Overtures

Purpose of Church Discipline

1. The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick recommends that the General Synod request that the Commission on Church Order add the following to the *BCO*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, “Nature of Discipline” (2016 edition, p. 77), as a new section 3 (additions underlined):

   *Sec. 3. The purpose of church discipline is to benefit people who adhere to it. Any discipline is unholy and contrary to the gospel that can be shown to 1) produce no benefit or fruit of the Spirit in the lives of those who adhere to it; 2) actively cause harm; 3) unjustly burden one group more than another. Spiritually unfruitful, harmful, unjust discipline denies the truths of the gospel and divides the church.*

Reasons:

1. Church discipline that produces no benefit or fruit of the Spirit is unholy.

   In the RCA’s *Book of Church Order*, the RCA considers its authority to discipline to be divinely bestowed to the church by Jesus, “to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1; 2016 edition, p. 77). But any church rule or discipline that results in the systematic destruction of human life is an abomination against our Lord Jesus Christ. The RCA has ample reason to abandon it. It does not at all benefit offenders if the threat of church discipline makes people miserable and destroys families and communities.

   God’s Holy Spirit yields love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). However, Christians who are LGBTIAQ people and their allies testify that the traditional position on homosexuality is a kind of church discipline that produces no spiritual fruit in their lives. Instead, in their lives, as in our denomination, this position creates enmity, strife, anger, divisions, and sects.

   Faithful LGBTIAQ people and their allies who are long-term members of the RCA’s sister denomination, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), contributed personal narratives to a 150-page report that supports same-sex marriage in the church.¹ They describe the heartbreak the traditional position on homosexuality causes them, their partners, family members, and communities even when they are faithful, even when they comply with the position of the church.

   They say the church hurts them in five ways.

   • *Personal Condemnation.* The simple fact that their church holds the traditional position on homosexuality causes them pain, as they say: “To be told in strong terms that God does not approve of you acting out a primary drive that comes naturally is devastating.” Reformed Christians have been known to claim they “love the sinner but hate the sin of gay sex.” However, gay and lesbian people do not feel their love but their hatred of the sexuality that God has woven into their personal identity.

• **Compelled Celibacy.** Celibacy, says the Apostle Paul, is a gift from God and compelling someone to be celibate who does not experience that call puts them at grave risk of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:7). Gay and lesbian Christians in the CRC say they do not experience a divine call to celibacy, they never experience an end to same-sex attraction, and they find no spiritual benefit in church-compelled celibacy at all—only deprivation.

• **Persecution by Others.** Lesbian and gay CRC members say they find themselves subject to the traditional position not only by official actions of church discipline but also by all church members. They say: “All [church members] fear God’s judgment on them for not calling a person they know to be actively sinning to repentance, as stated in Acts 20.” Therefore families and friends must choose between standing with the church and supporting one’s family member or friend: “Parents mourn over gay children who are condemned and ostracized by the church. Marriages are damaged when one parent remains loyal to a gay child while the other disowns the child out of loyalty to the church. Gay people choose between their church and their partner. Loss of a faith community takes a heavy toll.”

• **Life-Threatening Mental Health.** Lesbian and gay people say enforced celibacy causes them “pervasive loneliness and low self-esteem. They experience deep-seated longings for the love, touch, and affirmation that are fundamental to their identity. All around them they see viable partners, opportunities for lifelong partnerships of mutual love and service but the church requires them to sacrifice these for the sake of membership.” These CRC members experience numerous cases of depression, addiction, and suicide. They cite alarming national statistics that correlate family rejection with astronomical rates of homelessness, anxiety, depression, and suicide.

• **Disastrous Consequences.** CRC members explain how the traditional position encourages gay people to hide behind a heterosexual marriage, though they may be caught indulging in forbidden, same-sex affairs. Paul advocates marriage to help people avoid this very same temptation (1 Corinthians 7:5). Thus, their perfectly human inability to forego satisfaction in sexual intimacy—the same kind of intimacy that churches endorse to fortify the fabric of heterosexual lives—damages the lives of their children, spouses, and parents; it destroys families and caring communities.

Based on the five ways our CRC siblings tell us the church’s restriction of marriage to heterosexuals harms faithful LGBTIAQ people, we call Reformed Christians everywhere to stop harmful church discipline of same-sex loving people and restore wholeness and healing to people, families, and communities whom the church has harmed.

2. **Discipline must be based on precepts that apply equally to all people.**

The RCA’s position requires same-sex loving people to live celibate lives or to marry people to whom they feel no sexual attraction. Thus, the RCA’s position compels a sacrifice from same-sex loving Christians unequal to any required of heterosexual Christians. However, a precept is only just if it applies equally to all people, as Martin Luther King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

> An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow, and that it is willing to follow itself.²

² In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King used this principle to indict the hypocrisy of white Christian pastors who urged him to cease unlawful demonstrations and wait patiently.
King was echoing the principle that Paul describes in Galatians when he accuses Peter of selectively adhering to Jewish law as a free choice while compelling Jewish law universally on Galatians (Galatians 2:14).

In the case of human sexuality, it is unjust for the RCA to compel some people to lives devoid of satisfying sexual intimacy and the possibility of lifelong sexual partnerships—if the RCA does not compel all people to live this way. This is also contrary to the guidance of Paul who definitively says that celibacy is a gift of the spirit of God given to some, but not all (1 Corinthians 7:7). Therefore, the RCA sins when it compels celibacy on people who do not experience it as a divine call. Paul cautions that to deny the need of some for sexual satisfaction is to invite sexual immorality. Thus, the RCA sins when it encourages same-sex loving people to either be celibate or enter heterosexual marriages because this practice endangers the health, safety, and security of partners, families, children, and communities.

3. It is unjust to modify moral precepts for a majority but not for minorities.

The RCA has modified the Bible’s ethical rules for heterosexual marriage to promote the wellbeing of heterosexuals and to allow for historical changes in culture. The church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though ancient Israel’s faith leaders practiced polygamy. In the 20th century, the RCA modified Jesus’ prohibition of divorce to accommodate the social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of heterosexuals. Yet the RCA refuses to adapt its rules for marriage to support the social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of people who experience same-sex attraction. By caring only for heterosexual people and failing to care for same-sex loving people, the RCA harms the body of Christ.

4. Justification by faith is an ethical principle enunciated by Paul that requires Christians to adjudicate responsibly between conflicting ethical demands.

The RCA inflicts suffering on lesbian and gay people because of longstanding tradition and its interpretation of Scripture. However, this puts the church in a state of contradiction with Scripture itself. The importance of reexamining Scripture and tradition in light of one’s personal experience of suffering is emphasized in the conversion of the apostle Paul. Paul tells us that as a Pharisee, he embraced Scripture and tradition, excelling so far beyond his peers that he violently pursued the assembly of people who followed Jesus, to the point that he ravaged it (Galatians 1:13-14). As a young Pharisee named Saul, he was so pleased with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4) that he became bloodthirsty for more punishment that would purify his faith:

Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8:2-3).

His excellence in Scripture and tradition so blinded Paul that he witnessed Stephen’s stoning without pausing to consider Stephen’s extraordinary trust in God.

To explain how he went from being the persecutor of the church to the church’s great evangelist, Paul says that it pleased God to reveal God’s Son in him (Galatians 1:16). The author of Luke and Acts dramatized this revelation with a
stroke of blinding light and an audible voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” and then, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5). Jesus identifies himself with Saul’s victims. Paul experiences Jesus directly in the suffering of Paul’s victims.

To Paul’s astonishment, Paul discovered God was not on Paul’s side! God was on the side of Paul’s victims, people Paul justifiably bludgeoned and lawfully crucified. Instead of the self-righteous Paul, who aggressively executed the law, God raised as God’s Son the humble Galilean healer who became a willing victim of lawful persecution. This is the scandal of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 5:11), the stumbling block that stops Paul dead in his tracks and causes him to reevaluate his entire moral framework. But there’s more. When Paul says, “It pleased God to reveal Christ in me,” not only does Paul see Christ in the victims of his persecution, but Paul sees Christ, the resurrected victim, in himself. Paul experiences Jesus handing himself over in love for Paul, so that the persecutor in Paul could be replaced and Christ himself could live in Paul. The lawless victim and the lawful persecutor are enfolded together in the love of Christ. This divine embrace—the supersession of moralistic law by God’s more foundational law of love—is true Christian atonement. God’s law of love is a super-law, Paul says, a law that undergirds all other laws:

The entire law is summed up in one Word: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest by one another you are destroyed (Galatians 5:15).

Using adherence to religious tradition to justify discipline that causes only suffering is exactly opposite the intent of the gospel. Unlike the RCA, Paul does not increase his persecution but ceases it entirely and then joins those he persecuted. Paul considers himself to be judged by Jesus. Like Jesus, Paul allows himself to be crucified—for his sin of causing human suffering. If changing one’s mind because one experiences Christ in human suffering were contrary to the gospel, we might not have a gospel today.

