

Reuniting Reformed churches would stir discord, study says: Leaders urge continuing increase in shared works

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The two sisters grew up worshiping in the same church. Today, they feel like they still are—despite being in different denominations.

So, Patricia Roek and Lynda Barendse-Witte ask, why not reunite the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) with the Reformed Church in America (RCA), from which the CRC broke away nearly 150 years ago? After all, they say, the churches they attend are virtually the same in worship style and theology. “I think it would be a very good healing process,” said Roek, who was raised in the CRC but is now a member of an RCA congregation.

The two sisters aren’t alone in thinking it’s time to mend the CRC and RCA schism of 1857. On the eve of the CRC’s 150th anniversary this year, many in the two Dutch Reformed denominations believe that they could offer a stronger Christian witness as one church. But in a newly released comparative study of the CRC and RCA, the authors caution that an organizational merger would come at considerable cost.

In *Divided by a Common Heritage*, four scholars from CRC’s Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and RCA’s Hope College in Holland, Michigan, say a formal merger could cause as many as 100,000 people to leave the two churches over theological and policy disagreements. While not arguing for or against merger, they write that it would be “extremely difficult.”

“Both denominations are likely to move slowly toward each other, but I don’t see a merger,” said James Penning, a political science professor at Calvin. “A lot of compromises would have to be made.” A less rocky way, the authors suggest, is continuing to increase cooperative works that have brought the once bitterly divided denominations closer than ever.

Since 2002, the two churches have formed a joint publishing house and made it easier for their clergy to serve churches in the other denomination. “There [are] lots of areas short of formal merger in which the two denominations could cooperate and be better as a result,” said Hope sociologist Roger Nemeth.

That’s already happening in global missions, joint congregations and common consideration of a new confession emphasizing justice and racial reconciliation, said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, RCA general secretary. “We’re taking this seriously in terms of looking for opportunities where we can do together better what we don’t need to do separately.”

There are no formal discussions for a merger, which would be a “mammoth job” involving colleges, seminaries and administrative systems, Granberg-Michaelson said. “I think the time will come at some point when this will seem a likely, helpful and natural thing to advance our mission together,” he said. “But that will only happen when a whole lot has occurred at the grassroots level and a whole lot of questions get answered.”

The divide erupted in 1857 when four West Michigan Dutch immigrant congregations broke from the RCA over the latter’s hymn-singing, open communion and other practices they deemed less than pure. The immigrants’ objection to Masonic Lodge membership helped to fuel the growth of the breakaway CRC.

The lingering bitterness from that split has long since faded in both denominations, says Hope sociologist Donald Luidens. “The animus that was there for a long time was based on a sense of betrayal: ‘Who’s left the faith?’” Luidens said. “There’s none of that now.”

Luidens, Nemeth, Penning and Calvin’s Corwin Smidt have been tracking trends in their respective denominations for two decades. They combined their research and conducted new surveys to amass a huge body of data on demographics, theology and ideology in the CRC and RCA. The result: a portrait of two groups with many shared beliefs, some ideological differences and what Luidens calls “absolutely remarkable” demographic similarities. “The denominations [are] in many respects a kind of mirror image of each other.”

The denominations share Dutch heritage and the common problem of an aging, dwindling membership. They now stand roughly equal in total adult membership—about 168,000 in the RCA and 187,000 in the CRC.

The authors of *Divided by a Common Heritage* contend that remaining divisions would be exacerbated by a merger. The CRC is a member of the more conservative National Association of Evangelicals, while the RCA belongs to the more liberal National Council of Churches.

The RCA has long supported public education, while the CRC has made church-supported private schools a top priority. The RCA has been more willing to accept women clergy, but the CRC gave preliminary approval for women's ordination just last summer. Both churches' struggles over homosexuality would be magnified between the RCA's more tolerant wing and CRC's hard-line conservatives, the authors say.

Their conclusion: Whether merged denominations tried to accommodate these differences or adopted stricter doctrines, churches on the right or left would be lost. Either way, they estimate that out of roughly 400,000 combined members and attending nonmembers, perhaps 100,000 people would leave.

"There are good reasons for merger, but the total is going to be less than the sum of its parts," said Calvin's Smidt. "I certainly think it's worthy of discussion and close scrutiny." -*Charles Honey, Religion News Service*