Resources around Reformed Understanding of Scripture

Western Theological Seminary professor Todd Billings was asked to record a teaching video with discussion questions on this topic, which was piloted at the fall joint meeting of the GSC and the commissions in October 2016. After feedback from participants as well as the GSC, the video was rerecorded as a three-segment video series called “A Light to My Path,” a discussion and facilitator’s guide was developed, and the resource was posted on the RCA website at www.rca.org/resources/alighttomypath. The resource was sent to all classis clerks and all congregations inviting them to use it in their context.

Response to MGS 2016, R 16-29, pp. 154-155, Create Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee

INTERIM REPORT OF THE PASTORAL FORMATION COORDINATING COMMITTEE

At the direction of the General Synod, the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group (CCSC) met for six years, engaging the church in the process, standards, and funding of theological education in the RCA. The CCSC made the following recommendation, which was approved by the 2016 General Synod:

R 16-29
Reconstitute the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group under the new name of Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC). The PFCC will meet for a period of two years, and its funding will come from the General Synod assessment for theological education. At the completion of this two-year period, the PFCC will propose to the General Synod a permanent committee, along with appropriate staffing and budget. The PFCC’s responsibilities will include:

1. In consultation with the professorate, coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod. In conjunction with this process, coordinate the evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the certification processes in assisting candidates to meet the standards established by the RCA.
2. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among congregations and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.
3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation as it relates to RCA church order and the mission of the church.
4. Assist the GSC in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

While its final report is not due until the 2018 General Synod, the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) offers this interim report to give an account of what we have accomplished and our plans for the upcoming year.

The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry

The PFCC has been engaged in a discussion regarding the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) by the three agents of the RCA (Western Theological Seminary,
New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency). It has been noted that the three agents grant the certificate in unique ways. While uniformity in granting the CFM is not desired, the PFCC does think it prudent to develop guidelines for each agent to follow in granting a certificate.

One of the difficulties regarding the process of granting a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry is the lack of clarity given in the *BCO* regarding what actually makes a candidate “fit” for ministry. Additionally, primary responsibility for examining a candidate’s readiness for ministry and examination lies with the classis, not with the agents who grant the CFM. Therefore, the PFCC has had preliminary discussions regarding identifying the future role of the agents in granting students their certificates as well as the role of the certificate in the ordination process.

Currently, the PFCC is in the process of suggesting that the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry be renamed the Certificate of Readiness for Examination. First, the PFCC thinks that this title more accurately reflects the role of the certificate given by the agents, as currently defined in the *BCO*. Second, while the agents are supposed to determine whether candidates are “fit” for ministry as ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA, there is no definition as to what defines a candidate’s “fitness.” The PFCC is currently discussing the possibility of connecting a candidate’s readiness for examination by the classis to the Eight Standards for Theological Education. Third, this reflects the reality that the classis, not the agent, has the primary responsibility in determining a candidate’s fitness for ministry.

While the PFCC has discussed these issues regarding the CFM, we also feel it is vital to engage the church in this discussion. Therefore, before the PFCC presents recommendations to the 2018 General Synod, we intend to engage the church for ideas regarding the ordination process. The PFCC intends to engage the church through its classis stated clerks, the chairs of each classis’s candidate care committee, and the boards of the three theological agents, as well as through various councils of the RCA.

**Standards for Theological Education**

Both related and in addition to the above discussion regarding the CFM, the PFCC is also in the process of discussing the current standards for theological education (personal faith and evangelism, call, Scripture, history and theology, Reformed tradition, leadership, pastoral care, and worship and preaching). The PFCC has reviewed the effectiveness of the eight standards, examined the results of a forum held at the 2015 General Synod on the standards, as well as evaluated our agents’ role in helping our candidates meet those standards. Furthermore, the PFCC is discussing whether and/or where these standards for theological education should be located in the *Book of Church Order*.

**Long-Term PFCC**

As part of our mandate, the PFCC has been instructed to develop a recommendation to the 2018 General Synod regarding a long-term body that will fulfill the same role the PFCC currently does. The PFCC has begun discussions regarding the makeup of the committee as well as its primary mandates and accountability structure. The PFCC will be ready to provide a formal recommendation by the 2018 General Synod.

**Other Business**

Finally, the PFCC discussed additional items stated in our mandate. We reviewed the amount and division of the General Synod assessment for theological education. We will continue to monitor this. We also discussed classis best practices regarding candidate care
in a candidate’s formation for ministry. We will continue to develop the candidate care website, which has been effective for candidate care committees across the denomination. The PFCC has also had productive conversations regarding the development and growth of theological courses, programs, and degrees taught in Spanish and Korean as well as collaborative possibilities for education among the three agents of the RCA.