The story of Paul’s divine revelation shows that for Christians, the experience of human suffering must be a critical ground for reevaluating our moral positions. Paul first awakened to this revelation in his personal experience. Then, in an entirely new situation, Paul explained how his revelation provided an ethical principle for adjudicating between conflicting moral claims and reevaluating

3 By allowing himself to be legally executed, Jesus expands our understanding of how human beings were made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27). Christ dying on the crucifix shows us that the victims of our legalistic judgments are also made in God’s image. Thus Jesus identifies himself as the victim whom Paul persecutes when he asks Saul: “‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ [Saul] asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:4-5). In the same way Jesus explains that when we harm one another, we harm Jesus himself, as Jesus explains in Matthew’s Judgment of the Nations, saying to those at his left hand,

“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41-46).
doctrine in our communities. He wrote his letter to Galatians to stop Jews who followed Christ from compelling circumcision on Galatians who were not Jews. Later, in his letter to Romans, Paul used the same principle of justification by faith to convince Hellenistic Romans who followed Christ to maintain social solidarity with their Jewish neighbors who were persecuted by Rome (Romans 5:1-15). In the same way, Classis New Brunswick seeks to stop the RCA from compelling faithful LGBTIAQ Christians to lifelong celibacy simply because they are not heterosexual.

Like Paul, Reformed Christians who hold the traditional position on homosexuality may be theologically rigorous, faithful people. Like Paul, they may be supremely skeptical about departing from tradition and changing biblical interpretation. That is why Paul tells us that the only way for Christians to be justified in our moral reasoning is to follow Jesus, crucified and resurrected (Galatians 2:16). Paul understood the cross of Christ to be a giant direction marker or billboard, an ethical rule for the Christian application of moral law. Every time we must judge between executing a law and the welfare of people whom the law is to protect, we must constantly privilege our care for the law’s victims. This is what distinguishes us as Christians in the world. In the resurrection of Jesus, God affirmed that God is always on the side of people who are harmed by our merciless adherence to law.

5. Acts of the Apostles urges us to remain open to personal revelation in order to experience the suffering of Christ in people who are harmed by church discipline.

A conversion like Paul’s is a holy and personal experience. Revelation happens when each of us is guided by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves some of us when we read personal stories of faithful LGBTIAQ Christians. Yet the Holy Spirit is most likely to move us when we are in the physical presence of a person who is suffering, someone who, like Paul, bears the marks of Jesus, the stigmata of the cross (Galatians 6:17). When we perceive the marks of our idolatrous punishment etched in the flesh of their body and in the church-endorsed torment of their souls, we must blind ourselves to the requirements of law and tradition. We must suspend our deadly judgments. Blindly, we follow Jesus because we Christians are justified by faith alone.

One by one, the power of the Holy Spirit converts us. Thus we hear about a steady stream of conversions of formerly non-affirming parents after their beloved children come out as gay or transgender. We are moved by the stories of faith leaders like the ministers and elders of San Francisco’s City Church. In March 2015, City Church leaders changed their membership rules because they were converted by the suffering of faithful, loving gay couples in their congregation. As people who experience Christ crucified in the church’s persecution of LGBTIAQ people, we in Classis New Brunswick need no further justification to disavow any rule, guideline, liturgy, judicial decision, or edict that supports the RCA’s restriction of marriage to heterosexual relationships.

Sadly, many Reformed Christians do not understand Christ’s crucifixion as a divine “stop sign” meant to halt our very human trait of destroying people in our zeal to be seen by God as righteous in the law. When people suffer because of church discipline, some Reformed Christians may tell themselves, “This is God’s will.” Like Paul before his conversion, they cannot see the crucified Christ in the people they persecute. They judge faithful, same-sex couples to be unrepentant
sinners. They refuse to reexamine the biblical interpretation that drives them to confront, disparage, and discipline openly gay and lesbian people and their allies. They long to purify the church of our defiling presence. They imagine the presence of sinners like us prevents the church from upholding Christ’s one-time atonement for all humanity’s sins. Tragically, they miss the mark. Jesus handed himself over to be crucified in order to show us how wrong we can be when we follow tradition and scriptural interpretation without love for the suffering of people. In his willing crucifixion, Jesus expanded upon the holy truth that each of us is created in the image of God. When we use the law to destroy one another, it is God we destroy. God suffers on the cross. God raised his beloved son from the dead to prove to us that, when it comes to God’s mercy, our only hope is to let go of the law and let God take over.

6. To deny the blessing of the church to faithful, committed same-sex couples is harmful church discipline.

Throughout Holy Scripture, the social institution of marriage changes and evolves. In the time of Abraham and through that of King David, marriage included the practice of polygamy, which today we consider profoundly unjust, especially to women and children. In the days of Jesus, the first-century Jewish practice of marriage also differed radically from our modern-day religious arrangements. However, what does not change throughout history are the kinds of holy relationships that God calls us to celebrate in union with one another. As people of faith, we celebrate holy relationships defined by qualities that do not change over time. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another we see reflections of God and of our own selves. We reflect God’s love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. We experience holiness in such relationships. When two people cultivate with one another these qualities, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, to their friends, and to their community. To withhold the blessing of the church from same-sex couples is unholy discipline that harms people, families, communities, and the church.

In response to Overture 1 the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-17
To deny Overture 1. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Proposed Section 3 is already implied in Sections 1 and 2.
2. Proposed Section 3 is a commentary on Sections 1 and 2. Our church order does not typically include commentary.
Take Separate Declarative Votes on Constitutional Amendments

2. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:
1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:
   a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.
   b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.
   c. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.
   d. It confirms that a previous General Synod, and the classes, have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.

Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively noncontroversial or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together and voted upon as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice in general for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.
3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a second vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, some kind of process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, they may also encourage the beginning of much-needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so will not come before General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Creating a more intentional process for deliberation about second votes will, inevitably, take more time in General Synod’s process. However, time-saving practices are not as important as wise discernment, and efficiency is not as important as reconciliation. Given the tenuous and conflicted position the RCA now finds itself in, it is time for General Synod to recognize the consequences of abbreviating its process and change course.

3. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:

1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:

a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.

b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.

c. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.

d. It confirms that a previous General Synod and the classes have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.

Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively noncontroversial or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together and voted upon as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice in general for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression that the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ
in Matthew 18:20 (NRSV), “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Word and Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32 [MGS 2016, pp. 84 and 164]) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a second vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, a process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, it may also encourage the beginning of much-needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so will not come before General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Creating a more intentional process for deliberation about second votes will, inevitably, take more time in General Synod’s process. However, time-saving practices are not as important as wise discernment, and efficiency is not as important as reconciliation. Given the tenuous and conflicted position the RCA now finds itself in, it is time for General Synod to recognize the consequences of abbreviating its process and change course.

4. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:

1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:

a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.

b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.

c. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.

d. It confirms that a previous General Synod and the classes have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.
Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in his or her deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

40. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates, at their tables, before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:
1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken: (1) General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority, (2) each classis votes on the amendment, (3) if two thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a declarative vote. The benefits of incorporating a declarative vote in the amendment process include: (a) two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, (b) it provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit, and (c) to confirm that a previous General Synod, and the classes, have correctly determined the will of God for the RCA. Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively non-controversial, or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together, and voted upon, as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice, in general, for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members, and assemblies, of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not built into the agenda, it can leave the impression the declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet, the declarative vote is not a rubber stamp—it is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility, and wisdom, for the RCA.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there
among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the Church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet, when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility, when changing the Constitution, to ensure its delegates have discerned the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a declarative vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, some kind of process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, it may also encourage the beginning of much needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so do not warrant a declarative vote by General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Throughout the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics during this last year, we have worked to create a space of learning among our members. Our intention has been to better understand the nature of the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the ramifications of the proposed recommendations and amendments that have come from the Special Council and General Synod. In that process we have been encouraged by how we have grown—not only in knowledge of the issues, but also how we have grown closer to each other. Our hope is that as General Synod meets, delegates will also be able to engage in such learning—especially with those they otherwise do not know, nor typically interact with, at General Synod.

Separate declarative votes were taken on each amendment to the Constitution adopted by the 2016 General Synod and approved by a vote of at least two-thirds of the classes. Before voting, delegates discussed the amendments around their tables. See the Report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod, p. 42.

Identify and Minister to Breakdown in Community; Education around Constitution, Polity, and Unity in Christ; Affirmation/Declaration Regarding Interpretation of Scripture; P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary

5. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of Greater Palisades is seeing that the distress of community in the RCA and in the General Synod is the most important and most urgent challenge facing the General Synod today.
2. Reformed assemblies have two basic functions: *koinonia* (fellowship, relationship, community) and *episcope* (oversight, governance). And the two are deeply related. The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. Put negatively, to the extent that people do not know each other and do not trust each other, they will not be able to think and work well together. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.

3. We see in the life of the RCA as a whole that people and groups are not communicating well between the echo chambers in which we live. Across the RCA, people are not understanding why others in the church who have perspectives different than their own think what they think and feel what they feel. People are attributing to others intentions they would never attribute to themselves. The RCA is lacking the means to communicate across lines of difference, to let off steam throughout the year, to make our cases, to make ourselves known to each other. The cost is a breakdown of trust across the RCA. We note that trusting is different than agreeing. And while agreeing is not a necessary condition for either community or governance, trusting is.

a. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility to positively nurture community in the RCA.

i. A mechanism from the past we can point to as an example of community-nurturing is the “Flak and Flattery” section of the *Church Herald*, in which members would read perspectives from beyond their own context. Apart from whether or not folks agreed, those letters at least nurtured knowing each other. This overture mentions “Flak and Flattery” not to communicate nostalgia for the *Church Herald*. We mention it as an example of what we see missing in the *RCA Today*.

b. Additionally, we believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to mitigate what is hurting community in the RCA.

i. We think, as an example, of the impact on community of the success of TEA and MFCA (the good of which we absolutely do not dispute, but the cost of which we believe can be addressed), which have brought into the RCA many ministers who do not share a common seminary formation experience.

ii. We think, as an example, of the ever-polarizing North American cultural context, to which the RCA as a communion is not immune. It will take hard, focused, intentional work if the RCA is to evade capture by the polarizing powers. We believe that work merits addressing the problem of community as a matter of the synod’s highest priority.

