



## Deputies Reports to Synod – Who are they for?

By Wayne Pleiter

Over the next couple of weeks, a number of deputies' reports for Synod Legana 2009 will be submitted to each consistory in the FRCA federation. These reports have been compiled in response to the specific mandates provided to the synod committees by Synod West Kelmscott 2006. It provides evidence of their work over the past years, outlining in detail how they have fulfilled their specific mandates, as well as presenting their recommendations of how to move forward in their respective mandates.

These deputies' reports are sent to each consistory six months prior to the convocation of a synod. This is done, not out of a desire to keep the churches *informed* per se, but in order to keep them intimately *involved* in matters that belong to the churches. These are matters that have ultimately come from the churches and deal with issues that the churches have agreed to hold in common. Once these matters had been placed on the agenda of synod by the churches, subsequent synods are allowed to deal with them without the need for renewed action on the part of the churches.<sup>1</sup> Synod can do this because of the delegated authority given to it by the churches.

There are four main areas, which the FRCA hold in common, including; Training for the Ministry, Relations with Sister Churches, Relations with Other Churches and the Book of Praise. You will notice that the work involved in these four areas is rather dynamic in that it deals with relationships or matters of an ongoing nature, and as a result, these committees are permanent committees whose mandate is renewed by each synod.<sup>2</sup> Not all synod committees exist for long period of time. Occasionally, a synod may, at the request of the churches, appoint deputies for a specific issue and discharge the committee after they have made their report to the subsequent synod.<sup>3,4</sup>

With each of the different committees that are appointed by a synod, the original source of their work is clear – it comes from the churches. So it is then that all the deputies' reports' are sent to each of the consistories. Each consistory has the responsibility to ensure that they spend the appropriate time studying and reviewing the work of each synod committee and to interact with it's report as they see appropriate. Not to be intimately involved with the contents of these deputies' reports is to abdicate responsibly to the broader assembly – and that goes against the intent of the church order.

All this raises a few questions – are these reports public and who can interact with the reports? It is clear that these two questions are interrelated and have particular interest for the members of our churches. We are all aware of the challenges that are faced by our churches and our sisters to remain faithfully Reformed. Church history is filled with the deformation of once faithful churches, and so all professing members need to identify and fight against the unbiblical and un-confessional trends that may arise within our churches.<sup>5</sup> So it is good for members of the congregation to request copies of the deputies' reports from their consistory to keep up with the latest developments.

However, the deputies' reports are documents that have been created and formulated in response to the mandate of one synod and presented for the consideration of the next synod. These are not public reports per se, but deputies' reports *to* a synod and *for that* synod. 'The reason for this is that the reports from the various committees are for general synod to engage in a discussion and make the appropriate decisions. A synod does so representing all the churches within a federation'.<sup>6</sup> So it is that the deputies' report is prepared and addressed specifically to synod and not to the churches.<sup>7</sup>

This raises the question, why it is that all mandates for synod committees have the requirement for copies of the deputy's report to be provided to each consistory? Does that not prove that these reports are for consistory? Rev. Van Oene addresses this by stating '*this should not be construed to mean that the churches decide about the matters dealt within these reports.*'<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is recognition that these

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<sup>1</sup> WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 145

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pages 232-233.

<sup>3</sup> G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71

<sup>4</sup> This happened recently when deputies were appointed by Synod 2004 to investigate a second appeal court and were consequently discharged by Synod 2006 even though none of their recommendations were adopted (c.f. Synod West Kelmscott 2006, Art. 32, page 22-24).

<sup>5</sup> See question 1, Form of Public Profession of Faith, BoP, Page 593.

<sup>6</sup> Acts of General Synod Chatham Ontario 2004, Art. 20, Consideration 4.3, page 15.

<sup>7</sup> WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 232

<sup>8</sup> Ibid



matters come from the churches, and that the churches need to remain involved about the work. Hence the opportunity is provided to the consistories for input into the contents of the deputies' reports.

Does this mean that only consistories - and not individuals - can interact with the contents of the deputies' reports? Technically, the answer is yes, as the only legitimate conduit for feedback on the deputies' reports is via consistory. An individual member has no right, according to the Church Order, to personally direct their feedback to a synod. However this does not negate the fact that opportunity does exist for individuals to share their thoughts regarding a deputy report to their local consistory<sup>9</sup>. A recent synod of our Canadian sister churches gives clarity on this issue stating that 'individual members have opportunity to interact with these reports via their consistories. The way of the church order requires individuals to wait until a general synod actually makes decisions on the committee recommendations before they may begin an appeal process.'<sup>10</sup> The key point is that individuals must engage their local consistory in order to bring any concerns or show support to a particular deputy's report.

In the past, the FRCA synods have allowed for direct access to synod by individuals in relation to deputies reports. This historical practice is understandable and is consistent with a small federation, as it allowed for a diversity of opinions and positions that could not necessarily be achieved with a federation made up of a few churches.<sup>11</sup> However, just because this is the way it has always been done does not necessarily establish a precedent for how it should have been done, in accordance with Article 30 and 31 of the Church Order. There is no provision in the church order for individual members to bypass their local consistory and provide direct feedback to any broader assembly.<sup>12</sup> Rather, individuals must engage their consistory if they have feedback regarding the deputies reports. Of course this should only happen after the individual has duly studied and examined the reports and reviewed all the relevant supporting information. Should an individual have general concerns about a deputy report, but cannot as such articulate them, it would be most prudent to wait for synod to do its work and then review the final decision of synod.

Over the next few months you are bound to read more about all these deputies reports and this is a good thing. For it is healthy for the individual members of the congregations to be interested in the material for synod and to discuss it amongst their friends. Likewise it is fitting for consistories to immerse themselves into the reports and interact with its contents and provide their comments to synod as required. But ultimately, the deputies' reports will be furnished on the table of synod (along with the churches' comments) so that synod will have all the necessary information to make decisions and recommendations that are for the edification of the churches. We would do well to pray that the Head of the Church would bless the labours of the deputies, consistories and synod so that it might work for the furtherance of His Kingdom and the glory of His Holy Name.

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<sup>9</sup> If a "member sees something wrong within the church or within the federation, he most certainly has the right and even the duty to approach his consistory about it and to do his best to convince the consistory that action should be taken to correct the wrong." WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, Page 154.

<sup>10</sup> Acts of General Synod Chatham Ontario 2004, Art. 20, Consideration 4.3, page 15.

<sup>11</sup> Based on this argumentation, it could be said that over the last few decades, the FRCA has experienced considerable growth in the number of congregations within our federation that, as a result does provide a greater degree of diversity of opinions when dealing with synod reports.

<sup>12</sup> "The agenda of major assemblies is not composed by individual members but by the churches. An individual member cannot legitimately bring a matter before a major assembly. There is one exception. If he complains that a minor assembly has wronged him, he may seek redress as provided for in Art. 31." WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 157



## Deputies Reports to Synod – What are they about?

By Wayne Pleiter

In the previous article, it was noted that various deputies' reports for Synod Legana have been provided to each consistory in the FRCA for their review and interaction. These reports outline the detail of how these synod committees have fulfilled their mandate received by the last Synod as well as providing recommendations for the decision making process of a Synod. It was noted that the deputies' reports from the various synod committees are addressed directly to the next Synod, and are provided to the churches to keep them informed and involved in these matters. Interested individuals would be able to request their local consistory for a copy of these reports, however they would not be able to interact directly with Synod on these matters, but via their local consistory. More can be said about the deputies reports, what they are about and how the function within the context of a Synod. That will be the focus of this article.

When we consider the role of the deputies or synod committees, it is important to think about their existence in relation to the existence of a Synod. Using the delegated authority of the churches, synod committees are appointed by a synod to carry on the workload (provided by the churches) for the three years until the next synod.<sup>13</sup> This workload should be clearly defined by the synod and outlined in the mandate to the synod committee. When a synod gives a mandate to the synod committee it is only for the period of time between the closing of one synod and the convening of the next synod (which is approximately three years). It is only when the subsequent synod renews its mandate does the synod committee continue its work.

In comparison with the synod committee, the 'life span' of a synod is considerably shorter. As an ecclesiastical body, a synod only exists from the time it is duly constituted until its formal closing – normally some two or three weeks later. A synod is typically constituted after the examination of the delegate's credentials and the election of the officers of chairman, vice-chairman, first clerk and the second clerk. The last act of the chairman is the declaration that the synod is officially closed. Not only does the work of a synod cease immediately upon its closing, so does its existence. A synod does not have a permanent or perpetual nature and cannot be seen as the continuation of the previous synod.<sup>14</sup> Each synod (and each classis for that matter) is a distinct ecclesiastical body that stands in its own right and must be judged accordingly. It is for this reason that one synod should not provide additional information or supporting documents to substantiate the decision of a former synod. Each synod stands on its own merits and must be judged by the churches accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

With the closing of a synod, the work of executing the decisions made by the assembly must be carried out. For example, when dealing with sister churches abroad, a synod decision would be made to continue sister relation 'according to the established rules' and 'to monitor developments' and to 'discuss concerns' within that federation.<sup>16</sup> Since the synod that made the decision no longer exists, it is delegated to the deputies of the synod committee to do this work according to the mandate provided (as per Art. 48 CO).

The deputies of the synod committees do not function as an 'interim synod' but as executors of the specific decision of a synod to perform specific tasks mandated by that synod.<sup>17</sup> All this sounds rather technical, but it is important in order to avoid the potential abuse of a *synodical* committee, in which a synod committee takes a life of its own and deals with matters in which they have no delegated authority<sup>18</sup>. Article 48 of the FRCA Church Order, makes a specific point of ensuring that different deputies are appointed for separate matters. This not only allows for the spreading out of the workload but also ensures that there are no 'super-committees' that could potentially act outside of their mandates and make decisions that are not within their mandated responsibility.

Over a three-year period, the deputies are involved in a major undertaking as they perform their mandated task. Depending on the nature of the synod committee, the deputies will attend meetings on a

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<sup>13</sup> Even the so-called permanent committees (that deal with relations with sister-churches, relations with other churches, Book of Praise and theological training) still require a renewed mandate. See further; WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 232.

<sup>14</sup> G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71

<sup>15</sup> This does not undermine the right of one synod to defend or provide its explanation on a decision made by a previous synod.

<sup>16</sup> See for example, Acts of Synod Kelmscott 206, Art. 85 re: the CanRC and Art. 94 re: the RCN.

<sup>17</sup> G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71

<sup>18</sup> WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 234



monthly or bi monthly basis – and typically this is done on top of their tasks as minister and as elders. Each of the synod committees will have studied and reviewed numerous articles, reports and documents, including the Acts of Synod provided by our sister churches. Occasionally, there will be visits made abroad to engage in face-to-face meetings and/or to attend a Synod of a sister-church. The workload of a deputy can be heavy but it can be very interesting and engaging, and at times rather controversial. Not only does each deputy bring their various skills and talents to their committee work, but they also bring their personal views. This should ensure the issues are thoroughly discussed and that the final report takes into account the divergent views within the synod committee. Some times the deputies cannot come to agreement on a final proposal for synod, and as a result will have two different recommendations outlined in their report.<sup>19</sup>

Upon the completion of its task, the synod committee will collate its information and prepare a final deputy's report. This report will be sent directly to synod and copies of it will also be provided to each of the consistories in the FRCA. By providing the deputies' reports six months prior to the convocation of synod, all of the churches will have the time to study and review the material, and provide their comments as required. Once at synod, the contents of the deputies' reports will be examined, the comments of the churches will be evaluated and then the final decision will be formulated. If required, the deputies could be called to synod to clarify their actions and the contents of their report.<sup>20</sup>

It should be clear from the above, that the deputies play a significant role in assisting a synod to make its decision. The deputies not only do a lot of work for synod, but they can influence the direction a synod takes in its decisions. This is not stated to create suspicion or sow seeds of distrust of the brothers who do this work. Rather it is highlighted to encourage the prayerful support for the deputies who do this important work over the three-year period between synods. Deputies must have a good understanding of the scriptures as we confess it, as well as a keen understanding and application of the church order. We would do well to carry them in our prayers, and support them in their work. One way to support the work of the delegates is by alerting them of relevant information for their appointed task. Additionally when we speak to others about the delegates and their work, we should do so with the appropriate respect and support, and not with suspicion.<sup>21</sup>

Yet there must be limitations to the scope of the synod committee's work. For example, they cannot and must not make any statements that go beyond the decisions and statements of the various synods. Statements made by a synod committee in their reports or during their discussions with others, cannot carry the weight of a synod decision, and neither should it be used to form any kind of precedence. To do so, would create the situation where the synod committees are ruling over the synod. This is clearly not the intent of our Church Order and can lead to hierarchical practices.<sup>22</sup> Each deputy and every synod committee is a servant of synod and not its ruler and therefore it is critical that synod committees remain subservient to its mandate from synod.<sup>23</sup> Synod committees are not to try and influence the decisions of Synod, but rather to give assistance so that synod can make appropriate decisions in the limited time available.

At times, synod will incorporate the recommendations of the deputies, on an 'as is' basis. This may lead to the idea that a synod merely rubber-stamps the work of the committee, however, this is not necessary the case. It is normally a reflection of how thorough and comprehensive the work of the deputies have been. It also demonstrates how helpful the work of the deputies can be for a synod.

To that end, let us pray that the Lord will bless the work of the deputies so that synod is well served with the relevant information to make decisions that are pleasing to God's Name and for the edification of the churches.

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<sup>19</sup> c.f. Acts of Synod Kelmscott 2006, Appendix 10; Deputies Report re: RCNZ, pages 387-421.

<sup>20</sup> G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71

<sup>21</sup> While an individual may provide relevant information to the deputies, they cannot expect the deputies to engage in correspondence with them. Neither should individuals barrage the deputies with biased material in order to pressure them into a particular stance on an issue.

<sup>22</sup> c.f. page 9,10 of chapter entitled; 'The Church-corrupting Character of Hierarchy' by F.L Rutgers as published in *Bound Yet Free; Readings in Reformed Church Polity*, edited by J. De Jong.

<sup>23</sup> G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71



## Deputies Reports to Synod – Staying Involved and Interested?

By Wayne Pleiter

In the previous article, it was explained that a synod deputies<sup>24</sup> carries out the decisions of a synod, and does so by working to a specific mandate. The synod deputies do not hold an authoritarian position that allows them to make their own decisions; rather their task is one of service. They must carry out the instructions of synod within the scope of the mandate provided. As a synod will only exist for approximately three weeks, it is the various synod deputies who are the servants of synod for the following three years. It is their task to execute synod's decisions and by assisting the following synod with the relevant information required to make future decisions. The focus of this article will be on how the deputies' reports can keep the churches involved and the individual members informed about their work.

It bears repeating that the synod deputies are appointed by a synod and therefore are mandated to report back to the next synod. It is not the churches that decide about the matters contained in these deputies' reports, but the synod to which these reports are addressed.<sup>25</sup> Consistories receive copies of these deputies' reports upon the mandate of synod to *'enable the churches to take note of the reports, the conclusions and proposal they contain and, if they wish to do so, to send their thoughts and/or proposals about them to general synod.'*<sup>26</sup> The consistories are involved in critiquing the work of these synod deputies, as ultimately it is work that belongs to the churches. It was the churches that agreed that certain issues are matters that the churches have in common.<sup>27</sup> It was also agreed by the churches to delegate the authority of these matters to the broadest assembly, being synod. For example, according to Article 46 CO, the churches have agreed that *'the relationship with other churches shall be regulated by synod.'*

This begs the question – how will the individual members be informed about the happenings of the synod deputies? Shouldn't members of the FRCA – at least confessing members – also receive a copy of these reports? How does the average member in the pew know what is going on?