The PFCC looks forward to our upcoming meetings, in which we will continue to discuss these items for our final report.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce, moderator
Miriam Barnes
Tim Brown
Jaeseung Cha
Cornelis Kors
Ken Eriks (staff)
Eun Jae Joo
Gregg Mast
Carmen Means
Alvin Padilla
Cora Taitt

Response to MGS 2016, R 16-45, p. 234, Mass Incarceration Event

REPORT ON THE MASS INCARCERATION EVENT

R 16-45 directed the General Synod Council “to host a meeting of people interested in the study and work of mass incarceration as the beginning of a learning community.”

Three events were held in response to R 16-45, two local events and one denominational event. The local events were held in Chicago and New York City. Eleven people attended the event in Chicago and 36 attended the event in New York City. The target groups for these local events were:

- People and congregations that have been impacted by mass incarceration.
- People and congregations that realize the importance of getting involved but lack the experience to do so.
- People needing to increase their basic understanding of mass incarceration.

Mass Incarceration: Increasing Awareness, Determining Next Steps—a Denominational Meeting of the Reformed Church in America took place in Chicago, Illinois, on March 10 and 11, 2017. Fifty-five people from around the United States attended this event. General secretary Tom De Vries framed the time by reminding the group of Jesus’ words and actions in Matthew 25:39-40 and John 8:1-11.

The meeting focused on:

- How the criminal justice system works, the history of mass incarceration, and how it is sustained.
- The effect of mass incarceration on families and children.
- Listening to the personal stories of formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Providing a faith framework for the church’s response.
- Discussing pathways to engage the topic.
- Connecting people on certain aspects of this issue.
This was a powerful event that was filled with the Holy Spirit’s work in each of the attendees’ lives.

A number of continued learning communities came out of this event. They will focus on:

- Youth leadership/mentorship/prevention
- Reentry issues
- Policies
- Coming home
- Replicating aspects of the organization 70x7 Life Recovery
- Angel Tree
- Filming

These groups covenanted to work together for six months and reevaluate after that time.

The Commission on Christian Action encourages the General Synod Council to continue to support these learning communities.

**Response to MGS 2016, R 16-37, p. 174, Formulate Structured Procedure of Church-to-Church Assistance**

R 16-37
To direct the General Synod Council to formulate a structured procedure to connect financially stable churches with those churches working in economically deprived areas that need both financial and human resources to meet the needs and grow the mission in those areas, facilitating these connections across classis and regional synod lines; and further,

To bring the first report on this procedure to the 2017 General Synod.

In response to this recommendation, a meeting was convened on November 18, 2016, in Grand Rapids, attended by Evan Vermeer (president of General Synod 2016), Mike Van Kampen, Micheal Edwards, Tom Smith, Jen Peterson, Dean Van Farowe, Andy Bossardet (staff, Emerging Leaders), Bob Carlson (staff, Church Growth Fund), and Stephanie Soderstrom (staff, Volunteer Engagement). This group represented people from larger churches with more resources, smaller churches with more limited resources, churches that have been through an assistance program and are growing, and staff of related ministry areas.

There were two topics to be addressed. The first was a follow-up to a proposal from former synod president Tom Smith to respond to the issue of aging structures in the denomination. It was learned that the Church Growth Fund was developing a program to address this issue at least partially.

The second topic concerned how to assist churches struggling due to either a lack of financial or human resources. It was agreed that the classis was the first line of help. It was also agreed that the classis needed to study the church and area in question to determine the future of mission in that area. In other words, it needed to be clear that there was a need for that church to continue. Limiting factors that needed to be analyzed were population base and the presence, number of, and health of other churches in that immediate area. It is possible, based on this analysis, that the decision might be made to close a church or have the classis supersede.

If the need for mission in that area was deemed to be great enough to support the long-term growth and health of that church, the classis should be prepared to help. This
led to the question of how to develop a plan of assistance for that church. After some discussion among the group and input from staff present, it was determined that both at the denominational level and in various classes and synods, there are already assistance programs being developed and piloted.

The group then focused on how to gather existing information and make it more visible and available throughout the denomination. The obvious method would be the RCA website.

Under the leadership of Andy Bossardet and Stephanie Soderstrom, the staff will gather available information and place it on the website and will seek to make it known to a wider audience in the RCA.

This group also addressed the possibility that the classis in question might not have the financial or personnel resources needed to assist a church in this way. It is the hope of the group that through the website, the ability to link churches that are not in the same classis might be developed.

The focus of this study is to enhance the work of the RCA through Transformed & Transforming, specifically addressing the topic of growing missional involvement.

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2015 REFERRALS
Response to MGS 2015, R-39, p. 181, Task Force on Interreligious Understanding

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Unity, to establish, for a period of three years, a General Synod task force on interreligious understanding and relations, in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of relationships and evangelism between Christians and people and groups of other religions, with the understanding that this task force should work closely with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work, both in North America and globally; and further,

to include in the mandate of this task force the need to make recommendations to the General Synod regarding where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing; and further, to ask the task force to report annually to the General Synod for the duration of its work.

A report from the Interreligious Task Force can be found immediately following the report of the Commission on Christian Unity on p. 236.

