

**Church Plants with a Denominational Plan**

Ninety-seven church plants have an average worship attendance of 93.

**Organized/Received/Adopted**

Wayfarer Community Church, Caledonia, Michigan (1/08) Classis of South Grand Rapids  
 North Ridge Community Church, Eldridge, Iowa (2/08) Classis of Illinois  
 CenterPoint Church, Lewis Center, Ohio (4/08) Classis of Lake Erie  
 Within Reach Ministries, Parchment, Michigan (4/08) Classis of Southwest Michigan  
 Grace and Peace Reformed Church, Englewood, New Jersey (5/08) Classis of Greater Palisades  
 City Church Denver, Denver, Colorado (6/08) Classis of Center City Network  
 North Point Community Church, Plainwell, Michigan (6/08) Classis of Southwest Michigan  
 Iglesia El Calvario, Hemet, California (10/08) Classis of California  
 St. Paul Reformed Church, Van Wert, Ohio (10/08) Classis of Illiana  
 Lighthouse Korean Reformed Church, Kent, Washington (11/08) Classis of Cascades

**Disbanded/Released**

Church of the Good News, Chicago, Illinois (5/08) Classis of Chicago  
 Open Door Fellowship, Corsica, South Dakota (8/08) Classis of Dakota  
 Heritage Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan (11/08) Classis of Zeeland  
 Church of the Savior, Livonia, Michigan (12/08) Classis of Lake Erie  
 Hope Community Reformed Church, Sacramento, California (12/08) Classis of Central California  
 Open Door Reformed Church, Dorr, Michigan (12/08) Classis of Zeeland

**Merged**

Oaks Community Church, Chino, California and The Bridge, Chino, California, became The Bridge, Chino, California (6/07–reported late) Classis of California

Second Reformed Church, Wyckoff, New Jersey, and Union Reformed Church, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, became Abundant Life Reformed Church, Wyckoff, New Jersey (10/08) Classis of Passaic Valley

## Report of the General Synod Task Force on General Synod Professors of Theology

Interim Report on R-86

A task force appointed in early 2008 by the president of General Synod has been attempting a thorough review of the way in which the office of General Synod professor functions in the life of the church, and the manner in which the office is addressed in the *Book of Church Order* (BCO).<sup>1</sup> The full mandate is as follows:

1. to clarify the processes of accountability, appeal, and pastoral care for General Synod professors of theology currently outlined in the *Book of Church Order*, including any needed revisions to the *Book of Church Order*;
2. to coordinate the development of relevant policies and practices within the seminaries and/or commissions or agencies of the church that do not require changes to the *Book of Church Order*, but that relate to the role of General Synod professors within the seminaries and within the life of the church; and further,
3. to review the nature of the office of General Synod professor;
4. to review the criteria for eligibility to that office;
5. to clarify the responsibility of the office of General Synod professor of theology to the General Synod;

6. to examine means by which the General Synod professors could be established as an ongoing body within the order of the church.

Although the original mandate given to this task force requested a final report in 2009, for a variety of reasons, the task force intends to wait until 2010 for its final report. The task force has already met once by conference call, and three times face-to-face. Although our work is not yet finished, some broad principles are emerging. This report seeks to articulate some of these principles, in the hope of soliciting input, reactions, and advice from a variety of persons within the RCA who may have insights and/or concerns about the “fourth office.”

The task force began its work by seeking to define theologically and ecclesiologically exactly what a General Synod professor is or should be, from the perspective of Reformed theology and polity. Our first consideration focused upon the structural relationship between the seminaries and the General Synod. The task force believes that much of the current *BCO* language is a holdover from a time when the General Synod exercised much more direct oversight over the seminaries of the RCA.

This is reflected, for example, in the way the office is defined as a “full-time associate or full professor at one of the seminaries of the Reformed Church.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the operation or direct oversight of the seminaries is not explicitly granted to the General Synod by the *BCO*. In fact, since the dissolution of the old Board of Theological Education in 1993, General Synod’s constitutional oversight of the seminaries is restricted to the approval of appointments to their respective boards.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the *BCO* does explicitly assign to the General Synod the oversight of the standards for the certificate of fitness for ministry, as well as “original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.”<sup>4</sup> But if the General Synod no longer has direct oversight over the seminaries, then this new reality must be more fully reflected in the way in which General Synod professors are defined in the *BCO*. This led the task force to consider defining General Synod professors, not in terms of teaching at the seminaries, but rather in terms of the distinctive form of ministry which identifies this office. The task force recognizes, from the existing formulary for the appointment of a General Synod professor, that a General Synod professor is “a teacher of the church at large.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the task force notes the centrality of the involvement of General Synod professors in preparing candidates for ministry, and in the awarding of the certificate of fitness for ministry.

As a result, the task force is working with the following provisional definition of General Synod professors, for possible inclusion in the *BCO*:

The office of General Synod professor of theology is to offer the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole, and to represent the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry.

These changes would allow for the appointment of General Synod professors who are not full-time teachers at one of the seminaries, but who play a major role in teaching the whole church and in preparing candidates for ministry and granting the certificate of fitness. It would also open the possibility of General Synod professors who are not in one of the RCA seminaries, but who exercise major teaching and oversight responsibilities within the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.

A second major working assumption being developed by the task force focuses not so much on structural considerations (i.e., the relationship between the General Synod and the

seminaries), but upon the theological and ecclesiological definition of the office of General Synod professor. The task force has come to the conclusion that, even though General Synod professors are not *ordained* to their office, their ministry does represent an office of the church, in the sense that they represent, in a special and focused way, the teaching ministry of Christ to the whole church.

In one sense, this teaching ministry is part of the ministry of Word and sacrament, and professors of theology are in fact peers and partners with other ministers of Word and sacrament. The professorate is thus not a separate *magisterium* with teaching authority over or apart from the ministry of Word and sacrament. Yet in both scope and focus, there is also a distinct nature to this office. General Synod professors are teachers of the *whole* church, who assist the whole church in its understanding of and obedience to Scripture as interpreted by our Standards. This broader scope is critical and essential to the office as it has been exercised in the RCA. Moreover, General Synod professors are devoted in a special and focused way to the ministry of teaching, and in this sense as well represent a distinct vocation and office in the life of the church.

It is particularly this wide *scope* of the office, as well as the distinctive role played by General Synod professors in preparing candidates for ministry and in recommending the certificate of fitness for ministry, that supplies the central rationale for their distinctive participation in the life of the General Synod. Currently General Synod professors are members of the General Synod. This membership in the General Synod exists for a specific purpose: to ensure that the preparation of candidates for ministry does not reflect a narrow theological or ecclesiological perspective of one region of the church, but rather is an expression of the unity, apostolicity, and catholicity of the whole church. They participate regularly in the life of the General Synod<sup>6</sup> so that they may use their teaching gifts in the service of the whole church, and also because they are called to be agents of the General Synod in a critical task that can only be done at the General Synod level—preserving the unity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the whole church in its theological reflection and in its preparation and certification of candidates for ministry.

Yet problems have emerged in the ability of the General Synod to exercise appropriate pastoral care and discipline of those General Synod professors who are among its members. The *BCO* requires that the General Synod “shall be responsible for the pastoral care of each enrolled professor and the professor’s immediate family.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the General Synod has struggled to fulfill this mandate, and currently has no process or structure in place to fulfill it. And pastoral care is not the only problem. In the 2005 Kansfield trial and its aftermath, the difficulties the church has experienced in exercising continuing pastoral care and discipline in this case have shown that the General Synod is ill-equipped to engage in direct oversight of individuals. Because the membership of the General Synod turns over almost completely each year, it is almost impossible to establish the continuity in relationships that exists, for example, at the classis level, where such discipline and pastoral care normally take place in our polity.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly this is one of the major concerns that led to the mandates given to this task force. One approach the task force considered to address these problems consisted of establishing new and ongoing structures to strengthen the ability of the General Synod to fulfill these responsibilities of oversight and discipline. Yet the task force has decided that it intends to pursue a different approach in solving these problems. We have instead decided to reconsider whether General Synod professors should continue to be *members* of the General Synod. As an alternative to membership in the General Synod for General Synod professors, we are considering the following approach:

- General Synod professors will be members of the classis in which they reside.
- General Synod professors will continue to be either regular or corresponding delegates to the General Synod as they have in the past, in order to allow them to continue their ministry of teaching to the whole church, and to keep them in close contact with the synod in their crucial tasks of preparing and certifying candidates for ministry in the RCA.
- General Synod professors will be solely amenable to the General Synod *only in matters of doctrine*, but in every other respect shall be amenable, as are all ministers of Word and sacrament, to the classis in which they hold membership (in this case, the classis of residence).
- In this more focused amenability to the General Synod, the only discipline that the synod will exercise will focus upon the office of professor of theology. Its disciplinary options include admonishment, rebuke, suspension from the office of General Synod professor, or removal from that office. Any other discipline that may be needed will be the responsibility of the classis, which will address the accused not as a General Synod professor but as a minister of Word and sacrament.

Why are we taking this approach? The task force believes that the essential reason General Synod professors have been members of the General Synod in the past has been to preserve the doctrinal unity of the church. Our current practice is (correctly) based on the assumption that the preparation and certification of candidates for ministry should reflect the doctrinal convictions and perspective of the whole church, and not just a particular region. Yet amenability to the synod in matters of doctrine does not inherently require *membership* in the General Synod.