4. We see in the life of the General Synod assembly a microcosm of the RCA as a whole. Many delegates come to the synod meeting not knowing each other and not trusting each other. They have to overcome enormous obstacles to get to workable community. This at a time when the church urgently needs the synod to do governance well. Yet it is not working well.

a. In the absence of real community, and in the consequent absence of thoughtful governance, we see the synod increasingly becoming a body over-determined by arid procedure and in which dialogue is replaced by mere voting.

b. The synod’s procedural rules make allowance for things like anonymous voting, calling the question, limiting speaking time, replacing a year’s worth of considered work with last-minute substitute amendments. While rules like these may serve other worthy values, we believe they do not promote
the value of trust a Reformed assembly needs today.

c. We wonder if the synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday or to allow the synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.

d. We believe it may be counterproductive to community among delegates for the synod to consider shortening its meeting time or move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counterproductive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory committee structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict amelioration, the GSC’s program, or other values.

6. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

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c. We wonder if the synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday or to allow the synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.

d. We believe it may be counterproductive to community among delegates for the synod to consider shortening its meeting time or move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counterproductive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory committee structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict amelioration, the GSC’s program, or other values.

7. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council to identify areas in which the community and communication across the Reformed Church in America has broken down, as well as the consequences to which this breakdown has led in regard to the process of governance, with report back to the General Synod in 2018 with recommendations to address these matters.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of Schenectady recognizes that there has been a fundamental breakdown in communication, both within the General Synod itself and throughout the denomination as a whole, and that this has had a negative effect on relationships within the denomination.

2. Reformed assemblies have two basic, deeply related functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.
8. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to identify ways to minister to (1) the breakdown of communication and community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:
1. The Classis of Schoharie is seeing a breakdown in communication, both within the General Synod itself and throughout the denomination as a whole, and this has had a negative impact on relationships within the denomination.
2. Reformed assemblies have two basic and related functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address and make room for both.

10. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA's Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the LGBTQ community’s inclusion in the life and witness of the RCA.

Reasons:
1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. Misunderstanding about the nature of RCA polity—specifically in regard to the authority of consistories and classes—has led to much of the conflict surrounding the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the RCA. Such misunderstandings, if not corrected, will only continue to fuel acrimony in the RCA.

For example, if the amendments are not ratified by the RCA, the current situation will remain problematic for those who advocated for their inclusion in the Constitution. Indeed, it is highly likely that a failure to ratify these amendments will create even more problems for classes where churches have threatened to leave the RCA. However, a greater appreciation of RCA polity may help those concerned about future affiliation with the RCA come to terms with the current reality.

Conversely, if these amendments are ratified, a realistic understanding of the RCA’s Constitution and polity suggests consistories and classes will interpret these amendments differently. General Synod delegates must understand that the authority of a consistory, and subsequently a classis, to interpret and adjudicate these amendments is not an accident but by design and, inevitably, the adherence to these amendments will be dealt with differently throughout the RCA. While it may seem to some proponents of the amendments that these changes will decrease the conflict in the RCA, a study of how RCA polity works suggests the conflict will actually increase. Again, it is highly likely that even if these amendments are ratified, greater acrimony will be created when those who want uniformity of practice in the RCA are not satisfied with non-uniform outcomes.
If General Synod 2017 authentically intends to pursue unity, purity, and peace for the whole of the RCA, it will necessarily need to correct future misunderstandings of the Constitution and RCA polity—specifically as they pertain to the authority of consistories and classes.

2. In an oversight of process, delegates of General Synod 2016 were not given the opportunity to learn about existing RCA polity as a way forward for the RCA. The Special Council created by General Synod 2015, which was given the task of recommending a constitutional pathway forward for the RCA, in its initial report, made a recommendation to affirm existing RCA polity. This recommendation was regarded by the Special Council as having the greatest consensus among delegates. However, by the time General Synod 2016 met and considered the other recommendations of the Special Council, the affirmation of existing RCA polity was removed—effectively eliminating the Special Council’s most agreed-upon recommendation from General Synod 2016’s consideration and allowing misunderstanding of RCA polity to continue. If delegates of General Synod 2016 had discussed this recommendation as originally intended by the Special Council, delegates would have had a better understanding of the consequences of the other recommendations. This oversight in process between the Special Council and General Synod needs to be corrected.

3. At the heart of the RCA’s conflict is a fundamental disagreement on how Holy Scripture should be interpreted in light of shifting societal definitions of gender identity and sexual orientation. However, this disagreement has revealed a second problem for the RCA—a lack of appreciation of how the Constitution and RCA polity can, and cannot, help in solving the issues that have arisen. Much frustration and mistrust have grown as attempts to use the polity have yielded little change. This is not the fault of the RCA’s polity but a failure of those who try to use the polity to achieve ends the polity cannot create—such as actually changing the hearts and minds of how people interpret Holy Scripture with regard to the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the church.

4. In this toxic environment of frustration and mistrust, there is an additional consequence to General Synod—those to whom General Synod delegates would typically look for wisdom on matters of a way forward (commissions, committees, special councils, professors of theology, General Synod staff, etc.) are too often viewed with suspicion. If delegates of General Synod have lost trust in their leaders to the point that leaders’ voices are dismissed from deliberation, it behooves all General Synod delegates, for the good of the RCA, to understand the Constitution and RCA polity well enough to still complete General Synod’s mandate to speak for the RCA. Additionally, it behooves those in leadership to earn back delegates’ trust by relating and communicating more effectively about what can and cannot be achieved with the Constitution and RCA polity.

5. While RCA polity and the Constitution are limited in solving the fundamental disagreements in the RCA, they can be guiding lights in a process toward that end. If we spend time understanding how RCA polity and the Constitution have helped the RCA pursue purity in tension (if not in balance) along with unity and peace, we will come to realize “the way forward” for the RCA is already available to us in the Constitution and the polity.

11. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the inclusion of LGBTQ Christians in the full life and witness of the RCA.
Reasons:

1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32 [MGS 2016, pp. 84 and 164]) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. Misunderstanding about the nature of RCA polity—specifically in regards to the authority of consistories and classes—has led to much of the conflict surrounding the inclusion of the LGBTQ Christians in the RCA. Such misunderstandings, if not corrected, will only continue to fuel acrimony in the RCA.

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12. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to instruct the General Synod Council, working in consultation with the Commissions on Church Order, Christian Discipleship and Education, History, and Theology, to implement as a highest priority actions that educate about the importance of and foster a covenant community within the life of the RCA, for final report to the General Synod of 2020; and further,

that this include an educational component for all delegates to the General Synods of 2018, 2019, and 2020 on the Constitution of the RCA, our polity, and the authority and relationship of the various assemblies of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. The Commission on Church Order raised concerns with the General Synod of 2006 over changes in society that were putting strains on our covenant relationship (MGS 2006, pp. 66-68). We observe that this stress has only gotten worse in recent years and continues to threaten how we work and live together.

2. It is important for the church to reflect on how it has manifested its covenantal relationships among the assemblies, offices, and congregations.

3. In John 13:35, Jesus reminds us that the world knows we are his disciples when they see our love for one another. The church’s witness is strengthened when we understand how we demonstrate to the world how we live together in Christ despite all our disagreements. Pulling together, we are stronger. The Reformed Church has done this through its understanding of doctrine, liturgy, and government, where our covenant is lived out.

13. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution and RCA polity.
Reasons:
1. In the midst of discussion around various overtures and constitutional amendments, it has become clear that many delegates are unclear about matters of our denominational polity. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that it has been many years since many of our ministers have taken polity courses, that elder delegates often never take polity courses at all, and that constant changes to the *Book of Church Order* have led to delegates often not having the present awareness regarding matters of polity and governance.
2. Providing continuing education for our delegates is beneficial to both the process of the General Synod and the church as a whole.

14. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution and RCA polity.

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2. Providing continuing education for our delegates is beneficial to both the process of the General Synod and the church as a whole.

15. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to direct the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education, in consultation with the Commissions on Theology and Christian Unity and the General Synod Council, to provide education and training, including opportunities for practice and reflection, across the denomination to recognize and further the Reformed Church in America’s understanding and practice of unity in Christ, in contrast to uniformity, including the recognition and celebration of the gifts of our diversity, even what may seem incongruent perspectives that arise out of our diversity of theological perspective or biblical interpretation, other than our shared belief in Christ.

Reasons:
1. In the current divisive cultural climate, the false dichotomy of polarization has crept into the church. Scripture reminds the church many times that Christ is our unity (Romans 15:5; Malachi 2:10; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:26-28; John 17:23). It is the church’s responsibility, and highest priority, to practice this reality.
2. Unity in Christ, lived out in mutual respect and continued missional partnership across theological divides, is a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit, witnessing against the cultural temptations toward echo-chamber divisions in which people, even Reformed Christians, associate and listen only to those of like mind, ignoring or consciously dismissing those of like spirit with different perspectives.
3. The Reformed Church in America is at a critical point in which a temptation to define one viewpoint on a topic not related to Christ over and against relationship to each other may divide the church. Throughout Scripture, God implores God’s people to choose relationship with God and others as the “greatest” command (Mark 12:29-31).
4. According to the Belhar Confession, unity is “both a gift and an obligation for
the church of Jesus Christ.” In the Belhar, we further confess, “true faith in Jesus
Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.” And further, “We
believe this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint;
that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well
as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ,
opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of
God.”

5. Placing an emphasis on one “right belief,” other than Christ, over relationship
to one another not only divides the church but greatly hinders our witness to the
larger world.

29. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to affirm that
the Bible is God’s Living Word, which, rather than being static, is continually
reinterpreted by the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of human beings, and that
this reinterpretation reveals a continuous arc toward greater mercy, acceptance,
and justice, reflecting a divine love that has no limit and transcends our human
formulations.

Reasons:

1. We must reaffirm our Reformed approach of continually seeking to understand
Scripture.
2. Scripture, in numerous instances, models its own reinterpretation: Hosea knew
what Scripture commanded regarding sacrifices and offerings, and yet God
speaks through him to say, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the
knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NRSV). In Matthew
9:13 Jesus explicitly commands the Pharisees to go and learn the meaning of this
prophetic word. Jesus continually reframes the law in terms of its intent to bless
people by helping them love God, neighbor, stranger, and enemy. Peter and the
other apostles knew without question what the law commanded regarding dietary
laws and consorting with Gentiles, but the Holy Spirit moved to direct them away
from the letter of the law toward its ultimate purpose (see Acts 10:1–11:18),
which Paul stated simply, that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10,
NKJV).
3. Scripture implicitly reveals the slowness and struggle of God’s people to
comprehend God’s true nature. The self-revelation of God occurs in the
Hebrew Scriptures under the shadow of human culture and practices. In the
New Testament, Peter and others backslide from the revelation of God’s wider
welcome, and the dispute between circumcised and uncircumcised continues to
obscure the church; nevertheless, the Spirit moves the church at last to heed God’s
will. Jesus himself intimates that the church will be given understanding beyond
what even he has spoken, through the Holy Spirit. “I have said these things to
you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father
will send in my name, will teach you everything” (John 14:25-26a, NRSV). And,
“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When
the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13a,
NRSV).
4. When the church tries to stop this process of leading, sanctification, and
transformation by the Holy Spirit, it becomes concretized, constricted in spirit,
and fearful in heart. God has sent prophets of reform, as we note God called
Martin Luther 500 years ago, to summon the church away from the idolatry of its
own self-satisfied certainty.
5. A strict, literalist interpretation of Scripture leads to the inability to correctly
understand and teach the meaning of apocalyptic literature, thereby encouraging
millennialist thinking, which is superstitious and dangerous.

6. We must address the ways in which we choose particular passages of Scripture to interpret literally or nonliterally in order to confirm our own preconceptions or prejudices. This slavish misuse of Scripture blinds us to the true intent of the gospel and the leading of the Spirit.

7. LGBTQ inclusion discussion at the Special Council and at General Synod was obstructed by disputes about scriptural interpretation. This and other issues will remain intractable until we reclaim a reasonably unified understanding of Scripture.

30. The Classis of Mid-Hudson, in concern and love for the Reformed Church in America, overtures the General Synod to declare that: 1) God, in unconditional love and grace, freely elects and calls persons into communion with God and with the church; 2) God freely justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies those whom God calls, conforming them to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, and preserving them in God’s salvation; 3) God freely moves and acts to redeem God’s whole creation in ways that surprise and prompt God’s people to reconsider and deepen their current interpretation of Scripture in relation to God’s movement; 4) in response to God’s ongoing, sovereign action in the church, the world, and the lives of individuals, the church is called to speak and to hear in light of God’s Word and what God’s Spirit is doing, and to discern through our assemblies the truth and meaning of this witness for the life, mission, and ministry of the church; and 5) the church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our present interpretation of Scripture, for to do so would be to give more authority to our current interpretation of Scripture rather than to the Triune God, who is still revealing, speaking, and acting. God does not abandon the revelation of Scripture but continually deepens our grasp of that revelation.

Reasons:

1. As a denomination, we are at a critical juncture in our life together. We are poised to rend the body of Christ over the question of what it means to fully include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians in the full ministry and mission of the church. We are, by the grace of God, one body in Jesus Christ, and we are called to manifest the unity that we are given. We acknowledge that manifesting our unity in Christ is always a challenge for the church. We inevitably experience disagreement as we undergo and participate in God’s mission and ministry in our varied contexts. In the midst of disagreement and tension, the church is always free to rend the body rather than stay engaged in the hard work of discerning together the truth of God’s Word and Spirit. As a classis, we implore the RCA to stay in the process of discernment together and to have the biblical and theological conversations that have not yet taken place but that we believe must be had.

We are asking the RCA to take account of the whole witness of Scripture through the interpretive lens of our Reformed confessional Standards. With this overture, we set forth several core Reformed convictions about who God is, what God has done, and what God is doing to redeem the whole creation. We also set forth core Reformed convictions about the church as a creature of God’s Word and Spirit, and its vocation to continually open itself to the ministry of God’s Word and Spirit in search of truth in particular times and places.

We acknowledge that this is a challenging and difficult vocation no matter what we are called to discern together. But it is our vocation, and as a classis, we believe that if we can declare what this overture invites us to declare—the
core wisdom of our Reformed confessions—we will center ourselves and our conversations in the unconditional love and grace of the Triune God, who is the source of our being and our salvation, and whose glory is the goal of all our living. Thus centered, we trust that we can commit ourselves to the good, hard work of ongoing discernment, as we undergo and participate in God’s mission and ministry to make all things new.

2. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God freely elects and calls whom God chooses. The Heidelberg Catechism (HC) states: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). Using virtually the same words, this belief is stated in the Belhar Confession (Belhar, 1). The Belgic Confession elaborates on the nature of God’s grace in election, saying: “God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from … perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works” (Belgic, Article 16). The Canons of Dort describe election as “God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation” (Canons, First Point, Article 7). The Canons further declare that “the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve God’s choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as God’s own possession” (Canons, First Point, Article 10). God’s election “can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God’s chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced” (Canons, First Point, Article 11). Election is then entirely grounded in God, who not only draws the elect to God’s self but also brings to completion the redemption of those whom God has chosen and called.

3. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God justifies, sanctifies, and preserves those whom God calls, finally fully glorifying persons when God’s new creation is fully come. In Romans, Paul writes: “And those whom [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30, NRSV). Those whom God chooses, God justifies; that is, God makes the elect right with God and unfolds in them the fruits and fullness of God’s justification accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is God’s gracious initiative and faithful work that both begins and brings to completion the redemption of those chosen in Christ. “Election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects” (Canons, First Point, Article 9).

The Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that God’s justification completely changes the believer’s situation. The “being made right with God” includes the reality that by God’s “sheer grace,” sinners, through no effort of their own, are granted and credited “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,” as if they “had never sinned nor been a sinner” and as if they “had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient” (HC, Q&A 60). In grace, God not
only grants and credits the elect with Christ’s righteousness and holiness, but also actively effects Christ’s righteousness and holiness in their lives, cleansing them by Christ’s “blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle” (Canons, Second Point, Article 8).

God’s justification cannot be separated from God’s work of sanctification. In Christ, through union with Christ, sinners receive what is not theirs and they become what they are not and cannot be on their own. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, “the Spirit is given also to me, so that, through true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his benefits through true faith, comforts me, and will remain with me forever” (HC, Q&A 53). Baptism is the sign and seal of the Christian’s union with Christ, the visible event that assures us that the Holy Spirit, having joined us to Christ, “has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and live holy and blameless lives” (HC, Q&A 70).

Through faith that is produced in us by the hearing of God’s Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit, “[God] regenerates us and makes us new creatures, causing us to live a new life and freeing us from the slavery of sin” (Belgic, Article 24). Our sanctification consists of the Spirit’s daily work of causing us to die to sin and rise to new life and obedience. The Canons of Dort describe regeneration, or sanctification, as

the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God’s work is done, it remains in human power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture … teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God, but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, people themselves, by that grace which they have received, are also rightly said to believe and to repent (Canons, Third and Fourth Points, Article 12).

Joined to Christ, activated and motivated by God’s Spirit, persons are renewed. Their wills are conformed to the will of God, and they become responsive to what God has done and is doing in their lives and in the life of the world. Yet, despite the mystery and power of God’s Spirit at work in us, we struggle against sin throughout our whole lives. The Belgic Confession says of Christians, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him” (Belgic, Article 29). In the words of the Heidelberg, “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning” of obedience to God’s commandments; “[n]evertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (HC, Q&A 114).
We are unable to perfectly love God and our neighbors, but in full assurance of God’s saving grace and faithfulness, we await our “entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Belgic, Article 27). God keeps God’s promises. Those whom God chooses and calls God justifies and sanctifies and ultimately glorifies. It is the action of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, past, present, and future—which begins and completes our redemption, activating us to believe and receive with thanksgiving what in grace God has given and promised.

4. The biblical witness shows us again and again that God’s free and sovereign action surprises God’s people and challenges them to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture, theological understanding, and missional practice. God impinges upon individuals and communities, recalling them to what they have forgotten, and revealing God’s self and God’s purposes in ways previously inconceivable. Israel’s prophets received a special measure of God’s Spirit and were called to reinterpret and help the people re-understand the meaning of the Torah. When the people of Israel became obsessed about making the proper sacrifices to God as a way to fulfill their covenant obligations and righteousness, the prophets reminded them that what God requires, what God wants, is that they do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (see Micah 6:6-8). The Hebrew Scriptures have a great deal of quite clear instruction about making the right kinds of sacrifices (see Leviticus 1-7, 12, 14, 16). It is an easier set of instructions to follow than the call to do justice and love kindness. The people’s preoccupation with right sacrifice prevented them from discerning and living into the deeper meaning of what God commands and desires as a whole (see Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:11-17). What God wants, what love of God looks like, is obedience to God’s rules for right living in community where love of neighbor, strangers, aliens, slaves, widows, orphans—love of the little, the least, the weakest, and the most at risk—is a sharing in God’s righteousness. Prophets, in the power of the Spirit, disrupted the settled arrangements and understandings of Scripture and tradition. Through the prophets, God’s Spirit speaks and calls the people to listen less selectively and more comprehensively to the Word of God in Scripture.

God’s free and sovereign action in Jesus Christ, who is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit and is himself God’s Word made flesh, points to the most profound surprise and challenge to the people’s interpretation of Scripture and their theological understanding. In light of Jesus Christ, in light of their experience of God’s presence and God’s kingdom in him, in light of Jesus’ own articulation of his mission through the lens of Isaiah’s suffering servant, some in the Jewish community were compelled to reinterpret the Hebrew Scriptures and to see there what they previously had not been able to see. God’s Davidic Messiah could be a king who acts like a servant to all, accepts a crown of thorns, does not return violence with violence, and is finally hanged upon a tree to die, despite all of the contrary expectations that the people held based on their interpretation of the Scriptures.

Because of what they witnessed in the person and life of Jesus, because of the presence and power of the Spirit in Jesus and in them, Jesus’ followers came to understand that Jesus himself both taught and embodied a new and deeper interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures—he knew and loved the Scriptures, and he was himself God’s Word, God’s speech, God’s conversation in the flesh. But this revelation did not come instantaneously. The New Testament shows how difficult it was for religious leaders, committed disciples, and curious crowds to apprehend what Jesus was saying and doing and who he was. While Jesus was
with them in the flesh, their religious world was being turned upside down by God. To many, it seemed that Jesus was playing fast and loose with the Word of God, ignoring and trying to abolish the “Law and the Prophets,” when, in fact, Jesus was doing the exact opposite. Anointed and led by the Spirit, in total trust of God’s love and purpose, Jesus apprehended the profound depth of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus walked humbly with God. He surrendered himself completely to God, opened himself to the unfolding of God’s Word and will, and in perfect obedience and love, Jesus fulfilled—he filled full to overflowing—the whole intent of the Law and Prophets. In so doing, he embraced the heart of the biblical witness more clearly and truly.

In order to perceive and receive the new thing that God was doing in Jesus, members of the community had to surrender their certainty, their unimpeachable clarity about what they assumed Scripture says and means, their settled understanding of who God is and what God will do. They had to risk their lives on the living God who does not stop speaking, moving, and acting in ways that surprise.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people at Pentecost, bearing witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ, all heaven breaks loose on earth. The eschatological age arrives in Jesus Christ. The new heavens and the new earth are aborning. The huddled disciples become apostles, sent in the Spirit to discern and embrace what the Spirit is doing to make all things and all people new. The apostle Peter has no interest in eating unclean food, nor sitting at the table to eat with unclean people. He is not a careless reader of Scripture. He takes seriously the written Word which, on moral grounds, prohibits the eating of certain foods and dining with Gentiles who are defiled and unclean. But, in a vision, God speaks to him and orders him to eat food Peter deems profane. Peter argues with God. But God wins the argument, saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15, NRSV). Before Peter can justify his resistance by citing Scripture, while he is still puzzling over the vision and conversation with God, the Spirit instructs him to go to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. So he goes. Upon arriving there, Peter says to those assembled, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28, NRSV). Cornelius explains that he had a vision in which he was told to ask Peter to come, then says, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (Acts 10:33b, NRSV). Peter tells them all about Jesus, and while he is still speaking, the Spirit falls on them, and some of the “circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45, NRSV). When Peter is asked to explain to the other apostles and believers in Jerusalem why he went to “uncircumcised men” and ate with them, he tells them the whole long story of what had happened and how the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as the Spirit had fallen on them, and he asks his critics, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17, NRSV).

Peter’s experience of and testimony to what the Spirit is doing among the Gentiles is not the end of the conversation between the apostles. But Peter’s testimony is honored. It is listened to and taken seriously as a communication and revelation from God that ultimately prompts the apostles to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture as it relates to association with Gentiles.
Because of who God is and how God continues to move in freedom and love to redeem creation, and because God gathers, equips, and calls the church to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace, communal discernment is and must be a core practice of the church of Jesus Christ. This requires us to listen to one another in love as we discern together what the Spirit of God is doing in our midst, as we minister in our varied contexts. We cannot simply ignore those whose experience of and testimony to the Holy Spirit rubs up against our understanding of the written Word, nor simply dismiss them as persons who “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4b, NRSV). Such judgments have been made by some against others in the RCA. Together, we are undergoing the work of the Triune God in electing, calling, justifying, sanctifying, and ultimately glorifying a people for God’s self. This requires us to welcome and listen to each other in love as we engage in the long, difficult, necessary work of discerning through our assemblies the revelatory interplay of God’s Word and Spirit, deepening our grasp of the heart of the biblical witness. The church will cease its discerning only when the Lord Jesus Christ himself comes again in glory and completes his work of judging the living and the dead.

5. Central to the church’s process of discernment is our opening to the possibility that God is effecting salvation. God is bringing God’s reign. God is redeeming creation in ways that appear to be contrary to our traditions, our contexts of ministry, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our interpretation of Scripture. This would be to give more authority to our current interpretation of Scripture, and our particular cultures and ministry contexts, rather than to the Triune God, who is still revealing, speaking and acting across time, within every earthly culture, and in varied ministry contexts. God does not abandon the revelation of Scripture but continually deepens our grasp of that revelation. This broad and generous working of God is clearly seen in Scripture and summarized in the Belgic Confession: “And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (Belgic, Article 27).

Our contextual interpretations of Scriptures must not, indeed cannot, prevent the action of the Holy Spirit. The very fact that the Bible is recorded in human language speaks of its limits. In our finiteness, human beings can never fully comprehend the fullness of God, who is infinite, and human words can never fully express what God has and does reveal. Human language in and of itself is not a thing that can ever express itself perfectly. Yet God chooses to accommodate God’s self to us, and condescends to use us in our sin and fragility, and appropriates our words to convey that which is divine. This is the true beauty of Scripture—that it is fully human, but that it witnesses to divine things. It contains all the presuppositions of Peter and Paul’s culture, but that does not mean these presuppositions are to dictate or rule our context. This would make the culture of Peter and Paul superior to ours and require us to bow down to first-century culture as a fixed, contextual idol. However, God does not love or hold in esteem one time or people over another, and for us to hold such a view would mean reaping detrimental theological consequences.

Because Scriptural interpretation is always contextual, it is incumbent on our various assemblies to seek the Holy Spirit and to reason together with the mind of Christ. Our assemblies must always be engaged in a search for truth in our
shared life, mission, and ministry if our witness is to have relevance and vitality. This concept of truth that speaks with relevance and vitality is expressed perhaps nowhere better than in the phrase *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—the church reformed and always being reformed. The church’s ongoing discernment of the truth is always grounded in the inseparable relationship of Word and Spirit. The Spirit is always laboring to transform us and to enliven and deepen our grasp of the Word. Assemblies play a critical role in this process of seeking truth that attends to the redemptive interplay of Word and Spirit. The Belgic Confession states that the truth of God “is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself” (Belgic, Article 7). Because of this, assemblies must work to find the truth in a sea of human vanity that longs to make its own understanding the truth. Therefore we are called as assemblies to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1, KJV). Only as assemblies seeking truth in Word and Spirit and longing always to be reforming accordingly can we hope to bear witness with relevance and vitality while maintaining fidelity to our Reformed confessions.

31. The Classis of Schoharie, in concern and love for the Reformed Church in America, overtures the General Synod to declare that: 1) God, in unconditional love and grace, freely elects and calls persons into communion with God and with the church; 2) God freely justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies those whom God calls, conforming them to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, and preserving them in God’s salvation; 3) God freely moves and acts to redeem God’s whole creation in ways that surprise and prompt God’s people to reconsider their current interpretation of Scripture in relation to God’s movement; 4) in response to God’s ongoing, sovereign action in the church, the world, and the lives of individuals, the church is called to speak and to hear in light of God’s Word and what God’s Spirit is doing, and to discern through our assemblies the truth and meaning of this witness for the life, mission, and ministry of the church; and 5) the church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our interpretation of Scripture, for to do so would be to give ultimate authority to our interpretation of Scripture rather than to the Triune God who is still revealing, speaking, and acting.

Reasons:

1. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God freely elects and calls whom God chooses. The Heidelberg Catechism states: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). Using virtually the same words, this belief is stated in the Belhar Confession (Belhar, 1). The Belgic Confession elaborates on the nature of God’s grace in election, saying: “God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from … perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works” (Belgic, Article 16). The Canons of Dort describe election as “God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and
the foundation of their salvation” (Canons, First Point, Article 7). The Canons further declare that “the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve God’s choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as God’s own possession” (Canons, First Point, Article 10). God’s election “can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God’s chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced” (Canons, First Point, Article 11). Election is then entirely grounded in God, who not only draws the elect to God’s self, but also brings to completion the redemption of those whom God has chosen and called.

2. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God justifies, sanctifies, and preserves those whom God calls, finally fully glorifying persons when God’s new creation is fully come. In Romans, Paul writes: “And those whom [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). Those whom God chooses, God justifies; that is, God makes the elect right with God and unfolds in them the fruits and fullness of God’s justification accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is God’s gracious initiative and faithful work that both begins and brings to completion the redemption of those chosen in Christ. “Election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects” (Canons, First Point, Article 9).

The Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that God’s justification completely changes the believer’s situation. The “being made right with God” includes the reality that by God’s “sheer grace,” sinners, through no effort of their own, are granted and credited “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,” as if they “had never sinned nor been a sinner” and as if they “had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient” (HC, Q&A 60). In grace, God not only grants and credits the elect with Christ’s righteousness and holiness, but also actively effects Christ’s righteousness and holiness in their lives, cleansing them by Christ’s “blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle” (Canons, Second Point, Article 8).

God’s justification cannot be separated from God’s work of sanctification. In Christ, through union with Christ, sinners receive what is not theirs and they become what they are not and cannot be on their own. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, “the Spirit is given also to me, so that, through true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his benefits through true faith, comforts me, and will remain with me forever” (HC, Q&A 53). Baptism is the sign and seal of the Christian’s union with Christ, the visible event that assures us that the Holy Spirit, having joined us to Christ, “has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and live holy and blameless lives” (HC, Q&A 70).

Through faith that is produced in us by the hearing of God’s Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit, “[God] regenerates us and makes us new creatures, causing us to live a new life and freeing us from the slavery of sin” (Belgic, Article 24). Our sanctification consists in the Spirit’s daily work of causing us to die to sin and rise to new life and obedience. The Canons of Dort describe regeneration, or sanctification, as
the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God’s work is done, it remains in human power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture … teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God, but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, people themselves, by that grace which they have received, are also rightly said to believe and to repent (Canons, Third and Fourth Points, Article 12).

Joined to Christ, activated and motivated by God’s Spirit, people are renewed. Their wills are conformed to the will of God, and they become responsive to what God has done and is doing in their lives and in the life of the world. Yet, despite the mystery and power of God’s Spirit at work in us, we struggle against sin throughout our whole lives. The Belgic Confession says of Christians, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him” (Belgic, Article 29). In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning” of obedience to God’s commandments; “[n]evertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (HC, Q&A 114).

We are unable to perfectly love God and our neighbors, but in full assurance of God’s saving grace and faithfulness, we await our “entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Belgic, Article 27). God keeps God’s promises. Those whom God chooses and calls God justifies and sanctifies and ultimately glorifies. It is the action of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, past, present, and future—which begins and completes our redemption, activating us to believe and receive with thanksgiving what in grace God has given and promised.

3. The biblical witness shows us again and again that God’s free and sovereign action surprises God’s people and challenges them to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture, theological understanding, and missional practice. God impinges upon individuals and communities, recalling them to what they have forgotten, and revealing God’s self and God’s purposes in ways previously inconceivable. Israel’s prophets receive a special measure of God’s Spirit and are called to reinterpret and help the people re-understand the meaning of the Torah. When the people of Israel become obsessed about making the proper sacrifices to God as a way to fulfill their covenant obligations and righteousness, the prophets remind them that what God requires, what God wants, is that they do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. The Hebrew Scriptures have a great deal of quite clear instruction about making the right kinds of sacrifices. It is an easier set of instructions to follow than the call to do justice. The people’s preoccupation with right sacrifice prevents them from discerning and living into the deeper meaning of what God commands as a whole. What God wants, what love of God looks like, is obedience to God’s rules for right living in community where love of neighbor, strangers, aliens, slaves, widows, orphans—love of the little, the least,
the weakest, and the most at risk—is a sharing in God’s righteousness. Prophets, in the power of the Spirit, disrupt the settled arrangements and understandings of Scripture and tradition. Through the prophets, God’s Spirit speaks and calls the people to listen less selectively and more comprehensively to the Word of God in Scripture.

God’s free and sovereign action in Jesus Christ, who is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit and is himself God’s Word made flesh, points to the most profound surprise and challenge to the people’s interpretation of Scripture and their theological understanding. In light of Jesus Christ, in light of their experience of God’s presence and God’s kingdom in him, in light of Jesus’ own articulation of his mission through the lens of Isaiah’s suffering servant, some in the Jewish community were compelled to reinterpret the Hebrew Scriptures and to see there what they previously had not been able to see. God’s Davidic Messiah could be a king who acts like a servant to all, accepts a crown of thorns, does not return violence with violence, and is finally hanged upon a tree to die, despite all of the contrary expectations that the people held based on their interpretation of the Scriptures.

Because of what they witnessed in the person and life of Jesus, because of the presence and power of the Spirit in Jesus and in them, Jesus’ followers came to understand that Jesus himself both taught and embodied a new interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures—he knew and loved God’s Word, and he was himself God’s Word, God’s speech, God’s conversation in the flesh. But this revelation did not come instantaneously. The New Testament shows how difficult it was for religious leaders, committed disciples, and curious crowds to apprehend what Jesus was saying and doing and who he was. While Jesus was with them in the flesh, their religious world was being turned upside down by God. To many, it seemed that Jesus was playing fast and loose with the Word of God, ignoring and trying to abolish the “Law and the Prophets,” when, in fact, Jesus was doing the exact opposite. Anointed and led by the Spirit, in total trust of God’s love and purpose, Jesus apprehended the profound depth of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus walked humbly with God. He surrendered himself completely to God, opened himself to the unfolding of God’s Word and will, and in perfect obedience and love, Jesus fulfilled—he filled full to overflowing—the whole intent of the Law and Prophets.

In order to perceive and receive the new thing that God was doing in Jesus, members of the community had to surrender their certainty, their unimpeachable clarity about what Scripture says and means, their settled understanding of who God is and what God will do. They had to risk their lives on the living God, who does not stop speaking, moving, and acting in ways that surprise.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people at Pentecost, bearing witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ, all heaven breaks loose on earth. The eschatological age arrives. The new heavens and the new earth are aborning. The huddled disciples become apostles, sent in the Spirit to discern and embrace what the Spirit is doing to make all things and all people new. The apostle Peter has no interest in eating unclean food, nor sitting at table to eat with unclean people. He is not a careless reader of Scripture. He takes seriously the written Word, which, on moral grounds, prohibits the eating of certain foods and dining with Gentiles who are defiled and unclean. But, in a vision, God speaks to him and orders him to eat food Peter deems profane. Peter argues with God. But God wins the argument, saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call
profane” (Acts 10:15). Before Peter can justify his resistance by citing Scripture, while he is still puzzling over the vision and conversation with God, the Spirit instructs him to go to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. So he goes. Upon arriving there, Peter says to those assembled, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Cornelius explains that he had a vision in which he was told to ask Peter to come, then says, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (Acts 10:33b). Peter tells them all about Jesus, and while he is still speaking, the Spirit falls on them, and some of the “circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). When Peter is asked to explain to the other apostles and believers in Jerusalem why he went to “uncircumcised men” and ate with them, he tells them the whole, long story of what had happened and how the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as the Spirit had fallen on them, and he asks his critics, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

Peter’s experience of and testimony to what the Spirit is doing among the Gentiles is not the end of the conversation between the apostles. But Peter’s testimony is honored. It is listened to and taken seriously as a communication and revelation from God that ultimately prompts the apostles to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture as it relates to association with Gentiles.

Because of who God is and how God continues to move in freedom and love to redeem creation, and because God gathers, equips, and calls the church to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace, communal discernment is and must be a core practice of the church of Jesus Christ. This requires us to listen to one another in love as we discern together what the Spirit of God is doing in our midst, as we minister in our varied contexts. We cannot simply ignore those whose experience of and testimony to the Holy Spirit rubs up against our understanding of the written Word, nor simply dismiss them as persons who “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4b). Such judgments have been made by some against others in the RCA. Together, we are undergoing the work of the Triune God in electing, calling, justifying, sanctifying, and ultimately glorifying a people for God’s self. This requires us to welcome and listen to each other in love as we engage in the long, difficult, necessary work of discerning through our assemblies the revelatory interplay of God’s Word and Spirit. The church will cease its discerning only when the Lord Jesus Christ himself comes again in glory and completes his work of judging the living and the dead.

4. Central to the church’s process of discernment is our opening to the possibility that God is effecting salvation, God is bringing God’s reign, God is redeeming creation in ways that appear to be contrary to our traditions, our contexts of ministry, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are sometimes at odds with our interpretation of Scripture. This would be to give ultimate authority to our interpretation of Scripture, and our particular cultures and ministry contexts, rather than to the Triune God who is still speaking and acting across time, within every earthly culture, and in varied ministry contexts. This broad and generous working of God is clearly seen in Scripture and summarized in the
Belgic Confession: “And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (Belgic, Article 27).

Our contextual interpretations of Scriptures must not, indeed cannot, prevent the action of the Holy Spirit. The very fact that the Bible is recorded in human language speaks of its limits. In our finiteness, human beings can never fully comprehend the fullness of God, who is infinite, and human words can never fully express what God has and does reveal. Human language in and of itself is not a thing that can ever express itself perfectly. Yet God chooses to accommodate God’s self to us, and condescends to use us in our sin and fragility, and appropriates our words to convey that which is divine. This is the true beauty of Scripture—that it is fully human, but that it witnesses to divine things. It contains all the presuppositions of Peter and Paul’s culture, but that does not mean these presuppositions are to dictate or rule our context. This would make the culture of Peter and Paul superior to ours and require us bow down to first-century culture as a fixed, contextual idol. However, God does not love or hold in esteem one time or people over another, and for us hold such a view would mean reaping detrimental theological consequences.

Because Scriptural interpretation is always contextual, it is incumbent on our various assemblies to seek the Holy Spirit and to reason together with the mind of Christ. Our assemblies must always be engaged in a search for truth in our shared life, mission, and ministry if our witness is to have relevance and vitality. This concept of truth that speaks with relevance and vitality is expressed perhaps nowhere better than in the phrase ecclesia semper reformanda (the church always reforming). Over and above this, truth is always grounded in the inseparable relationship of Word and Spirit. Assemblies play a critical role in this process of seeking truth that attends to the redemptive interplay of Word and Spirit. The Belgic Confession states that the truth of God “is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself” (Belgic, Article 7). Because of this, assemblies must work to find the truth in a sea of human vanity that longs to make its own understanding the truth. Therefore, we are called as assemblies to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1, KJV; Belgic, Article 3). Only as assemblies seeking truth in Word and Spirit and longing to always be reforming accordingly can we hope to bear witness with relevance and vitality while maintaining fidelity to our Reformed confessions.

As a denomination, we are at a critical juncture in our life together. We are poised to rend the body of Christ over the questions of what it means to fully include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians in the full ministry and mission of the church. As a classis, we implore the RCA to stay engaged in conversation and discernment, taking account of the whole witness of Scripture through the interpretive lens of our confessional tradition, and in light of the ongoing movement of God’s Spirit in our various contexts of ministry. We acknowledge that this is a challenging and difficult spiritual practice no matter what we are called to discern together. But we humbly and hopefully believe that if we can declare what this overture invites us to declare and embrace—the core wisdom of our Reformed confessions—we will center ourselves and our conversations in the unconditional, powerful, transforming love and grace of the Triune God who is the source of our being and our salvation, and whose glory is the goal of all our living, both now and forevermore.
41. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the LGBTQ’s inclusion in the life and witness of the RCA.

Reasons:
1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. For example, if the amendments are not ratified by the RCA, will those who advocated for their inclusion in the Constitution be willing to accept this? Or will it actually fuel greater acrimony in classes where churches have threatened to leave the RCA? Conversely, if these amendments are ratified, a realistic understanding of the RCA’s Constitution and polity suggests consistories and classes will interpret these amendments differently. Do General Synod delegates understand that the authority of a consistory, and subsequently a classis, to interpret and adjudicate these amendments is not an accident, but by design? Do they understand why our Constitution and polity work this way? And, will those who want uniformity of practice in the RCA be satisfied when, inevitably, the adherence to these amendments are dealt with differently throughout the RCA? While it may seem to some proponents of the amendments that these changes will decrease the conflict in the RCA, a study of how RCA polity works suggests the conflict will actually increase. In fact, in even asking classes to take this vote, the only reasonably assumed outcomes look like greater division. If General Synod 2017 authentically intends to pursue unity, purity, and peace for the whole of the RCA, it will necessarily need to correct future misunderstandings of the Constitution and RCA polity—specifically as it pertains to the authority of consistories and classes.

2. The Special Council, created by General Synod 2015 and given the task of recommending a constitutional pathway forward for the RCA, offered, in its initial report, that one way forward for the RCA was to affirm existing RCA polity. This way forward was regarded in the Special Council’s initial report to have the greatest consensus among delegates. However, by the time General Synod 2016 met and considered the other recommendations of the Special Council, the affirmation of existing RCA polity was removed—effectively eliminating the Special Council’s most agreed-upon recommendation from General Synod 2016’s consideration. This oversight in process between the Special Council and General Synod needs to be corrected.

3. At the heart of the RCA’s conflict is a fundamental disagreement on how Holy Scripture should be interpreted in light of shifting societal definitions of gender identity and sexual orientation. However, this disagreement has revealed a second problem for the RCA—a lack of appreciation of how the Constitution and RCA polity, can, and cannot, help in solving the issues that have arisen. Much frustration and mistrust have grown as attempts to use the polity have yielded little change. This is not the fault of the RCA’s polity, but a failure of those who try to use the polity to achieve ends the polity cannot create—such as actually changing the hearts and minds of how people interpret Holy Scripture in regard to the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the church.

4. In this toxic environment of frustration and mistrust, there is an additional consequence to General Synod—those whom General Synod delegates would typically look to for wisdom on matters of a way forward (commissions, committees, Special Councils, General Synod professors, General Synod Council staff, etc.) are too often viewed with suspicion. If delegates of General Synod
have lost trust in their leaders to the point that leaders’ voices are dismissed from deliberation, it behooves all General Synod delegates, for the good of the RCA, to understand the Constitution and RCA polity well enough to still complete General Synod’s mandate to speak for the RCA. Thus, it behooves all delegates to have a more comprehensive understanding of the Constitution and RCA polity. Additionally, it behooves those in leadership to earn back delegates’ trust by relating, and communicating, more effectively about what can, and cannot, be achieved with the Constitution and RCA polity.

5. While RCA polity and the Constitution are limited in solving the fundamental disagreements in the RCA, they can be guiding lights in a process toward that end. If we spend time understanding how RCA polity and the Constitution have helped the RCA pursue purity in tension (if not in balance) along with unity and peace, we will come to realize “the way forward” for the RCA is already available to us in the Constitution and the polity.

43. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and General Synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:

1. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is seeing that the distress of community in the RCA and in the General Synod is the most important and most urgent challenge facing the General Synod today.

2. Reformed assemblies have two basic functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). And the two are deeply related. The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. Put negatively, to the extent that people do not know each other, do not trust each other, they will not be able to think and work well together. The story we are telling about General Synod is that its governance is suffering because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the General Synod as an assembly. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.

3. The story we are telling about the life of the RCA as a whole is that people and groups are not communicating well between the echo-chambers in which we live. Across the RCA, people are not understanding why others in the church with different perspectives than their own think what they think and feel what they feel. People are attributing to people of different perspectives than their own intentions they would never attribute to themselves. The RCA is lacking the means to communicate across lines of difference, to let off steam throughout the year, to make our cases, to make ourselves known to each other. The cost is a breakdown of trust across the RCA. We note that trusting is different than agreeing. And while agreeing is not a necessary condition for either community or governance, trusting is.

a. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility positively to nurture community in the RCA.

i. A mechanism from the past we can point to as an example of community-nurturing is the “Flak and Flattery” section of the Church Herald, in which members would read perspectives from beyond their own context. Apart from whether or not folks agreed, those letters at least nurtured knowing each other. This overture mentions “Flak and
b. Additionally, we believe the General Synod needs to look at the forces militating against community in the RCA, and to take action to mitigate them.

i. We think, as an example, of the impact on community of the success of TEA and MFCA (the good of which we absolutely do not dispute; but the cost of which we believe can be addressed), which have brought into the RCA many ministers who do not share a common seminary formation experience.

ii. We think, as an example, of the ever-polarizing North American cultural context, to which the RCA as a communion is not immune. It will take hard, focused, intentional work if the RCA is to evade capture by the polarizing powers. We believe that work merits addressing the problem of community as a matter of the General Synod’s highest priority.

4. The story we are telling about the life of the General Synod assembly is that it is a microcosm of the RCA. Many delegates come to the General Synod meeting not knowing each other, and not trusting each other. They have to overcome enormous obstacles to get to workable community. This is at a time when the church desperately needs the General Synod to do governance well. Yet it is not working well.

a. In the absence of real community, and in the consequent absence of thoughtful governance, we see the General Synod increasingly becoming a body over-determined by arid procedure and in which dialogue is replaced by mere voting.

b. The General Synod’s procedural rules make allowance for things like calling the question, limiting speaking time, replacing a year’s worth of considered work with last-minute substitute amendments. While rules like these may serve other worthy values, we believe they do not promote the kind of trust a Reformed assembly needs today.

c. Anonymous voting may speed up the pace, but it works against knowing each other.

d. We wonder if the General Synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday, or to allow the General Synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.

e. We believe it may be counter-productive to community among delegates for the General Synod to consider shortening its meeting time. We believe it may be counter-productive to community among delegates to move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counter-productive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory group structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict-amelioration, the General Synod Council’s program, or other values.

In response to Overtures 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 29, 30, 31, 41, and 43, as well as P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-18
To request that the GSC as well as each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention
and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for God’s people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church might be reflected, and should include the following questions:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of conversations at all levels should be shared across the classes and regions. The summary of these conversations should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and the small group of pastors and elders, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world.”

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-18 as follows (additions are underlined):

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, stated clerks, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-18 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-18 as follows (deletions are stricken):

… 2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration? …

**VOTED:** To adopt the amendment.

R 17-18 as amended was before the house.

A motion was made and supported to further amend R 17-18 as follows (additions are underlined):

**OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS**
The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity, etc.) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

A motion was made and supported to amend the proposed amendment as follows (deletion to the proposed amendment is highlighted):

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

**VOTED:** To amend the proposed amendment.

The amended proposed amendment to R 17-18 was before the house. It reads as follows:

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

**VOTED:** To adopt the amended proposed amendment.

R 17-18 as further amended was before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt R 17-18 as amended and further amended.

The final version of R 17-18 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**R 17-18**

To request that the GSC as well as each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for God’s people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions:
1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?

2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?