Response to MGS 2015, R-51, p. 242, Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies

To direct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to create a task force of no more than ten members—consisting of members of the Commission on Theology, the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Christian Action, diaconal leaders, and others as appropriate—to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels.
REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON DIACONAL MINISTRIES

Introduction

Following many years of denominational discussion, commission studies, and surveys, the Reformed Church in America continues to raise and discuss the question of the role deacons might fulfill within church assemblies (specifically classis, regional synod, and General Synod). There is, however, broad agreement on several relevant matters:

• Deacons provide a unique and valuable perspective within the consistory.
• There is a desire for greater diaconal involvement in both local church and denominational ministries.
• Very few deacons within the RCA are involved in any form of diaconal service or ministry that extends beyond the purview of their local church.
• The diaconal community may benefit from interaction and collaboration with the broader church community, perhaps through diaconal assemblies.
• Issues addressed by the assemblies of the church often fall within the purview of diaconal ministry.
• There is a solid theological basis within a Reformed and missional ecclesiology for including deacons as voting members in all assemblies of the RCA.

The Commission on Theology concurs with each of these matters and has, through its papers and surveys, added to the broader discussion.

History

In 2011, the Commission on Theology presented to General Synod its paper, “The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church” (MGS 2011, pp. 289-304). The commission recommended that the paper be distributed for discussion in the RCA in order to determine the mind of the church before making any recommendations about possible changes to the Book of Church Order (BCO). The first significant discussions took place in all-synod advisory groups at General Synod 2011, and that feedback was given to the Commission on Theology for review.

The same synod approved the distribution of the paper to the churches and requested that the commission produce a study guide to aid further discussion throughout the RCA (MGS 2011, R-51 and R-52, pp. 305-306). The study guide was produced and distributed with the paper with a request for feedback to the commission by January 31, 2013. Feedback was received through a simple, web-based survey and a number of fuller, more discursive responses from individuals, consistories, and classes.

The study guide is filled with invaluable information on the history of and biblical context for the discussion, the roles of the offices and the assemblies of the church, the significance of the judicatory, and questions for further consideration. It solicited both general and specific feedback on two questions that were included in the web survey:

1. Should deacons be included in all the assemblies of the church with voice and vote? If “yes,” why? If “no,” why not?
2. If you are convinced that deacons should be included in all assemblies, do you have additional ideas for how to implement this?

Survey responses were received from a total of 75 individuals: 39 respondents voted “yes” on including deacons with voice and vote in all the assemblies of the RCA and 36 voted “no.” Of the 39 who voted yes, 12 were deacons, 7 were elders, and 17 were ministers (3
did not indicate their office). Of the 36 who voted “no,” 6 were deacons, 4 were elders, and 25 were ministers (one respondent did not indicate an office). Responses to this survey question showed a nearly even split between those who favor the full inclusion of deacons and those who do not.

A compilation of responses from the majority of those in favor of including deacons in all the assemblies of the RCA highlights three reasons for their support of such a change:

1. The parity of the offices.
2. The fact that all of the offices working together enable the church to fulfill God’s mission.
3. As is evident through the deacons’ participation in consistories, they bring a unique perspective.

A compilation of responses from the majority of those who do not favor the inclusion of deacons in the broader assemblies highlights three reasons for not making a change:

1. The Bible and tradition make clear that only elders are responsible to “rule” or govern the church.
2. Including deacons in the “ruling” function will further confuse the role and purpose of the diaconal office and reinforce the sense that deacons are really simply junior elders.
3. It will distract deacons from their “real” calling.

In addition, a few expressed concern that deacons do not have the theological acumen required for broader governance in the church.

In addition to the survey results, the commission received 14 written responses from ministers, boards of deacons, consistories, and classes. Nine of these responses supported the inclusion of deacons in the broader assemblies, three did not support inclusion, and two expressed both support and reservations. The reasons given for and against the inclusion of deacons in these written responses echo those cited above. Some also expressed practical concerns about the human and financial cost of including deacons in the broader assemblies. In addition, one respondent suggested that the distinction the commission’s paper makes between assemblies and judicatories is misguided, and that, on the whole, we could be thinking much more creatively and radically about how to empower and receive the gifts of the deacons, for instance, through the establishment of a diaconate and the revision of denominational structures accordingly.

Consequently, the Commission on Theology submitted to the 2015 General Synod a recommendation that was subsequently recognized as R-51:

R-51 (MGS 2015, p. 242)
To direct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to create a task force of no more than ten members—consisting of members of the Commission on Theology, the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Christian Action, diaconal leaders, and others as appropriate—to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels.

This recommendation was adopted.
In its 2015 report to the General Synod, the Commission on Theology noted that it “recently conducted a denomination-wide survey of deacons. In reviewing the survey results, one finding was particularly noteworthy: very few deacons in the RCA are involved in any form of diaconal service or ministry that extends beyond the purview of their local church” (MGS 2015, p. 241). The Book of Church Order defines the office of deacon as “set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach” (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10; 2016 edition, p. 13). The text would seem to give permission for ministry beyond the local church, since “it is impossible to restrict ‘the ministry of mercy, service, and outreach’ to the work of the local church. There are, of necessity, aspects of the ministry of deacons that require deacons to work collaboratively with other deacons beyond their own congregation” (MGS 2015, p. 241). The commission stated that it believes it is a problem that collaboration apparently happens infrequently within the RCA. The report went on to say:

This problem has a structural component since RCA polity has no structures that encourage or provide a context for deacons to collaborate with other deacons beyond their own congregation. In other words, our polity does not assist deacons in exercising the full scope of the office to which they have been called by God—and in some cases even hinders them from this ministry. This needs to change.

The Commission on Theology believes that an implicit awareness of this problem underlies some of the recent interest in bringing deacons into a greater involvement with higher RCA assemblies, including classes, regional synods, and the General Synod. (See the timeline in “An Invitation to Study and Conversation: ‘The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church’,” Appendix II, pp. 26-29, http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/DeaconStudyGuide.pdf.) Moreover, the commission believes that repairing the structural problem is a necessary precursor to addressing the broader problem of how the contributions of deacons should be incorporated into the work of classes, regional synods, and the General Synod.

Specifically, the Commission on Theology believes that the RCA must begin to address these problems by creating a structure of diaconal assemblies at the classical level in ways that are informed by the work of other denominations. Such structures can create the opportunity for collaboration on diaconal concerns at a level beyond the local church, bringing congregations in a classis together to engage in diaconal ministry in their particular region. As these assemblies take shape and begin their work, there will probably be a need to create such assemblies at the level of regional synods as well, and eventually the General Synod.

This will raise a further set of issues, particularly focusing on how such diaconal assemblies should integrate their work with classes, regional synods, and the General Synod. Local churches do this all the time, delegating certain tasks to boards of elders and deacons, and reserving others for the work of the consistory. The commission believes that it would be profitable to explore how such structural solutions might be implemented in higher assemblies in the RCA. Such a strategy would also offer a more comprehensive solution to the challenge of integrating deacons into the work of higher assemblies than the RCA has considered thus far (MGS 2015, pp. 241-242).

**Diaconal Assemblies Task Force**

In February 2016, the Diaconal Assemblies Task Force, consisting of the members
prescribed by R-51 (2015), was convened. An early discussion focused on an earlier proposed amendment to the *BCO (MGS 2002, R-54, p. 233)* that was adopted by General Synod 2002 and submitted to the classes for approval. The proposed addition to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2 of the *BCO* set forth in R-54 read:

Sec. 3. The classis shall form a diaconal conference to assist local boards of deacons and to express the diaconal ministry of the church in the geographical area described by the bounds of the classis. The conference shall consist of at least one representative from each local board of deacons. The classis shall delegate authority to the conference as the classis deems appropriate. The conference shall report to the classis.

Nearly identical in intent to R-51 (2015)—that is, to see the ministry of the diaconate extend beyond the local church into the broader community—this proposal was not ratified by the classes (it was defeated 30 classes to 16 classes) and thus was never put into action. In trying to determine why this has not passed previously, these causes were considered:

- Difficulty in enlisting deacons for another meeting when they already have many others.
- A number of organizations have already been born of diaconal collaboration; for example, Love INC.
- Classes simply were not interested in implementing the concept and didn’t see it as workable in their context.

Several questions were also considered:

1. How does the historical interpretation of roles of elder and deacon, with differing levels of significance ascribed to each, impact the formation and work of diaconal conferences?
2. How do geographical regions, each with different emphases for the office of deacon, impact the formation and work of diaconal conferences?
3. How can diaconal conferences impact the various cultural groups and generational groups throughout the RCA?
4. Could the proposal be more readily accepted by classes if the diaconal conference was optional rather than mandatory? Could having a choice in creating a diaconal conference help accommodate the various needs of individual classes?
5. How might a classis or a synod address the financial resources needed to accommodate classes that would incur travel costs for meetings? Technology helps minimize those costs to a degree, though it is recognized that in-person gatherings provide important benefits.
6. What role is best for these conferences? Are they adjunct to the classis or integrated within the classis?
7. How might a classis articulate the need for a diaconal conference?

These questions could help to shape the conversations of classes and synods in the formation of diaconal conferences.

The task force formed a preliminary set of conclusions, suggesting that there is a need for a vision of what a diaconal assembly might look like, appropriate language for the *BCO* allowing the construction of such an assembly as well as defining its role, and additional work to consider the implications of possible assemblies at the regional and General Synod levels.

In May 2016, the task force met to discuss at length and in depth this broad array of past events, actions, and questions. These conclusions became readily apparent to the task force:
1. Significant work has been done in the RCA in the past to emphasize the importance of the ministry of deacons, particularly in the former Office of Diaconal Ministries. This work lives on in the lives of those deacons who were touched by this ministry, but the attention and resources of the RCA have been turned in other directions in recent years.