The greatest challenge faced by a rapidly growing business is one of communication. It is not just that there are a lot of changes to the business, but also that employees have little understanding of the changes. The desire is that good communication will lead to good participation and a greater interest in the undertakings of the company.

While the church is not a business, the principles of good communication are also essential for the FRCA federation. Individual church members should be able to rely on their local consistory to keep them informed on the happenings at synod. There are a number of ways a local consistory can keep their members informed. The consistory could review and summarise the contents of the various reports and make them available to the entire congregation. This could be done with a written summary or via a verbal presentation at a congregational meeting. Additionally, those interested in studying the contents of the deputies' reports in greater detail could request a personal copy of the reports from their consistory. By providing information to individual members about the deputies' reports to synod, consistories encourage interest in how the mandate of the synod deputies has been fulfilled. Should an individual member actually have the opportunity to visit a synod while it is convened, they may also understand the proceedings a little more.

What about making comments on these deputies' reports, or voicing one's disagreement on the direction it takes? There are a few points to consider here. First, when the contents of the deputies' reports are provided by consistory to its members, it is done for their information only and not to solicit their input. However, if an individual member felt it necessary to share their concerns about a deputies' report prior to synod, it must be done via their consistory.<sup>28</sup> This should only be done when the individual has given careful consideration to all the material involved in the deputies' reports. It is not just a matter of reading the report and jumping to conclusions; it requires careful study of the supporting documents and previous synod decisions. This is not meant to discourage the individual

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<sup>24</sup> In the previous article reference was made to synod committees. However Synod 1985 decided that the term synod deputies were the preferred designation, c.f. Acts of Synod 1985, Art.74, page 46.

<sup>25</sup> c.f WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 232, 233 and G Van Rongen, *Decently and in Good Order*, page 71

<sup>26</sup> WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 232

<sup>27</sup> Such as church relations, theological studies, and the Book of Praise.

<sup>28</sup> "An individual member cannot legitimately bring a matter before a major assembly. There is one exception. If he complains that a minor assembly has wronged him, he may seek redress as provided for in Art. 31." WWJ Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, page 157



members, but to ensure that individual comments are substantiated and accurate, so that a consistory is not inundated with various unqualified opinions and statements.

Secondly, individual members need to understand that the deputy's report is a 'working document' for synod and that they do not have the right to participate in them by means of a submission.<sup>29</sup> Rather it is a Synod that must consider the entire contents of the report, along with the comments from the churches, and only then will a specific decision be made. The point is – an individual member should not be reactive to a deputies' report, but exercise patience and wait until the collective wisdom of synod delegates has made the a decision.

Since the introduction of a classis system in 2000, individual consistories no longer have direct representation at synod<sup>30</sup>. Members of synod are no longer delegated by their local consistory but are appointed by a classis.<sup>31</sup> In some ways, this means that the consistories are further removed from their direct involvement and personal participation at synod. However, consistories still have the duty and responsibility to proactively interact with the deputies' reports. Additionally, by providing its members with summary information regarding the deputies' reports, consistory not only keeps the congregation informed, but also gives opportunity for members with gifts in these matters to assist them in this work (if required).

At the completion of synod, the Acts of Synod will be given to each consistory outlining the decisions of that synod. During the review and adoption process, each consistory will study the decisions to ensure that they are true and faithful decisions; being in accordance to God's Word, the Confessions and the Church Order. Should a consistory perceive there to be an error, they would request the following synod to rescind or revise the decision, on the basis they have provided new grounds to substantiate that the decision of Synod was incorrect. It should be noted that this request for a revision, is not technically an appeal, as one can only appeal to the broader assembly and not to the similar assembly that made the decision.<sup>32</sup> This request by the consistory requires new grounds (under Art. 33 CO) in order for synod to consider the matter as admissible.

Individual members will also receive the Acts of Synod in a booklet form, to keep them informed about the decisions made in the FRCA federation. However, the individual does not have the opportunity to appeal directly to synod about any concerns or errors they might find. There is only one course of action for the individual and that is to interact with their local consistory. If the consistory shares the individual's concern, it will direct a request to rescind or revise the synod decision at the next synod (again under the provision of Art. 33 CO).

If the consistory does not accept the individual's concerns, and adopts the decision of synod as true and faithful, it is now incumbent on the individual to engage the consistory to prove that they were wrong to adopt a particular decision of synod.<sup>33</sup> After corresponding with their consistory with no agreement on the matter, the only recourse is for the member to appeal to classis the decision of the consistory to adopt a synod decision as true and faithful.<sup>34</sup> An individual member must be cautious here, not to engage the time of broader assemblies over minor points of differences. One must not have a stubborn insistence that they are individually wiser than the collective wisdom of the broader assemblies. However, occasionally broader assemblies make mistakes, and an appeal process must clearly articulate the error in the decision. Again, if classis does not support the appeal, the only recourse is to appeal to the next synod (as per Art. 31 CO).

One may argue that this is all rather bureaucratic and ineffective, however this is not a correct attitude. Each assembly must be able to deal with matters placed before them without deflecting matters to a

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<sup>29</sup> c.f Acts of Synod 1994 Byford, Art. 36

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Acts of Synod 2000 West Albany, Art. 43, page 20-22

<sup>31</sup> This may be perceived as a disadvantage, but in reality the formation of classis has provided a more efficient and effective system of dealing with personal appeals and matters that could not be finished at consistory. A classis meeting may be held every 3 months if required compared to the old system of waiting for (up to) two years for the next synod.

<sup>32</sup> As per Article 31 Church Order. This is also highlighted in the Closed Acts of Synod Kelmscott 2006, which stated several times; "Although the [particular] consistory calls this an appeal, Church Order Article 31 insists that appeals can only be brought to broader assemblies. Thus this is technically a request for revision and not an appeal." (Art. 71, 72 and 73).

<sup>33</sup> "When a consistory accepts a decision of a general synod, the individual's appeal is against the consistory and, therefore, Article 31 directs his subsequent appeal to the broader assembly of classis, and then...synod." *Acts of Synod Chatham 2004*, Art. 20, Consider. 4.5, page 16.

<sup>34</sup> "If the local consistory does not take over the individual's appeal, he can appeal the local consistory's decision to classis and thus begin the appeal process in accordance with Article 31 of the Church Order." *Acts of Synod Chatham 2004*, Art. 20, Consider. 4.6, page 16.



synod. As the appeal is against the consistory for adopting the synod decision, a classis must be able to make a judgement on the matter. It would be easy for a classis to dismiss an individual's appeal by claiming it is essentially an appeal of the original decision of a synod, but that misses the point. Members must follow the church orderly way when dealing with appeals. Likewise a classis (and synod) should have the collective wisdom to determine whether or not the consistory correctly adopted a synod decision. When classis directs an individual's appeal to by-pass the minor assemblies and go direct to synod, the dangers of hierarchy will be imminent.<sup>35</sup>

In summary, the involvement of the individual members is only possible via their local consistory. Members must be cautious and patient when reviewing deputies' reports and await the actual decision of synod prior to taking any 'action'. Individual members may provide qualified concerns to the consistory prior to synod or make their objections known to consistory at the time of the adoption of the acts of Synod. Through good communication with its members about the happenings of synod, consistories ensure that members are well informed, and capable of understanding the work of synod. In this way, the decisions of synod will not only cater to the 'intellectual' members of the churches, but also serve for the general edification of all the members of the FRCA. To that end, it is hoped that this series of articles on the working of the deputies' reports have achieved that same goal.

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<sup>35</sup> The decision of Synod Kelmscott 2006, Article 19, page 12-14, incorrectly denied a personal appeal by a member who followed the Church Order to the 'T'. Synod's decision may appear logical on the surface but is not consistent with Article 31 and 33 of the Church Order, as explained above and in the various footnotes.