

Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order met October 16-19, 2008, in Rosemont, Illinois, and again January 30-31, 2009, at the RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Additionally the commission met by means of conference calls and communicated by email to process the business of the commission.

Judicial Bodies

In 2007 the commission brought to General Synod a recommendation for the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that proposed significant changes in how judicial business would be conducted in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Generally it proposed that in most assemblies when functioning as a judicatory the work of the judicatory would be facilitated by a new judicial body of that assembly called a Commission on Judicial Business. The Commission on Church Order believed there to be a number of advantages to this system including freeing the assembly to do the work of the church while leaving the details of a judicial procedure to those elected by the assembly (i.e. the Commission on Judicial Business), who would have the ability to handle it efficiently and fairly.

While the 2007 General Synod approved the recommendation and while a majority of the classes ratified the proposed *BCO* amendments, the amendments failed to receive the necessary approval by two-thirds of the classes to allow for the incorporation of the changes into the *BCO*.

The commission has dialogued with the greater church about concerns that were perceived by the classes as they considered the ratification vote. The message heard is that many believed that having a judicial body do the work of the judicatory works on the level of the regional synod and the General Synod, but there were concerns about it at the classis level. (Note that there never was a proposed change to use judicial bodies at the level of the board of elders.)

There remains on the part of the Commission on Church Order a belief in the value of judicial bodies doing the work of the judicatory. Therefore, the commission worked during the past year toward a proposal to the church that would be similar to what was proposed to the General Synod in 2007 but would be only on the level of the regional synods and the General Synod. While the work on this proposal is not yet complete, the commission plans to bring a recommendation for new judicial bodies to the 2010 General Synod. The commission welcomes input from the church as it continues to work on a judicial bodies proposal.

Recourse for the Decision of an Investigative Committee

Provision is made in the polity of the RCA for a procedure to impose discipline when there are offenses subject to accusation that can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures or from the Constitution of the RCA. That provision is found in the Discipline section of the *BCO* (Chapter 2, Part I). A specific part of this is the procedure for bringing a charge (*BCO*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4). In this procedure a committee of the judicatory is appointed to determine if there is sufficient merit for the charge to warrant further consideration. This committee is usually referred to as the investigative committee. After a stipulated process, the *BCO* states in part that if the committee finds that “there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge by the judicatory” (*BCO*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Sec. 6).

It has come to the attention of the commission that there is not clarity about what “final resolution of the charge” means from the point of view of an accuser—a person who brought the charge. What recourse does the accuser have if he or she does not agree with the decision of the investigative committee? How can this be a resolution by the judicatory when only a committee considered the charge? Can the accuser file an appeal of this decision to a higher judicatory?

An example of the confusion was laid before the 2008 General Synod in a matter presented by the Commission on Judicial Business where a charge was dismissed by an investigative committee of a classis and subsequently that charge was appealed to the higher judicatory. Without going into detail suffice it to say that the 2008 General Synod said that such a dismissal cannot be appealed because it is only in order when a judgment has been reached. Dismissal by an investigative committee is not a judgment.

The commission agrees with the opinion of the 2008 General Synod that a dismissal of a charge cannot be appealed to a higher body. While not constitutional, the explanatory note for Section 6 (explanatory note 15, *BCO* page 92) states in part that if “dissatisfied with the decision of the committee of the judicatory, a new charge(s) may be filed.” A further recourse might be that a complaint against the actions of the investigative committee may be filed, if one of the grounds of a complaint is alleged.

To clarify that the dismissal of a charge by an investigative committee is not a judgment of a judicatory and therefore not open to appeal, the commission offers the following recommendation:

R-58

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 6, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 6

Sec. 6. If the charge is not otherwise resolved, and the committee determines there is sufficient merit in the charge, the judicatory shall proceed to trial. If there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge by the judicatory. (ADOPTED)

The Commission on Church Order will be amending explanatory note 15 (*BCO*, page 92) to indicate that additional recourse for dissatisfaction with the decision of the investigative committee may be a complaint against the actions of the investigative committee, providing that one of the grounds for complaint is alleged.

Supersession of a Consistory

The commission was given the following General Synod referral (*MGS 2008*, R-26, p. 123):

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to review the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 12-15 (regarding the supersession of consistories by classes) and *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 8 (regarding the dissolution of pastoral relationships), specifically looking to clarify the meaning and

implication of these sections and recommending, as it sees fit, possible amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, for report to the 2009 General Synod.

The commission performed a thorough review of the *BCO* sections that give the rules for a classis to supersede a consistory (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 12-15). Reasons that accompanied the referral included statements of concern about the hostile nature of the language to supersede a consistory and about issues that may arise on a potential dissolution of a pastoral relationship as it relates to the rules found in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 8.

While noting and addressing the specific concerns addressed in the rationale for the referral, the instruction was to do a general review. The commission offers three recommendations that are designed to help both the classis and the affected church with the process of classis supersession of a consistory. Two of the recommendations propose additional reasons for which a classis might supersede a consistory, and the third recommendation will be to clarify the process within the *BCO*. Additionally the commission offers some guidelines for a classis to follow in the process.

Classes are required to determine that at least one of the conditions that is listed in *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12 exists before moving to supersede a consistory. In reviewing this list of conditions, it came to the attention of the commission that another harmful condition could be present in a church that would call for superseding the consistory of that church. While items like property foreclosure and neglect of property are mentioned as conditions, there is no mention of a condition where financial irregularities or improprieties are occurring. Therefore the commission makes the following recommendation to add such a reason:

R-59

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out, subsequent subsections are renumbered):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12

***Sec. 12.* The classis shall have the authority to supersede a consistory in the administration of a local church when, in its judgment, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfill the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis. Such conditions shall include at least one of the following:**

- a. Failure to hold regularly scheduled Sunday services.
- b. Absence of a quorum of a governing body as prescribed by the constitution, bylaws, or rules of order of the church, for a period of three months.
- c. Lack of a governing body.
- d. Danger of loss of property by reason of foreclosure or otherwise.
- e. Financial irregularities or improprieties, including, but not limited to, the improper use of church funds.

- e. f. Neglect of the physical condition of the church properties.
- ~~f.~~ g. Insufficiency of confessing membership to fulfill the purposes and responsibilities of an organized church.
- ~~g.~~ h. Long-term or rapid decline in participation or membership.
- ~~h.~~ i. Inability to provide adequate ministerial services. (ADOPTED)

A time may come in the life of a church when both the consistory and the classis realize that it is the end of that church's ministry. For a classis to close a church the classis needs to assume control of that church by superseding the consistory. In these cases the supersession is voluntary and may actually be requested by the consistory. While undoubtedly this currently occurs, the *BCO* provisions assume an adversarial supersession with no provision for a request by the consistory. Therefore the commission makes the following recommendation to add a condition to the list found in Section 12:

R-60

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12

Sec. 12. The classis shall have the authority to supersede a consistory in the administration of a local church when, in its judgment, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfill the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis. Such conditions shall include at least one of the following:

- a. Failure to hold regularly scheduled Sunday services.
- b. Absence of a quorum of a governing body as prescribed by the constitution, bylaws, or rules of order of the church, for a period of three months.
- c. Lack of a governing body.
- d. Danger of loss of property by reason of foreclosure or otherwise.
- e. Neglect of the physical condition of the church properties.
- f. Insufficiency of confessing membership to fulfill the purposes and responsibilities of an organized church.
- g. Long-term or rapid decline in participation or membership.
- h. Inability to provide adequate ministerial services.
- i. The consistory requests supersession. (ADOPTED)

The commission believes that the remaining sections that give the classis rules regarding supersession and reconstitution of a consistory (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 13-15) should be refined and clarified so that those involved in this action have a clear understanding of what is expected during the process as well as the structure after the supersession. This includes adding a clear statement about the persons classis appoints to exercise the functions of a consistory. The commission offers the following recommendation that is intended primarily to clarify the intent and clean up the language rather than make any substantive change:

R-61

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 13-15, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 13. Classis shall be directed by the following rules when superseding a consistory:

a. Before superseding a consistory, the classis shall state notify the church of its intention and summon the ~~consistory of that church governing body~~ to show cause why that consistory should not be dissolved and the church and its property be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. The notice shall include the following:

1. the basis upon which the classis is seeking supersession.

2. the time, date, and location of the classis meeting where supersession shall be considered.

3. a statement that the consistory must appear at the meeting identified in Section 13(a)(2) and show cause why it should not be dissolved.

b. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may, instead, advise the classis of its approval of this action.

c. If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it shall dissolve the consistory and otherwise terminate the formal organization of that church and take such steps as may be necessary to bring that church, its ministry, and its property under the direct administration of the classis.

d. Such a church shall not have a consistory, but the classis shall designate those persons, not necessarily members of that church, who shall exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church. These persons shall serve the church in the same capacity as a consistory until such time as the life of the church has reached an end or a consistory for the church is reconstituted (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 15).

e. All actions ~~The final action~~ of the classis ~~under this section to dissolve a consistory~~ shall require a two-thirds vote, ~~of The classis shall have~~ a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 14. When the classis has superseded a consistory, it shall have the authority, in the exercise of its discretion and in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

- a. terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.
- b. take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote, ~~of the members~~ **The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.**

Sec. 15. The classis shall have the authority to reconstitute the consistory of a church when, in the judgment of the classis, sufficient growth has been achieved or suitable stability created so that the church can continue ministry without classis administration. The classis shall guide the consistory selection process (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 14). **All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis. (ADOPTED)**

The process to supersede a consistory—whether requested by a consistory or taken by a classis as a necessary action—is a task that is not always easily understood, especially since it is a task that (fortunately) does not occur regularly. It is a process that often results in the end of the life of a church, but it might be a time of renewal and rebirth. It can be a step in the renewal of a church as it needs to regroup with the classis' help toward restarting its ministry. Whatever the case the classis must do what is best for God's kingdom while still working within strict conformity to those provisions mandated by the *BCO*.

It may be helpful for classes to follow some guidelines as they find supersession of a consistory before them. These guidelines anticipate that some process has occurred with a church prior to the actual steps toward supersession. These guidelines do not change *BCO* provisions, and those must take precedence.

Steps to Guide Classes in the Supersession of a Consistory

1. When there are conditions in a church that the classis determines makes it unable to fulfill the functions of a church, the classis then may move towards superseding a consistory by satisfying itself that one or more of the provisions of Chapter 1, Part

- II, Article 7, Section 12 are true. This determination may be done by the full classis but more likely it will happen within a committee of the classis that has been working with the church and that is authorized to bring this intention before the classis and to the consistory.
2. The classis notifies the church that it is the intention of the classis to dissolve the consistory and that the church and its property will be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. This notification process must occur even if it is a voluntary supersession, i.e. the consistory requests that the classis takes this action. In subsequent steps, the consistory may indicate its approval of or agreement with this action rather than showing cause why it should not happen. The notice will:
 - a. give the reason(s) from the list found in Section 12.
 - b. give the time, date, and location of the classis meeting where the action to supersede will be considered.
 - c. summon the consistory to that meeting to show cause why it should not be dissolved.
 - d. be delivered within the constitutional lead time for a notice of a stated or special classis session.
 3. When supersession is to be considered at a stated meeting the notice to the classis should include the supersession as an item on the agenda. When this action is to be considered at a special meeting, the notice to classis must follow *BCO* rules in regard to the ten-day notice requirement and the requirement to state the purpose of the meeting.
 4. At said meeting, classis places the motion to supersede on the floor of the classis. The motion should state that in conformity with *BCO* Section 12 reason(s) [state them], the classis dissolves the consistory of [church name] and terminates the formal organization of said church; further, the church, its ministry, and its property is to come under the direct administration of the classis; further, the classis appoints [name the persons] who will exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church.
 5. Said meeting must have the quorum of a stated session (i.e. a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of classis).
 6. Classis shall make provision to hear the consistory in addition to any normal discussion on the motion. The said church may also have its normal elder delegate(s), who can participate as fully in discussion as other elder delegates. Provision to adequately allow the consistory to be heard does not necessarily mean that the classis allows others in the congregation to be heard.
 7. The vote on the motion as defined in step 6 (to supersede and appoint those exercising the function of the consistory) requires a two-thirds approval vote to pass. The *BCO* states that "Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis" (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1).
 8. The classis shall appoint persons as trustees for the protection, preservation, management, and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine. Those persons may or may not be the same persons who were appointed to function as the consistory. Note that the way in which property is owned may vary from state to state. It is important to obtain legal advice to insure clear ownership of the property.
 9. The classis should seek proper legal advice regarding terminating the authority of the consistory, especially as it applies to the church property. If appropriate, the classis shall take action (the motion approved by two-thirds vote) to terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.
 10. Finally, throughout the process the classis needs to make sure that every part of the *BCO* process is followed carefully, and that there are no conclusions being reached prematurely, procedural irregularities, or appearances of bias.

Receiving Ministers from Other Denominations

The 2007 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to review Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 4a (3-4) of the *Book of Church Order* and to consider amendments to that section that would allow a classis to waive the receipt of an academic degree and a seminary transcript in limited instances when an ordained minister of a church in communion with the General Synod is unable to furnish such documents (*MGS 2007*, R-28, pp. 108-109).

While in the process of working on this referral the commission received communication from the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) that expressed a concern about how classes are receiving ministers from other denominations. They stated that they have learned of situations where candidates enrolled with MFCA have “opted out of the RCA and then sought and obtained ordination with other churches or organizations” (*MGS 2008*, p. 298). Subsequently, classes receive these same candidates into classis membership—and therefore membership as an RCA minister of Word and sacrament—as ordained ministers from other “denominations.”

BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11 governs how a classis receives ministers (and licensed candidates) from other denominations. The commission sees a request from a classis that asks for a little more flexibility. The commission sees a request from MFCA that asks that it be clarified that the *BCO* requires the same minister preparation standards for a minister from another denomination as is required by the RCA. The commission believes both requests to be valid.

The commission looked at all of Article 11 not just subsections of it. The first three sections of this article outline the rules for reception of ministers from other denominations while the fourth section, with its many parts, is more like a process guide for implementation of the first three sections. (The fifth and last section of the article deals with licensed candidates and does not enter into this particular discussion.)

The commission debated whether or not the *BCO* should be a procedural manual, as the details of such a manual can become troublesome. For example, the aforementioned Section 4 of Article 11 only refers to a process for ministers from other denominations who wish to be considered for a call from a congregation, which then becomes confusing when ministers are being considered to be received under other circumstances. On the other hand the commission recognized that it is helpful to classes to have steps to follow so that nothing is missed in these important matters. Additionally the commission believes that the items under subsection 4a of Article 11 should be followed in all cases.

To clarify that ministers from other denominations must have completed the same standards of preparation as those required in the RCA, to clarify that in all cases classes need to have proper evidence of the credentials of ministers from other denominations, and to allow classes to not be restricted from exercising good judgment, the commission makes the following recommendation:

R-62

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 3-5, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11

Sec. 3. When an application is made for admission to the classis by a licensed candidate or a minister from another denomination, the classis shall consider only an applicant who has satisfied educational requirements that are equivalent ~~determine whether the applicant's educational qualifications are equal~~ to those required in the Reformed Church in America, and it shall subject the applicant to such examination before classis as shall demonstrate the applicant's understanding of the theology, history, government, and disciplinary procedures of the Reformed Church in America; understanding of and adherence to the Standards of the Reformed Church in America; and loyalty to its agencies.

Sec. 4. a. When an ordained minister of another denomination wishes to ~~be considered for a call from a congregation in the RCA~~ apply for admission to the classis, that minister shall furnish the ~~stated clerk~~ of classis with the following or the equivalent:

- ~~1.~~ a. a written statement from the body holding the minister's credentials attesting that the minister is an ordained minister in good and regular standing;
- ~~2.~~ b. a completed Minister's Profile form;
- ~~3.~~ c. copies of academic degrees;
- ~~4.~~ d. a seminary transcript;
- ~~5.~~ e. names, addresses, and telephone numbers of five persons who are qualified to comment on the applicant's ministry;
- ~~6.~~ f. a statement from the applicant which attests to knowledge of Reformed Church history, readiness to adhere to the Standards of the RCA, and a basic knowledge of and readiness to support Reformed Church agencies and institutions.

Sec. 5. An ordained minister from another denomination may seek to receive preliminary approval to candidate with RCA congregations.

- ~~b.~~ a. Prior to becoming a serious candidate for a call from a congregation in the Reformed Church in America, an ordained minister who is affiliated with another denomination shall meet with the appropriate committee of a Reformed Church classis, which shall determine whether, in its judgment, the minister is able to meet the requirements set forth in the *Book of Church Order*, Part II, Article 11, Sections 1, 2, ~~and 3,~~ and 4 above. The committee's judgment, whether positive or negative, shall be sent by the stated clerk to the Office of Ministry Services for attachment to the applicant's Minister's Profile form and such distribution as may be appropriate.
- ~~e.~~ b. If the committee's judgment is negative, the classis may appoint one or more of its ministers to assist the applicant in preparation for a second meeting with the classis committee, which shall take place not less than six months after the initial meeting. The committee may also require additional formal study prior to a second meeting.

- ~~d~~. c. When an ordained minister who is affiliated with another denomination has met with a classis committee in order to determine whether the minister is qualified to be considered for a call to a Reformed church, and the committee is not satisfied with the minister's qualifications, any subsequent meetings for the same purpose shall take place within the same classis, unless the classis specifically requests another classis to act on its behalf.
- ~~e~~. d. When a classis is requested to approve a call to a minister who is affiliated with another denomination, prior to its examination of the applicant it shall obtain full information from the chairperson of the committee which reviewed the applicant's qualifications, as outlined in ~~b, c, and d~~ a, b, and c above.

[The current Section 5 becomes Section 6.] (ADOPTED)

Church Growth Fund Representation at General Synod

The bylaws of the General Synod provide for corresponding delegates from various agencies, commissions, and other related entities to provide for a proper communication link between the General Synod and the entity. Examples include corresponding delegates from the RCA colleges, the *Church Herald*, the seminaries, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, and the Board of Benefits Services.

The RCA Church Growth Fund currently has no such connection. The RCA Church Growth Fund has requested such a connection be established to allow for proper connect- edness to the General Synod. Therefore the commission proposes a change to the bylaws of the General Synod:

R-63

To adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 8, Section 13, for approval by the synod and to be voted for ratification at the 2010 General Synod (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 13. RCA Church Growth Fund

The president of the RCA Church Growth Fund board of directors, or another of its members designated by the RCA Church Growth Fund board of directors, shall be a corresponding delegate. (ADOPTED)

Membership of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

The commission received a communication that came jointly from the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. That communication requested that the Commission on Church Order consider changes to a section of the bylaws of General Synod that sets the membership of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. The reasons for the request as stated by the two commissions are:

First, there is a significant (and seemingly growing) focus in the RCA on discipleship and youth ministries due to the prevalence of all age groups coming to communities of faith with no previous Christian faith development. Assuming this is so, the commis-

sions believe it is appropriate for this to be reflected in the *BCO* provisions regarding membership on the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship.

Second, it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy some of the requirements for membership on the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship—particularly the requirement that two of the members of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship be members from the faculties of RCA-affiliated institutions. Simply put, there are a limited number of faculty members of RCA-affiliated institutions who both a) have knowledge of and interest in Christian education and b) are members of the Reformed Church in America.

The Commission on Church Order concurs with these commissions. Therefore it recommends the following change in the bylaws of the General Synod:

R-64

To adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12a, for approval by the synod and to be voted for ratification at the 2010 General Synod (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 12. Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

a. Membership

The commission shall have seven members. At least three shall be persons with responsibility for discipleship and education ~~and discipleship~~ in RCA churches and one ~~two~~ shall be a members from the faculties of an RCA-affiliated institutions. A general knowledge of, and interest in, Christian education and discipleship shall be required of all members. (ADOPTED)

Affinity Classis—Definition of Bounds

Included in the Commission on Church Order report to the 2008 General Synod was the topic regarding a classis that is formed using other than geographical boundaries. A so-called affinity classis was formed by the Regional Synod of the Far West; that classis is called the Center City Network Classis. Repeating what was said in the commission's 2008 report (*MGS 2008*, p. 250):

Although the commission believes that the historical intention of the *BCO* was for classis bounds to be geographic lines, nothing was found that clearly prohibits the formation of this type of classis. The *BCO* gives the regional synods the power to “form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3). While it is not within the area of responsibility of the commission to determine the merits of such a decision, several suggestions were offered by the commission to the Regional Synod of the Far West prior to the new classis formation.

At the 2008 General Synod Center City Network Classis representatives were invited to participate in the life of the synod but were not allowed to vote. They were not allowed to vote only because the bylaws of the General Synod state that the configuration of the classes for determining General Synod delegates shall be as of “December 31st of the year immediately preceding the year in which General Synod is convened” (*BCO* 3.I.1.1c), and the classis was formed after that date. Coming out of the discussion of seating the new clas-

sis at the 2008 General Synod, a written statement was delivered to the president of the General Synod that requested that the Commission on Church Order form a definition of “bounds” as it is used in the *BCO*. The president referred that request to the commission.

In the fall of 2008 the commission received a communication from the Classis of Greater Palisades. That communication asked the commission to respond to several questions that revolved on the “bounds” definition as it is used in the *BCO*.

On a different but related issue, the commission continued its discussion and initiated communication regarding the Church Multiplication Team (CMT) conviction document. The specifics of the commission work with this document will be given later in this Commission on Church Order report. However, suffice it to say here, some of the issues that to the commission are less than clear in the CMT conviction document are about how authority is granted to classes across traditional classis boundaries.

It became clear to the commission that this is a larger issue than is appropriate for the Commission on Church Order to determine. While the commission understands the history of the intention of “bounds” in the *BCO*, it also realizes that the *BCO* is a document that evolves as the church’s understanding of its polity develops. The *BCO* does not specifically forbid what has occurred nor does it specifically permit it. Church order is there to serve the church, not the other way around. It must be flexible enough to free the church to do the things that are important while still giving the necessary structure and reflection of Reformed theology.

Given that this is a larger issue than the commission, the following recommendation is offered:

R-65

To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the RCA seminaries and the General Synod professors of theology, to offer a church-wide discussion on the issue of “bounds” as it is used in the *Book of Church Order*, particularly on the issue of classis boundaries; and further,

**that this church-wide discussion event be one that is self-funded.
(ADOPTED)**

Church Multiplication Team Conviction Document

The RCA Church Multiplication Team (CMT) developed a conviction document that defines the relationship between a church plant and its classis of accountability. This document is commonly known as the CMT Conviction. The CMT is a ministry arm of the General Synod Council (GSC). It reports to the GSC through the general secretary.

The Commission on Church Order reported to the 2008 General Synod that prior to the 2008 synod session it entered into dialogue with CMT representatives along with General Synod officers and others. Out of that discussion came some changes in the CMT Conviction. That conviction was quoted for the 2008 General Synod in the workbook and it appears in the *2008 Minutes of General Synod* on pages 136-137.

The commission report to the 2008 General Synod on this matter concluded with the following: “The commission will remain in discussion with the Church Multiplication Team and/or the General Synod Council (GSC)—which had voted that the document is not in violation of GSC policies—as the commission believes that continued refinement of such a document is in the best interest of all” (*MGS 2008*, p. 250).

The CMT conviction states that a classis of a parenting church determines the classis of accountability and support for a new church start. It goes on to say that this relationship will remain with the classis of the parent church for the initial ten years—or longer.

The primary concern that the commission has with this document is not so much crossing traditional boundaries—although when that boundary crossing happens, that is when issues might arise—rather it is that the authority is vested in this document rather than appropriately in an assembly. While the CMT may wish this document to mandate the classis relationship, our polity states that “governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies” (*BCO*, Preamble, p. 4). It is the assemblies that govern, not a conviction, not the GSC, and not staff employed by any assembly.

Suggestions have been given for modification of the CMT conviction document that would direct an appropriate assembly to make the classis of accountability decision when the parent church and church plant relationship crosses traditional boundaries. It may well happen that the decision will be to keep the church plant’s classis of accountability with the classis of the parent church as stated in the CMT conviction, but that decision should be made by an appropriate assembly.

As of this writing the members of the CMT have only modified their document by adding a footnote that states that those involved with a particular church plant will be “in consultation with other regional synods, classes, and congregations prior to the establishment of a new ministry.” The commission appreciates this assurance, however, it does not provide for resolution if disagreement would occur between the parties involved.

The commission intends to continue to monitor how the CMT Conviction is used. It is the commission’s intention to remain in communication with the CMT and the GSC. The commission has expressed to both the CMT and the GSC its desire to serve the General Synod and to do what is best for the RCA and God’s kingdom. It hopes and prays that a way will be found that so that all parties can work in unity and support the efforts of the CMT in multiplication of congregations and the growth of God’s kingdom.

Work with Other Commissions and Task Forces

The commission is in communication and consultation with other commissions and task forces especially as their work may involve changes in the *BCO*. Specific to this General Synod the commission has worked with two such groups.

Consultation occurred with the Commission on Christian Unity as they bring a recommendation for a *BCO* amendment adding the Belhar Confession as an additional RCA doctrinal standard.

Additionally the Commission on Church Order worked extensively with the *BCO* recommendation coming from the task force that worked on the “R-11” recommendation coming out of the 2008 General Synod. In part that task force was to “study how to increase the participation of people from racial and ethnic backgrounds other than the majority in the life of General Synod, and to increase the participation of women and those of younger generations, so that these voices may be more fully heard and welcomed in the life of the General Synod; and...to report and bring recommendations to the 2009 General Synod, including any possible changes in the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod” (*MGS 2008*, R-11, pp. 81-82). It is with regard to the latter part of the task that the commission worked in order to bring the requested changes in conformity with the polity of the RCA.