

Address to General Assembly of the Reformed Churches of Japan

14 oktober 2015

Esteemed moderator, dear brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

It is a great privilege to me and it gives me much joy to be able to address your 70th general assembly today. It has been nine years that our churches met with you at your synod. Back in 2006 our prof. Eric Peels visited your synod, and at that time you had the 60th anniversary of your denomination. Today you are close to your 70th birthday as Reformed Churches of Japan. Those ten more years are witness of Gods providence and blessing, His protection and care. And of His ongoing work to save sinners by the blood of His Son Jesus Christ. And on behalf of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands I greet you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since 1995 our churches have an official sister church relationship. So for twenty years now, despite of distance and language barriers, we may rejoice in that unity in Christ, the head of the Church. It is encouraging to experience those bonds in faith again, and we treasure our relationship with you as our sister churches.

And saying so, it would be good to know who it is that greets you. Our churches have a little over 73.000 members, 182 congregations, 148 ministers, 3 professors in active duty, 3 retired professors and 2 teachers who will become professor in due time.

The Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands stand in a different culture but within the same world as the Reformed Church of Japan.

In a world that is in fear for terrorism and IS operating worldwide with attacks in Paris and Ankara. And also last week we heard of horrible stories of Christians being crucified in Iraq before their children's eyes. How deep mankind had sunk in her try to become like God. A world in which country fights against country and is able to shoot a passenger plane from the sky, like what happened with the MH-17.

We live in a world that still experiences an economic crisis with global impact. It does affect the Netherlands as well, although it seems to get a little better this year. But more important, we experience times in which Mammon is on its knees and still so many are worshipping the god of money and materialism. Materialism and worldliness defeat their thousands in a country as Holland which has been so richly blessed in the past with the Word of God. We see that these thoughts, this attitude to life, also afflicts church people. In this situation we need to humble ourselves before the Lord and confess with Daniel 9:5-7a: *We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled...* But in these circumstances, by God's grace, we still may proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, the Prince of peace.

Let me give you some additional information on subjects that are important to our churches today.

Theological University Apeldoorn

Regarding our Theological University: we are in the midst of an investigation if the start of a broad Reformed Theological University is a possibility. This Reformed Theological University has to be a co-operation between our churches and the Reformed Churches (liberated) (GKv), Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK), the reformed part of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Bond), and the Restored Reformed Church (HHK).

This investigation is not an easy task, but we hope our synod in 2016 can receive a report on the progress made in this matter. We pray that our university – also if it becomes a part of a

new Reformed Theological University – may be blessed and may be a blessing in the field of reformed theology.

Study on homosexuality and homosexual relationships

Our general synod of 2013 accepted unanimously the study report on the subject of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. In our liberal continent more and more governments start to accept these kind of relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships. In Holland this has been the situation for over ten years now. The study concluded that homosexual relationships are contrary to Gods Word. At the same time the study provides a guide for pastoral care to homosexuals who want to live according Gods Word. We were very thankful that our general synod accepted this study unanimously, although our next synod has to deal with some review requests. The study is translated in English and is available as a download on the website of our churches.

Focus on Europe

Because our continent is moving away from Gods Word, our last general synod asked our committees of gospel mission and relief mission to cooperate in finding blank spots on the European map to start mission work. These committees will report to our synod next year.

Fraternal concern

As we have understood this synod will effectuate the decision in the matter of women in office. And if our information is correct, your synod now will allow acceptance of women in office.

With caution I want to approach these matters, realizing the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands are in a different situation. Denominations with a larger number of congregations and members are more capable of doing things than when a denomination is small and congregations have few members. We understand that because also in our churches we have several congregations that are small and that are facing the problems of having few members.

Notwithstanding these facts, on behalf of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands I want to ask some questions in brotherly love and fraternal concern:

1. Our churches studied the subject of women in office and published a synodical report back in 1998. On the basis of this study our general synod concluded that the Bible teaches us that the office in church belong to the man and not to the woman. This reformed view on office and office bearers is also phrased in our confessions. Our study and its conclusions were then handed to you by our professor Eric Peels. Has our study been of any help in the development of your thoughts on this subject?
2. Secondly, we wonder if the decision that will in effect after this synod includes the offices of spiritual teaching and leadership in the church.
3. Thirdly, if the final decision of your assembly will be the opening of all offices to women, we are eager to be informed about the underlying reasoning. Do, actually, practical arguments lead to this conclusion? Or do changing theological considerations form the basis of such a decision? Practical arguments would be somewhat understandable in view of your situation. But if theological arguments are at stake, we would like to be informed on these arguments, so that we can try to understand these.

However, if the Reformed Churches of Japan will effectuate the decision to accept women in office the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, your sister church, will regret such a decision. We kindly request you to provide us with an English translation of your decisions and the underlying considerations.

Our studies in Scripture and reformed confessions did not provide us with arguments to accept women in office.

We believe apart from the office there are many other possibilities for women to take part in the building up of Christ's church. A second study on this subject was presented to our synod in 2001. This study is titled "The service of women" and gives an overview of biblical and church historical possibilities for the service of women in the congregation. This study could be of help in this subject. It is not available in English, but several of your ministers or professors will be able to translate it from Dutch. We would be more than happy to provide you with a digital copy of this study.

On behalf of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands I urge you in brotherly love to hold on to the biblical view on the position of man and women in church and to stay in the reformed way of addressing these questions. We strongly hope that the Reformed Churches of Japan will not effectuate the decision to accept women in office but will conclude that women with their special gifts and talents have many other options to serve the body of Christ and that the office of spiritual leading and teaching is given to the men in church. Brothers we truly hope that you will continue in this reformed conviction.

Conclusion and blessing

Let me come to a conclusion. Dear brothers of the RCJ, we will continue to remember you in our prayers. May the Lord grant you as churches much of His grace and guidance by His Holy Spirit. May He bless and continue to bless your churches to the glory of His own Name and to the eternal salvation and benefit of dying sinners.

May I conclude with a word from I Thessalonians 5:23-26

23 And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

24 Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.

25 Brethren, pray for us.

26 Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss.

Dear brothers, may the Lord grant His rich blessing on your synod that your meetings and decisions may be to the glory of His Name and the benefit of your churches.

On behalf of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands,

rev. Laurens-A. den Butter

chair of Foreign Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands