

12. Pursuit of Organic Union (2012)

From the Report of the NAPARC Committee of Review to the 38th (2012) Meeting (pages 17–21, some footnotes omitted):

C. Pursuit of Organic Union

... Taking into account the discussion at the 37th (2011) Meeting and the comments it has received on the matter, your Committee is not recommending any substantive change to this clause in the Constitution.³ Your Committee observes that the subject of this clause is “the constituent churches,” and therefore believes that the correct reading of the clause is that it is the Member Churches, not NAPARC, who are to do the “hold[ing] out *before each other.*”⁴ Your Committee is united in the conviction that any proposal for one Member Church to begin a process of uniting organically with another Member Church(es) should originate in the appropriate assembly(s) of the Member Churches themselves, and should not be initiated or driven by NAPARC. And, with this understanding, your Committee offers the following as information that might be helpful to the Member Churches as they continue to “hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.”

1. Confessional Considerations. Both sets of the confessional standards enumerated in the Basis⁵ of NAPARC speak to the teaching of Scripture on the unity of the church, the communion of saints, the government of the church, and the binding of the conscience....

2. Counsel From Several of Our Reformed/Presbyterian Fathers and Brethren. In preparing for its discussions on the issue, your Committee sought counsel from the writings of several of our Reformed/Presbyterian fathers and brothers, including Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), Charles Hodge (1797–1878), and Iain Murray....

3. Some Options. The unity which those in the one catholic or universal church enjoy begins with their being joined, by faith, to Christ, her Head and Husband. Appreciating the “already/not yet” dimensions of the coming of His kingdom, particular churches wrestle with how best to express and manifest that unity among themselves in this age. At least five possible options for how a Member Church might take up its responsibility to “hold out before each other ...” come to mind:

a. Do nothing. Your Committee simply observes that such is not faithful to that to which the Member Churches have already committed themselves.

b. Negotiated bilateral mergers. Most of us are wary of anything that might resemble a “top/down” effort by denominational leaders, focusing on the more administrative/organizational dimensions of the union, to press forward in negotiating a merger of two Member Churches before the hearts of the people in both churches have been knit together among themselves. Well-intended efforts to merge two churches (“A” and “B”) into one (“AB”), before they are ready, could easily end up resulting in three churches (the new “AB,” the “Continuing A,” and the “Continuing B”), instead of the desired one, as members’ consciences feel taxed beyond what they are able to bear.

c. Gradual long-term process. This is a longer-view approach in which Member Churches, instead of devoting their resources and energies to trying to negotiate bilateral mergers in the

³ Your Committee is proposing: *i*) to insert the word “to” before the word “hold” to perfect the grammatical construction of the sentence; and *ii*) to divide Article II between the first sentence, which states the Basis of NAPARC, and the second sentence, which is more in the nature of a statement of the Purpose of NAPARC, rather than of the Basis itself.

⁴ *Emphasis added.* The clause does not read, “and the Council is to hold out before the Member Churches the desirability and need for organic union....”

⁵ *Constitution, II.*

short term, focus instead on developing ways to serve, edify, and deepen their fellowship with other Member Churches over the long term, perhaps a generation or more. Member Churches would actively look for ways and opportunities to work (in areas such as missions, relief efforts, training of men for the ministry, Christian schools, activities for young people, and church education and publications) and to worship together with one or more other Member Churches. Such things might include:

- pulpit exchanges
- participating in occasional services of public worship (e.g., “Reformation Day”) conducted by the other Member Church
- mutual invitations to youth and family camps
- intentional cross-pollination in the training of men for the ministry
- scheduling concurrent meetings of major assemblies and classes/presbyteries
- closer cooperation in world missions endeavors, including the sending of missionaries to labor with a mission established by the other Member Church
- annual bilateral meetings of interchurch relations committees’ representatives
- coordinating responses to major disasters
- joint publication projects
- joint involvement in Christian schools.

As the years roll by, and as it pleases the Lord to allow the bonds of mutual trust and affection to ripen and deepen between/among them, Member Churches, having already laid a foundation for working and living more closely together, can begin to explore whether, without sacrificing principles of conscience with respect to their own distinctives, they might be ready to put a formal structure in place to capture what is already a present reality in their mutual lives.

Your Committee believes that this approach fits with the logical order of the dual purposes of NAPARC—“[i] to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and [ii] hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice”⁶—and most of the changes your Committee is proposing are focused on helping the Member Churches better carry out their responsibilities with respect to the first.

d. “A Reformed Dream” General Assembly.

... Your Committee is of one mind with regard to the idea of establishing a general assembly, with each (former) Member Church becoming a particular synod under that general assembly: that a specific proposal for such should not be originated by NAPARC, but only in the appropriate assembly(s) of the Member Churches, who are seeking to become part of the new general assembly, themselves. Your Committee also believes that, even if as many as a half dozen of the Member Churches were to unite in forming such a general assembly, there would still be some Member Churches left behind, who are not yet (and may not be in our lifetimes) ready to unite. Therefore, there will still be an ongoing valuable purpose and function for NAPARC to carry on, both for the Member Churches who are not (then) able to become part of the new general assembly, and for the new general assembly which (one might hope) would also become (or continue) a Member Church in NAPARC.

e. Combination of c. and d. This approach would build on the gradual long-term process described in “c. Gradual long-term process,” above, with a view that whatever formal structure might eventuate would resemble the new general assembly in “d. ‘A Reformed Dream’ General Assembly,” above. It might also include pursuing the gradual long-term process simultaneously with more than one other Member Church, waiting upon the Lord for His blessing, with one of the possible fruits over the long term being the formation of a new general assembly by several Member Churches, like the one envisioned in d.

4. A Way Forward. Your Committee is thankful that both the Reformed and the Presbyterian traditions are represented and embraced in NAPARC, and observes that, generally speaking

⁶ *Constitution*, II.

and without wanting to limit what our Lord is able to do among us, the obstacles to be surmounted when contemplating any form of organic union among Member Churches would be fewer among those Member Churches that are from the same tradition. Accordingly, your Committee would encourage Member Churches, as each considers possible courses or options to pursue in taking up its responsibility to “hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice,”⁷ to:

- be involved actively in seeking opportunities “to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with”⁸ all of the other Member Churches;
- seek opportunities for working together with other Member Churches in particular ministries;
- develop regular conversations with other Member Churches, particularly among those from within the same tradition, with a long-term view towards possible organic union; and
- keep in mind that full organic union of all Member Churches will occur upon the Second Advent, for which we all long today.

⁷ *Constitution*, II.

⁸ *Id.*