purpose of affiliating with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). In response to this petition, the special committee appointed by the classis to consider the petition (UTC) presents the following recommendations:

R-1 That the Great Lakes City Classis believes that the reasons listed in the petition filed by the Consistory of the University Reformed Church are inadequate reasons for withdrawal from the Reformed Church in America.

If R-1 is approved, the UTC recommends:

R-2 To deny the petition filed by the Consistory of the University Reformed Church to withdraw from the Reformed Church in America at this time, and request that a committee including the General Secretary of the RCA and whoever he wishes to bring with him meet with the ministers, consistory, and members of URC and attempt to resolve the issues listed in the petition within the coming year.

If R-1 is defeated, the UTC recommends:

R-3 To empower the Executive Committee of the Classis to negotiate a settlement with Consistory of University Reformed Church that will include the approval of their petition for withdrawal from the Reformed Church in America (RCA) for the purpose of affiliating with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and a continuation of the RCA ministry on the campus of Michigan State University.

Background and History of the Findings and Recommendations

The Consistory of University Reformed Church (URC) of East Lansing, Michigan filed with the Stated Clerk of the South Grand Rapids Classis (renamed Great Lakes City Classis; hereafter "Classis" or "GLCC") a written petition for withdrawal from the Reformed Church in America (RCA) for the purpose of affiliating with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The Stated Clerk referred the petition to the Executive Team of the Classis which decided to appoint a special committee to consider the petition. On July 7, 2014, the Classis Executive Team appointed Howard Moths to serve as the leader of this special committee and approved a list of prospective members of the

committee. The members who agreed to serve are Howard Moths, Ken Blauwkamp, Tom Paarberg, and Dick Welscott. For purposes of shorthand, the special committee

decided to call itself the "University Transfer Committee" that is represented by the initials "UTC" below.

The UTC met for the first time on Friday, October 10, 2014. The UTC reviewed the process for considering a petition for leave to withdraw in the RCA *Book of Church Order* (BCO), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 18-21 (Appendix A), and the petition filed by URC (Appendix B), and the correspondence between URC (Allan Knapp, chair) and Howard Moths (serving as secretary of the UTC). A question was raised of whether or not the petition to withdraw filed by URC is conditioned on a decision to allow the URC to retain all of its real and personal property free from any claim on the part of the RCA. The application asks that the classis consider the request

for transfer to the PCA and the request to retain all of its property free from any claim on the part of the RCA as one petition. The UTC decided to follow the process adopted by the Peace Transfer Committee (PTC) and to consider these questions separately, as outlined in the *BCO*. Later conversations with the consistory affirmed the supposition of the UTC that the application is not conditioned on a decision to allow the URC to retain all of its real and personal property free from any claim on the part of the RCA.

The work of the UTC focused on the following paragraph from the *BCO*:

The classis committee shall meet with the congregation, with the consistory of the church, and with representatives of the denomination with which the church desires to affiliate. The committee shall endeavor to ascertain the basic facts and conditions underlying the petition, endeavor to reconcile any differences of opinion within the congregation and between the church and the denomination, explore the advantages and disadvantages of a withdrawal and the needs¹ of both the church and the denomination, and endeavor to ascertain how Christ's Kingdom may¹ best be served in the matter. (*BCO*, 1.11.7.19b)

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The petition filed by the Consistory of University Reformed Church lists three main reasons for withdrawal from the RCA: 1) concerns about the Belhar Confession, 2) the removal of the "conscience clauses" from the BCO, and 3) the denomination's response to homosexuality. After considering the contents of the URC petition, the UTC searched for ways "to reconcile any differences of opinion within the congregation and between the church and the denomination." The UTC disagrees with the assessment of the Reformed Church in America in the petition. The UTC believes that 1) the Belhar Confession serves a valuable purpose in combating racism as supplement to our historic confessions, 2) complementarians have a place in the RCA and will not face discrimination, and 3) that the RCA's position on homosexuality has not changed and the current discussion can be influenced by Biblical writing, prayer, and action. The UTC believes that the three reasons listed in the application misrepresent the facts and are not adequate cause for a local church to leave the RCA.

The UTC met again on Monday, October 27, 2014 to consider the petition from University Reformed Church and to meet with one of the URC ministers. The UTC discussed the response of the Great Lakes City Classis to the report of the Peace Transfer Committee. On October 21, 2014 the Classis approved the recommendation of

the PTC after deleting the following paragraph: "a. paid to the Classis of South Grand Rapids Classis or the Great Lakes City Classis the approximate cost of starting a new church, which is calculated to be \$400,000 this year." The report of the PTC gave the classis a choice in recommending a payment from Peace Reformed Church to the classis so that the Classis could meet its goals in planting new churches. The Classis approved the amendment to delete that payment by a clear margin. The final vote to approve the recommendation of the PTC as amended was 88-10.

The UTC discussed how to respond to the action of the Classis. Did the Classis vote set a precedent that limits what the Classis may do in response to the URC petition? Is the relationship between the Classis and the URC unique, given that the withdrawal includes not only an organized church, but one of the campus ministries of the RCA?

Should the UTC consider the question of whether or not the reasons listed in the petition from URC are valid? Can any local RCA church decide that for any reason they will be more effective in another denomination? What is the threshold for deciding the validity of the reasoning within the petition?

As a part of their October 27 meeting, the UTC met with Rev. Kevin DeYoung and Allan Knapp (chair of the University Reformed Church Consistory subcommittee who came with Kevin as an observer). The interview lasted just under one hour and began and ended with prayer. Kevin spoke about his roots in the RCA and the process that led to the filing of the petition for leave to withdraw. Kevin was candid and honest about his role in the application to withdraw from the RCA. He is convinced that his ministry and the ministry of URC would be enhanced by transferring to the PCA, although choosing to leave the RCA was not an easy decision for him. He talked about the pain caused by the decisions of the 2013 General Synod regarding the issue of homosexuality. However, the most significant turning points for Kevin were the removal of the "conscience clauses" from the *BCO* and the adoption of the Belhar Confession as one of our doctrinal standards.

As part of this conversation, we talked about an appropriate way to use the papers written by Rev. Tom Stark in our meetings with URC. In an email sent on October 24, Allan Knapp raised the question of the use of these papers, in the light of the Covenant of Separation between Rev. Stark and the URC Consistory that was put in place in 2003 when he retired as pastor. A key paragraph in the document states that "Tom Stark is determined to be supportive of the future pastoral and lay leadership of URC. Tom will not receive negative comments or participate in any conversation or activity that might undermine any program or person belonging to URC." We agreed that only a summary of Tom's papers will be sent to the URC Consistory and the URC members, but that

Tom will be free to speak when the Classis meets to consider the URC petition. The papers written by Rev. Tom Stark appear in Appendix C of this report.

The UTC met again on November 5, 2014, to make plans for the meetings with the URC Consistory and congregation on Sunday, November 23. The UTC decided that it would be best to meet with the consistory that Sunday afternoon at 3:00 p.m. and to hold a special meeting of the URC confessing members to vote on the petition that

evening at 7:00 p.m. as suggested by the Consistory. Some URC Consistory terms ended in May, so there are members who signed the petition who are no longer installed as members of the Consistory. We decided to invite the Consistory members who retired in May, and the currently installed members of the URC Consistory to the meeting on Sunday afternoon, November 23. The UTC worked on a letter to the URC confessing members that served as the official notice of the congregational meeting and

as an attempt to present the other side of the issue, as required by the BCO. To accomplish that purpose, the UTC decided to enclose with the letter a two-page summary of the reasons for staying in the RCA similar to the paper used by the Peace Transfer Committee (Appendix D). The UTC met with Rev. Ben Falconer and Allan Knapp (as an observer) as part of their November 5 meeting. Ben was not involved in writing the petition, but supports the petition and intends to request a transfer of his classis membership to the PCA.

On Sunday afternoon, November 23, all the members of the UTC traveled to East Lansing and met with the URC Consistory from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. without the presence of Kevin DeYoung or Ben Falconer. One of the URC elders led with a devotion and prayer time prior to the UTC discussion. All the consistory members expressed strong support for the application to transfer to the PCA, even if both pastors were not leaving with them. When asked how the church can minister to the students of Michigan State University while holding a complementarian view on the role of women, the comment was made that visitors who do not agree soon discover the position of the church and don't stay long. It was mentioned that those who check out the church website will become aware of the church's position that some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men. This position is included on the Statement of Faith page on the URC website (www.universityreformedchurch.org) as follows: "Though not an official statement for our church, the theology in the Danvers statement is shared by our staff members and shapes their philosophy of ministry." (The Danvers Statement states the core beliefs of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and was prepared by evangelical leaders at a CBMW meeting in Danvers, Massachusetts, in December of 1987.) It is clear that the role of women in the church is a central reason for the URC petition. The Danvers Statement expresses deep concern over "the emergence of roles for men and women in church leadership that do not conform to Biblical teaching but backfire in the crippling of Biblically faithful witness." The statement concludes by saying: "we are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our

families, our churches, and the culture at large." The comments made in the November 23 URC Consistory meeting showed clear support for this position. Members of the Consistory expressed the opinion that the removal of the conscience clauses from the *BCO* has also removed the protection that they need to continue to express complementarian views in the RCA. That evening (November 23), the UTC members attended the URC worship service at 6:00 p.m. and the congregational meeting immediately following worship. As part of the congregational meeting, the *BCO* says that "there shall be opportunity given for presentation of all sides of the issue, after which the presiding officer shall allow time for discussion." The agenda of the congregational meeting included:

1. Opening Prayer by Ken Blauwkamp
2. Explanation of the Purpose of the Meeting by Dick Welscott
3. Reasons to vote in favor of the Petition-Kevin DeYoung (10 minutes)
4. Reasons to be opposed to the Petition-Howard Moths (10 minutes)
5. Questions for clarification -answered by the person to whom they are addressed
6. Congregational vote by ballot
7. Closing Prayer by Dick Welscott {members may leave afterward}
8. Counting by Tom Paarlberg and Ken Blauwkamp and two members of the Consistory
9. Certification of the Vote and Announcement to the Congregation

The congregational meeting started at 7:15 p.m. and lasted for about one hour. Absentee ballots were made available in the URC office at least one week in advance of the meeting. The ballots were counted separately as part of the counting process by the tellers following the instructions in the *BCO*. One question appeared on the ballot: "do you support the petition filed by the Consistory of University Reformed Church for withdrawal from the Reformed Church in America (RCA) for the purpose of affiliating with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)?"

The following choices appeared on the ballot:

- 1) I favor the petition to withdraw from the RCA.
- 2) I am opposed to the petition to withdraw from the RCA.

The members voted overwhelmingly in favor of the petition. The total number of votes cast was 384 out of 422 confessing members who were eligible to vote. The votes in favor were 320 + 46 absentee = 366. The votes opposed: 15 + 3 absentee = 18.

After the series of meetings with the pastor, consistory and congregation of URC, the PTC met with two representatives of the denomination with which the church desires to affiliate -the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) on Friday morning, December 5, 2014. The PCA representatives were Rev. Jan Dykshoom, the Stated Clerk of the Great Lakes Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America, and Rev. Ken Klett, pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Holland, Michigan. The UTC received oral and written assurances that URC would be able to exercise a more effective ministry as a

part of the PCA, and that if the URC were transferred to the PCA, it would be received without reservation as a church having all the rights and privileges of any of its churches. (See the letter in Appendix E.) However, the PCA representatives also shared that the PCA has tried to start another church in Lansing with a campus ministry that has not been effective in its outreach to Michigan State University and may need to disband as a congregation.

The PTC met on Wednesday, December 17, to review the information gathered to date and to make some decisions in response to the petition submitted by the consistory of URC in preparation for submitting a report to the Great Lakes City Classis. In that meeting, the UTC approved the recommendations listed at the beginning of this report.

When ministers, elders, and deacons are ordained and installed they promise to "be loyal to the witness and work of the Reformed Church in America, using all your abilities

to further its Christian mission here and throughout the world." These vows should not be easily broken. If the classis determines that URC should not be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, the church may institute new proceedings after one year from the denial of the original petition. If the classis agrees with the conclusion of the UTC that the three reasons listed in the application misrepresent the facts and are not adequate cause for a *local* church to leave the RCA, then this would be an appropriate response to the petition. The current leadership of URC has done an excellent job of convincing the congregation that the three reasons listed in the petition are legitimate reasons for leaving the RCA. URC and the campus ministry to students at Michigan State University exist because of the vision and support of the Classis and many churches within our denomination. (See Appendix F.) The church has only had two pastors in its 55 year history. In listening to the current pastors and the consistory we became aware that these issues have come to the forefront in the last six years under the current leadership. The previous pastor (Rev. Stark) has written persuasive arguments that these three issues are not valid reasons to leave the denomination.

The UTC was given the responsibility to "explore the advantages and disadvantages of a withdrawal and the needs of both the church and the denomination." Clearly there are disadvantages to the RCA and the Great Lake City Classis. The classis has invested much time, money, and effort to start and nurture this local church and its ministry to the students of Michigan State University. And more important than the physical property and the financial assets of the University Reformed Church, the classis will be losing its ministry to the campus of Michigan State University if the URC petition is approved. In addition, plans made by the Classis for starting new churches will need to be scaled back or assessments will need to increase in order to meet the goals of starting new churches within our classis and continuing this campus ministry.

We must be faithful stewards of the financial assets and human resources that God has provided as we strive to be effective in our ministry and outreach in the RCA. The church is a communion of saints across time, and we must consider those who came before and those who will follow. We benefit from remembering that we have a "great cloud of witnesses" and there will be times when we may

be tempted to grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3). The historic crest of the Reformed Church in America contains two mottos: *Nisi Dominus Frustra*, which translates, "Without the Lord all is in vain," and *Eendracht maakt Macht*, which translates, "In unity there is strength." In John 17:20-23 Jesus teaches us that effectiveness of our ministry is related to our willingness to seek unity with other Christians who may be very different from us. Although it may be tempting to seek comfort in a closed community of like-minded believers, the disunity of the church impacts our effectiveness in many ways. There have been many times within the history of the church that Christians have been unable to come to complete agreement on specific issues. When that happens, we need to keep our faith that God's purpose will prevail, and that Biblical teaching, love, patience, honest confrontation, and the work of the Holy Spirit will be convincing (Philippians 3:15). Fear of the unknown future and lack of agreement in non-essentials is not a sufficient reason to leave a denomination. God is sovereign over *all*. The church is stronger when we are all committed to live in unity, purity, and peace.