2. Deacons should be present and participating in all church assemblies. We believe the benefit that the church could receive is greater than any reason offered, biblical or otherwise, for excluding full participation of deacons in all church assemblies. We do not find a Scriptural injunction against deacons participating in church assemblies.

3. Efforts to establish separate assemblies as an alternative to diaconal participation in existing assemblies perpetuates the problems while offering few advantages to the greater church.

4. While diaconal conferences could provide value to the church, they should not be an alternative to diaconal participation within the denomination’s assemblies. That being said, diaconal conferences could be created to unite deacons beyond congregational and classical boundaries for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries. When these diaconal conferences are created alongside deacons’ participation in all the assemblies of the church, the office of deacon is elevated to its proper importance, and the ministry of deacons is appropriately honored.

With these conclusions in mind, the task force is recommending two distinct courses of action. The first is the formation of diaconal conferences throughout the RCA, with the hope that they will foster collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries.

R 17-15
To encourage classes and regional synods to form diaconal conferences in all the assemblies of the church, for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries; and further,

to instruct the general secretary to help facilitate the creation of at least one such diaconal conference utilizing Transformed & Transforming funding. (ADOPTED)

Proposal for Deacons Participating in Assemblies

The second course of action is the inclusion of deacons in the assemblies of the church. The task force offers the following proposal, which we believe not only resolves most, if not all, of the negative factors, but also allows the diaconate to grow into a more meaningful contributor to the full ministries of the assemblies. The proposal consists of these four points:

1. Deacons, both currently installed deacons and members of the great consistory, are eligible to serve as delegates to each of the denomination’s assemblies.
2. Selection of deacons as delegates does not change the allocation of delegates given to each church by assembly bylaws. Elders and deacons are equally eligible to serve as delegates to the assembly at the discretion of the local consistory.
3. The authority that a delegate possesses is the same whether elder or deacon.
4. Deacons will participate with elders and ministers on disciplinary and judicial matters in the classis and synods but not the local church, following procedures currently defined in the Book of Church Order.
Elaboration of the Points Stated Above

1. The role of an elder selected as a delegate to classis or another broader assembly does not conform precisely to the ordination vows taken within the local congregation. Upon being accepted as a delegate to a higher assembly, the elder is asked to abide by the rules and procedures described in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* for an elder delegate and by the assembly’s bylaws. In essence, the elder in a broader assembly shifts from being a spiritual leader to a congregation, representing God’s Word to the people, to being a decision maker, arbiter, and advocate for a very wide blanket of denominational plans and concerns. In this transition, the elder does not give up any of the responsibilities to the local congregation but assumes additional responsibilities to the higher assembly and the larger church community.

In the same manner, a deacon nominated as a delegate to serve in a broader assembly would also be expected to continue to fulfill vows taken in ordination as a deacon within a specific congregation while assuming new responsibilities described in the *BCO* and the assembly’s bylaws.

The distinction between “ruling” elders and “serving” deacons, used by some to defend representation by elders alone, is a misleading distinction. In all matters of Christian living, Christ’s call is to be a “servant leader.” Christ’s call to each of us is to both rule over and to serve. We readily acknowledge this at the macro level within the church, but we are also called at the personal level to apply both principles, as Christ did throughout his life.

Within the bounds of the local congregation, both the elder and the deacon continue their ministries under their ordination vows. As delegates to the broader assemblies, their roles expand from solely the biblical representation of their positions and ministries to the added responsibility of being the broader church through the process of decision making. The offices of elder and deacon apply to the local congregation; the leadership provided by members of these offices applies to all levels of Christian living. The qualities of leadership and spirituality that led individuals to be ordained as elder or deacon are the qualities needed to guide within the higher assemblies.

2. Previous proposals have suggested that each church send an additional deacon as a delegate to the classis, which carries within it a concern that clergy representation would have less influence if diaconal delegates were added to the gathered assembly. This proposal offers the solution that the total number of delegates from any church need not change, and the distribution between elders/deacons and ministers of Word and sacrament need not change at all. Only the mix of elders and deacons will change.

Each consistory will be responsible for the selection of consistory members (drawn from the great consistory as well as the installed members). The number of delegates from each congregation does not change from the allocation determined by each classis and synod.

In their consistorial role, deacons’ authority and scope of responsibility are uniquely shaped by Scripture and differentiated from that of the elder. In the role of delegate to a higher assembly, deacons and elders become equal in authority and in the shepherding of the church’s ministry at broader levels.
3. The “parity of offices” argument has been brought forward to defend the addition of diaconal delegates to higher assemblies. Parity of office is not the deciding factor for selecting delegates to broader assemblies.

4. The task force is asserting that all delegates to broader assemblies serve the same function because together they are the assembly. An assembly becomes a judicatory by the vote of the assembly. All members of the assembly become members of the judicatory with this vote. On the other hand, in local churches, the board of elders is assigned responsibility for care and discipline of the church’s members and office bearers.

With these points in mind, the task force is recommending that assemblies of the RCA incorporate as delegates a church’s installed or great consistory member who is selected by that consistory to serve as a delegate, whether elder or deacon.

R 17-16
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II

Article 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body and the elder and deacon delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds. The classis is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. Voting rights shall be limited to elder and deacon delegates and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis.

Article 3. Elder and Deacon Delegates

Sec. 1.

a. A church shall not have more than four elder delegates. A church with three hundred or fewer confessing members shall have one elder delegate. A church with more than three hundred confessing members shall also have one elder delegate for each additional three hundred confessing members or fraction thereof, up to a maximum of three additional delegates.

b. A church without an installed minister shall have an elder delegate who shall not be counted as one of the above delegates allotted in subsection (a).

c. A collegiate church shall have at least one elder delegate for each of its constituent congregations.

Sec. 2. The congregation in a multiple parish may take turns
in sending to classis one or more additional elder delegates so that the number of minister and elder or deacon delegates from the multiple parish is at least twice the number of such congregations.

Sec. 3. The elder or deacon delegate to classis shall be chosen from the entire body of elders and deacons in a church, whether or not presently a member of the board of elders consistory.

Sec. 4. The elder or deacon delegate shall be a member of classis from the date of election or appointment and shall continue in that responsibility to classis until the effective date of election or appointment of a successor. If, however, confessing membership in the church represented shall be terminated during the period of appointment, the delegate shall cease to be a member of classis.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder and deacon delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ministers and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. …

Chapter 1, Part III

Article 1. Regional Synod Defined

Sec. 1. The regional synod is an assembly and judicatory consisting of ministers and elders or deacons delegated by each of the classes within the bounds determined for it by the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to elder and deacon delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving under the jurisdiction or with the approval of the classis.

Article 3. Delegates

Sec. 2. The elder or deacon delegate to regional synod shall
be chosen from the entire body of elders in a church installed consistory or great consistory, whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders.

**Article 4. Sessions of Regional Synod**

Sec. 2. The president of the regional synod shall call a special session of the synod upon receipt of a written request of one minister and one elder or deacon delegate from each of the classes within its bounds. At least three weeks’ notice of the meeting shall be given, such notice stating the purpose of the meeting.

Sec. 3. The presence of a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder and deacon delegates is required to constitute a quorum at any session of a regional synod.

**Chapter 1, Part IV**

**Article 1. General Synod Defined**

The General Synod is the highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. It consists of two minister delegates and two elder or deacon delegates from each of the classes having four thousand or fewer confessing members on the roll of its churches, and one minister delegate and one elder or deacon delegate for each two thousand confessing members, or fraction thereof, from each of the classes having more than four thousand confessing members on the roll of its churches as computed in accordance with the Bylaws of the General Synod; one elder_deacon, or minister delegate from each of the regional synods; five General Synod professor delegates, drawn from each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; a number of furloughing missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the Bylaws of the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to to elder_and_deacon delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction or with the approval of an assembly. The General Synod is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through the General Synod Council, commissions, and agencies.

**Article 3. Delegates**

Sec. 2. The elder_or_deacon delegate to the General Synod, or the elder_or_deacon who serves on committees, commissions, or boards of the General Synod, shall be chosen from the entire body of elders and deacons in a church, whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders consistory.

**Article 4. Sessions and Meetings of General Synod**

Sec. 2. The president of the General Synod shall call a special session of the synod at a place determined by the president, vice
president and the general secretary of the synod upon the joint application of three ministers and three elders or deacons from each of the regional synods, all of them serving currently as accredited delegates to the General Synod. Three weeks’ notice of the session shall be given to the members of the synod, such notice to state the purpose of the session.

Sec. 3. The presence of a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder and deacon delegates is required to constitute a quorum at any meeting of the General Synod.

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3

Sec. 2. Composition

  a. One-half of the membership of the General Synod Council (GSC) shall be elders and deacons and one-half shall be ministers and not less than one-third of the membership shall be women. The Commission on Nominations shall assure the composition of the council reflects the full diversity of the church. (REFERRED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-16.

A motion to refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology was made and supported.

VOTED: To refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology for review of the matter of office at assemblies and report back to General Synod 2018.

Respectfully submitted,
Chris Jacobsen, moderator

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2014

REFERRALS

Response to MGS 2014, R-14, pp. 101-102, Ad-Hoc Committee on Alternate Plan for General Synod

To instruct the General Synod Council to create an ad-hoc committee of no more than eight persons, half of whom are delegates to the 2014 General Synod, for the purpose of preparing a concrete plan for General Synod that incorporates clearly both a revised means for doing business and provisions for learning and visioning around mission and ministry, using the values and feedback expressed by the all-synod advisory committees of the 2014 General Synod to guide its work; and further;

To bring to the 2015 General Synod a specific plan, the costs and impact on the budget and assessment, and the changes needed in the Book of Church Order; and further;

To refer R-12 and R-13 to the ad-hoc committee.
REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON AN ALTERNATE PLAN FOR GENERAL SYNOD

This task force has previously made two detailed reports to General Synod Council: one in March 2016 and one in October 2016.