Consequently, the task force believes that a better way forward is to posit a more focused amenability of General Synod professors in matters of doctrine to the General Synod, and to leave the rest of pastoral care and discipline in the hands of the classis, which is better equipped to carry out these tasks in an ongoing way. The General Synod is ill-equipped to exercise a wider range of discipline or pastoral care over its professors, and the attempt to do so may also create conflicts between the synod and the seminary boards. Therefore the task force is moving toward proposing that General Synod professors retain membership and some amenability in their classes of residence, while continuing their involvement with the General Synod, and their amenability to the synod in matters of doctrine.

This approach has the additional benefit of allowing part-time faculty who are teaching in the seminaries or in the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, but who also function as ministers of Word and sacrament under the oversight of a classis, to be considered for nomination as General Synod professors.

Obviously, a host of details must be addressed if such an approach is to be fully articulated in our church order, particularly in clarifying this “division of labor” between the oversight of the General Synod in matters of doctrine, and the more general oversight exercised by the classis for General Synod professors. The task force is continuing to work on a comprehensive set of proposed changes to the *BCO* and related church order documents. The task force hopes to develop its initial draft of these changes by June 2009. It intends to circulate them widely in the church and to solicit input before it prepares a final report, including a set of proposed changes for submission to the 2010 General Synod.

The task force is also addressing the collegiality and corporate identity of General Synod professors. Because of the broad Reformed conviction that the Spirit’s work in guiding the church expresses itself most fully within the church corporately, and not just in individuals, the task force believes that it may be helpful to recognize in our church order a corpo-

rate role for General Synod professors within the life of the church. This role should first of all concern oversight of the standards for the certificate of fitness for ministry, and the professors should work together to receive referrals from the General Synod with respect to the standards, and to formulate periodic reports and recommendations to the synod regarding the standards.

Similarly, the professorate may be a useful resource to the General Synod from time to time, not replacing any of our existing commissions, but in some cases, receiving appropriate referrals from the General Synod, or offering reports to the synod on matters which touch upon the specific responsibilities granted to the professorate by the General Synod. The task force is still working on defining the specific channel through which such reports and referrals could be communicated between the professorate and the General Synod.

Finally, the task force is seeking ways to change the option of a *second trial* for General Synod professors<sup>9</sup> into the option for an *appeal* to the next General Synod. This poses some challenging issues in terms of church order, but the task force believes it can be done, and will better serve the church.

The task force has done further work to begin to translate these principles into a full set of changes to the *BCO*, which involves many detailed considerations. Our work is not yet complete. However, the task force invites feedback on the broad principles we have enumerated above, including the following:

- Clarifying that General Synod professors fill an office of the church, focused upon teaching the whole church, and preparing and certifying candidates for ministry on behalf of the General Synod.
- Clarifying that doctrinal amenability to the General Synod is necessary for General Synod professors for a theological reason: to preserve the unity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church's teaching and more specifically of its preparation of candidates for the ministry of Word and sacrament.
- Defining the professorate in terms of serving as a teacher of the church, and in terms of teaching and oversight of candidates for ministry and the certificate of fitness for ministry, rather than in terms of teaching in RCA seminaries.
- Broadening the possible sources for appointment of General Synod professors to allow for part-time professors at the seminaries, as well as teachers under the supervision of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.
- Amenability of General Synod professors to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, but in all other cases, holding General Synod professors amenable to the classis in which they reside.
- Making provision in our order for the professorate to function as a body, with oversight over the standards for the certificate of fitness for ministry, including the ability to receive referrals from the General Synod and to make reports to the General Synod.
- Changing the option of a second trial for General Synod professors to the option to appeal a judicial case to the next General Synod.

The task force welcomes responses to this interim report. Please submit all comments and feedback to [jim.brownson@westernsem.edu](mailto:jim.brownson@westernsem.edu). Thanks in advance for helping the task force to do its work.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the mandate of this task force, see R-86 in the *Minutes of General Synod, 2007*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>2</sup> See *BCO* 1.IV.8.3.

<sup>3</sup> It must also be recognized that the General Synod is the “sole member” of the corporation that legally constitutes each of the seminaries. Yet this relationship between the seminaries and the General Synod is not to be confused with *oversight*, which the General Synod exercises only indirectly through approval of appointments to the seminary boards.

<sup>4</sup> See *BCO* 1.IV.2.7.

<sup>5</sup> See Formulary 6: “Appointment of a General Synod Professor of Theology.”

<sup>6</sup> Each year, two General Synod professors from each seminary currently attend General Synod as regular delegates (1.IV.1), and all General Synod professors who are in attendance at General Synod are recognized as corresponding delegates (3.I.8.1).

<sup>7</sup> See *BCO* 1.IV.8.6.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that many classes have also found it difficult to fulfill the mandate which the *BCO* gives them regarding the pastoral care of their enrolled ministers. (See *BCO* 1.II.12.3.)

<sup>9</sup> See *BCO* 2.I.3.4.b.