Three values guided our momentum in this conversation:

- Multiethnic participation
- Multigenerational participation, especially an increase in younger lay participation
- Accessible location, reducing hours of travel from airport

As we move forward, we ask the GSC to decide on the following actions and empower GSC staff to begin work for implementing changes to the annual General Synod gathering.

1. **Approve and communicate to staff, commissions, and institutions a change in the reporting structure at General Synod that includes video reporting.** Commissions, institutions, agencies, and councils will continue to submit written reports but will not speak from the platform unless they have recommendations to present. Instead, the standard will be an invitation to submit a brief video report that highlights the body’s work over the year and can be used beyond the synod setting. This will include training and resourcing for commission moderators and possibly new commission members at the fall joint GSC/commission meetings.

2. **Approve a shorter synod with the goal of moving to five days in 2018 and four days in 2019.** Arrange for a five-day synod in 2018 and a four-day synod for 2019 that includes the weekend. This may require renegotiating contracts with Hope College for 2019 or may be implemented in 2020. In preparing for joint sessions with the CRCNA synod in 2018, move away from business and mission conversation to a worship and discipleship event.

3. **Actively explore potential venues for General Synod 2020 that are in mid- to large-size cities.** As a denomination seeking to be multiethnic and expansive, move synod to larger metro areas, which may move synod to other colleges or hotel venues. If cost is the prohibitive factor, the GSC needs to wrestle with what drives Transformed & Transforming goals. Charge staff to make this happen for General Synod 2020. The image for General Synod can no longer be a “family reunion” but a Pentecost gathering for all. The General Synod is a fellowship event—a gathering of friendly strangers who are seeking fellowship with one another through the power of the Spirit and the bond of Christ.

4. **Approve a biennial, two-day (Friday to Saturday) worship, discipleship, and evangelism event adjacent to synod, starting in 2019.** Charge the general secretary with deploying two to three staff to work with us to organize a planning and implementation team. We encourage the GSC to invite members to this team who have experience with event planning.

5. **Approve the continuation of this team for the next two years (2017–2019) and add a few more people to the team, including at least one additional GSC member.** We are committed to consider and plan for changes to the structure and content of General Synod. We anticipate being able to work within the remaining budget from the Biennial Synod Task Force. Adding a few more people from
GSC and the RCA at large will help drive this preferred future for General Synod gatherings. It is crucial to have GSC representation on this team, and Dan’s term on the GSC will finish in June 2018.

*At its March 2017 meeting, General Synod Council voted to approve the above five recommendations of the task force (GSC 17-14).

Here is our updated proposed plan of action over the next three years:

2017

Location: Hope College
Length of time: Six days and five nights (stays the same)
Changes we are proposing:
  • Lean into video reporting procedures.
  • Sunday morning is spent worshiping together instead of going to area churches.

2018

Location: Calvin College—joint session with CRCNA
Length of time: Five days and four nights (one less day/night). However, the possibility of shortening synod by a day this year is something that needs to be explored since it is a joint synod and some things may already be set in place.
Changes we are proposing:
  • Implement new video reporting procedures, offering training and resources to commission moderators at the joint meeting in October 2017.

2019

Location: Hope College
Length of time: Two-day life-giving event plus four-day General Synod. The life-giving event would cover Friday and Saturday. General Synod could begin with worship on Sunday morning with the business beginning in the afternoon. There is room in the BCO for this to occur without a change (Chapter 3, Part II, Article 1; 2016 edition, pp. 123-124).
Changes we are proposing:
  • Continued trajectory of implementing new reporting procedures for General Synod.
  • The organization of a design team for the life-giving event. This team would also work with denominational staff to make sure everything flows well with the start of General Synod.

We recognize that change is hard and that it will take a significant amount of work to see this change through.

Respectfully submitted,
Dan Gillett, moderator
Steven Germoso
Sarah Palsma
Don Poest
Kyle Small
Imos Wu
Response to MGS 2014, R-15, pp. 113-114, Task Force to Assess RCA Governance with Five-Fold Test

REPORT OF THE FIVE-FOLD TEST TASK FORCE

Task Force Mandate

R-15 (2014)
To direct the General Synod Council to create a task force to assess the RCA’s governance utilizing the Five-Fold Test and make recommendations for changes to its order that are consistent with the tenets of the Belhar Confession and that will aid the RCA’s transition to becoming a more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism; and further,

that the task force include the general secretary, the racial/ethnic council presidents, the General Synod president or vice president, the GSC moderator, a representative of the Commission on Church Order, and a number of additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups; and further,

that the task force make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016.

About the Five-Fold Test

The Five-Fold Multi-Dimensional Test, or Five-Fold Test, is a planning and evaluation tool that was developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). The ECC is one of a very few denominations that has effectively and fruitfully made strides toward becoming a multicultural denomination freer from racism. The tool is designed both for planning and evaluating ministries, initiatives, processes, and operations that increase freedom from racism.

The five dimensions are as follows:

1. **Population**: Who is at the table in terms of racial/ethnic people? Where do we want to be regarding people at the table three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

2. **Participation**: Of the people at the table, how are they participating? Do they appear contributory or disengaged, and why? Where do we want to be regarding how people present will participate in three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

3. **Power**: Among the people at the table and participating, how is influence used? How are decisions really made and who really makes them? How are preparations for decision-making done, and are those preparations equitable across racial/ethnic lines? Where do we want to be regarding how influence is used three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

4. **Pace-setting**: Given the levels of presence, participation, and power, what new missional opportunities are we better prepared to take on, and what existing missional challenges are we better able to address? Where do we want to be regarding preparedness to take on new and existing missional challenges three, six, or nine months or a year from now?
5. **Purposeful Narrative**: Do we describe ourselves like a main river with various different racial/ethnic streams, or do we describe ourselves as one large river moving forward together? Where do we want to be regarding how we describe our racial/ethnic togetherness three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

**Members**

The recommendation that created the task force specified that the task force’s membership would include the general secretary, the racial/ethnic council presidents, the General Synod president or vice president, the GSC moderator, a representative of the Commission on Church Order, and a number of additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups.

Current members of the Five-Fold Test Task Force include Tom De Vries (general secretary), James E. Steward (African American Black Council), Pedro Agudelo (Council for Hispanic Ministries), Paul Lee (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries), Evan Vermeer (2014 General Synod president), Sharon Palms (GSC), Joshua Bode (Commission on Church Order), and Rick DeBruyne (Commission on Race and Ethnicity). Tony Campbell staffs the task force.

As of March 1, 2017, participation of some members needed to be confirmed and “additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups” needed to be identified and recruited.

**Meetings**

Due to difficulty assembling the members, the task force did not meet in 2015. At the 2015 General Synod, GSC reported:

> Due to the specificity of the stated requirements for the membership of this task force, it took longer than expected to fully form the task force, but all members are now committed, and each task force member is passionate, gifted, and determined to carry out the recommendation’s mandate. The task force is moving forward with setting up its first meeting, and anticipates bringing a report to General Synod 2016 (*MGS 2015*, p. 72).

The task force had its first meeting on March 28, 2016. This was reported to the 2016 General Synod:

> The task force met via conference call on March 28 (scheduling challenges prevented them from meeting earlier) to discuss its mandate and steps for accomplishing its work. One of its planned next steps is to consult with the White Privilege Task Force that recommended the creation of the current task force. A conference call has been set up with Shari Brink, moderator of the previous task force. The Five-Fold Test Task Force is also reaching out to the Evangelical Covenant Church to consult with that denomination on how it has used the Five-Fold Test to great effect to become more multiracial and freer from racism. Because of this, the task force has asked General Synod Council for an extension to complete its work. It anticipates being able to complete its work within the budget it was initially given (*MGS 2016*, p. 139).
The task force subsequently held conference calls on December 13, 2016, and February 22 and March 20, 2017.

On December 13, the task force heard from Shari Brink, who had served on the R-91 Task Force on White Privilege, to ascertain a clearer understanding of the intent of R-15 (2014). Rick DeBruyne, moderator of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, shared that commission’s perspective. Rick DeBruyne was subsequently selected to chair the Five-Fold Test Task Force.

On February 22, the task force had a conference call with Gary Walter, president of the Evangelical Covenant Church. As mentioned above, the ECC developed the Five-Fold Test. The conversation was very helpful and stimulating. Walter noted that while the Five-Fold Test had helped them with evaluation and planning, more significantly, the five dimensions have become core values for the life and ministry of their church.

On March 20, the task force had a conference call to determine the meaning and scope of “governance” in R-15’s wording, “to assess the RCA’s governance,” and to set a course of action for fulfilling the task force’s mandate.

Time Frame

The original recommendation called for the task force make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016. Due to the difficulty in assembling the group, the task force asked the General Synod Council for an extension. The task force plans on completing its work in the spring of 2018 and bringing a final report to the 2018 General Synod.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2013 REFERRALS
Response to MGS 2013, R-10, p. 72, Transformed and Transforming Implementation Plan

R-10 (2013)
To instruct the General Synod Council, working with the boards, institutions, agencies, and commissions of the General Synod:
• To develop a clear implementation plan with measurable ends and goals for “Transformed and Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together”;
• To report this plan to the 2014 General Synod;
• To share this plan widely throughout the greater church;
• To report progress on this plan to General Synod annually thereafter.

The GSC finalized ends policy statements regarding Transformed & Transforming at its fall 2014 meeting. The monitoring reports on each of these policy statements included on pages 197 to 207 of these minutes report on the implementation of the priorities of Transformed & Transforming.