3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of conversations at all levels should be shared across the classes and regions. The summary of these conversations should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and the small group of pastors and elders, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world. (ADOPTED)

Reaffirm Theological Commission Reports

9. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to reaffirm the reports of the Theological Commission concerning questions of marriage that do not fit our “norms” (MGS 1970, pp. 203-205; MGS 1975, pp. 162-171; MGS 1983, pp. 277-278; and MGS 1986, pp. 321-322), and circulate these reports to our congregations for study and to be used as guidelines for congregations discerning whether or not to perform specific marriages.

Reasons:

1. The Theological Commission did extensive study of the question of marriage during the 1970s and 1980s. These reports are largely forgotten by our congregations but would serve as good guidelines during our current marital conversations.

2. These papers quite properly place the decisions concerning whether or not to perform weddings in the hands of the ministers and boards of elders, and to some of us it appears that we need a reminder of this.

3. These are a reminder that our current marriage liturgy has wording that can be altered for specific circumstances as is required by need.

4. Our deeper understanding of the views of marriage since the days of the early church would serve as good guidelines for our current churches, many of whom are conflicted as they decide who may be married in their congregations.

In response to Overture 9, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-19
To deny Overture 9. (ADOPTED)
Reason:

These documents are available in the minutes of General Synod from 1970, 1975, 1983, and 1986 and can be accessed and studied by congregations.

**Property of Church Withdrawing from Denomination**

16. The Classis of British Columbia overtures the General Synod to amend the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter I, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42), as follows (deletions are crossed out; additions are underlined):

   f. If the classis shall then determine that it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, and to retain all or part of its personal property free from any claim, fees, or penalties on the part of the denomination or any assembly, board or agency thereof; and it shall then so declare and proceed promptly to assist the consistory of the church in (1) dissolution of the relationship of the church to the denomination, and (2) transfer of its property to a church of another denomination.

Reasons:

1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 (2016 edition, pp. 42-43), assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4f; 2016 edition, p. 42).

17. New Thing Classis overtures the General Synod to amend the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter I, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42) as follows (deletions are crossed out; additions are underlined):

   f. If the classis shall then determine that it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, and to retain all or part of its personal property free from any claim, fees, or penalties on the part of the denomination or any assembly, board or agency thereof; and it shall then so declare and proceed promptly to assist the consistory of the church in (1) dissolution of the relationship of the church to the denomination, and (2) transfer of its property to a church of another denomination.

Reasons:

1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5, pp. 42-43 (2016 edition) assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4f; 2016 edition, p. 42).
In response to Overtures 16 and 17, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-20**
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose constitutionally appropriate amendments to the *Book of Church Order* to accomplish the intent of Overtures 16 and 17 for report to the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 (2016 edition, pp. 42-43), assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5f; 2016 edition, p. 42).
3. This is a complicated matter that requires the expertise of the Commission on Church Order to provide appropriate language.

**Consistory’s Authority Concerning Marriage**

18. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

*Sec. 11.* The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a–f remain unchanged]

**g.** The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.

Reasons:
1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2016 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. This proposed amendment is the recommendation brought to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (*MGS 2015*, pp. 188ff). In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (*MGS 2016*, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on the original recommendation as proposed by the Commission on Church Order.
3. The authority and responsibility to provide for worship rightly belongs to the consistory of the local church: “The consistory shall provide services of worship … for the spiritual benefit and growth of Christ’s people” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 10; 2016 edition, p. 15). The solemnization of Christian marriage is a service of worship. The opening rubric of the Order for Christian Marriage (2002) recognizes it as such: “As a service of Christian worship, the marriage service is under the direction of the minister and the supervision of
The consistory” (Worship the Lord, p. 84) (from the report of the Commission on Church Order, MGS 2015, p. 190). The decision about which weddings to approve, how the service is to be conducted, and how strictly the Order for Christian Marriage is to be followed should remain with the consistory and the minister.

4. The language proposed in this overture would accomplish the recommendation contained in the initial report of the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality, which originally stated:

To reaffirm:
- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.

However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it was not brought before the General Synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Albany is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

19. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

Sec. 11. The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a–f remain unchanged]

g. The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.

Reasons:
1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2016 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. The Classis of Mid-Hudson believes this would be an appropriate way forward for the RCA.
3. The rationale for and language of this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (MGS 2015, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (MGS 2016, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.
4. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation,
To reaffirm:
• That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
• That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.

The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (*MGS 2016*, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Mid-Hudson is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

20. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

  *Sec. 11.* The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a–f remain unchanged]

  g. The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.

Reasons:
1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2015 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. The Classis of Schoharie believes this would be an appropriate way forward for the RCA.
3. The rationale for and language of this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (*MGS 2015*, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (*MGS 2016*, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.
4. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation,

To reaffirm:
• That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
• That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (*MGS 2016*, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Schoharie is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

42. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 2

Sec. 11. The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

*subsections a-f remain unchanged*

g. **The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.**

Reasons:

1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2015 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.

2. The rationale for, and language of, this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (*MGS 2015*, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (*MGS 2016*, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.

3. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation,

“To reaffirm:
- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*."

The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (*MGS 2016*, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.
In response to Overtures 18, 19, 20, and 42 the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-21
To deny Overtures 18, 19, 20, and 42. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
The general secretary’s proposal, P-1, provides a way forward for the body which has more potential for manifesting unity, purity, and peace.

Certificates of Fitness for Ministry Granted Directly by General Synod; Clarify Roles of Classis and MFCA in Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Process

21. The Classis of Central California overtures the General Synod to assume responsibility for granting certificates of fitness for ministry by acting as a committee of the whole and amending and adding to the Book of Church Order the following sections (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 1

A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity from a seminary of the Reformed Church in America, upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found to be a qualified and is adjudged to be a fit candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of an RCA seminary a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

a. A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not officially related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found to be a qualified, and is adjudged to be a fit candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination.

[subsections b–c remain unchanged]

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4

f. When the candidate passes the examination, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

Reasons:
1. The General Synod acting as a committee of the whole is in the best position to reflect the broadest views of the church with regard to who is fit to minister. The
General Synod in its annual meeting is the most representative gathering of the Reformed Church in America.

2. The Christian Reformed Church, with whom we have a unique and growing relationship, has long held to this practice and has managed the logistical issues of certifying candidates for ministry at the synodical level.

3. It is a conflict of interest for those who provide ministerial training to also certify that the training is adequate.

4. The participation of the synod acting as a committee of the whole would promote greater confidence in ministerial certification process.

26. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

a. A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not officially related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found by the candidate’s supervising classis, in consultation with the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), to be qualified, and is adjudged by the supervising classis to be a fit candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency-MFCA a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination. The MFCA shall ensure candidates demonstrate adequate academic preparation and denominational identity, including a thorough understanding of the history, polity, liturgy, and confessions of the RCA, and an adherence to the same. In the event the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

Reasons:

1. As currently written, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2 is not clear about who judges the fitness of a candidate for ministry. These proposed changes would locate the final authority of a candidate’s fitness for ministry within the supervising classis for which the candidate was initially brought under care.

2. The BCO states clearly in other areas that the classis is the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, as well as calling ministers to churches within its bounds, specifically Sections 7 to 9 of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2 (2016 edition, p. 30): “Sec. 7. The classis shall exercise a general supervision over all students of theology subject to its jurisdiction. Sec. 8. The classis shall examine students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. Sec. 9. The classis shall ordain, install, commission, transfer, suspend, depose, declare demitted, declare inactive, and declare retired ministers” (italics added).

3. The Preamble of the BCO reminds us that governance in the Reformed tradition is “presbyterial,” consisting of consistory, classis, regional synod, and General Synod. Crucially, “[t]he governmental functioning of these of offices takes place,
not apart from, but in harmony with the understanding of the mission of the church and the nature of its ministry” (italics added). Furthermore, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser. Consistories, classes, and synods work together in mission and ministry within their shared boundaries” (2016 edition, p. 3, italics added).

27. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

c. The General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis shall determine that the candidate meets minimum competencies as determined by the standards established by the General Synod and designated as indispensable for the proper exercise of the ministerial office of the church. If a candidate comes under the jurisdiction of a new agent of the General Synod, the classis in which the candidate is enrolled shall apply to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency on behalf of the candidate. If the candidate has completed less than half the process toward reception of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, the relevant agents of the General Synod shall effect the transfer. If the candidate has completed half the process or more, the original agent shall award the Certificate in consultation with the supervising classis. If the applicant has previously been asked to terminate studies, has withdrawn under duress, or has been denied the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry at a Reformed Church in America seminary or the MFCA, further supervision and/or examination of the applicant shall only be carried out by or with the consent of the seminary or agent within whose program the candidate had previously been enrolled. Any further supervision and/or examination will occur in partnership with the supervising classis.

Reason:
This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.

28. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology in the Approved Alternate Route and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4

e. When the candidate has completed the program, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry by the Ministerial
Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis. The method of assessment shall be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

f. When the candidate passes the examination, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. In the event the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

Reason:
This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.

In response to Overtures 21, 26, 27, and 28 and P-4 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-22**
To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. The PFCC is the body designated by General Synod to oversee the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and the standards for preparation for ministry. This is the appropriate body to address the concerns raised in Overtures 21, 26, 27, and 28.
2. This action will address the role of General Synod and classes as classes ordain candidates for ministry.

Prior to the adoption of R 17-22 a motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-22 as follows (additions are underlined):

To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018 where a final decision shall be made.

A point of order was raised questioning the propriety of the 2017 General Synod taking action that requires a future General Synod to take a particular action. In response the vice president declared the point well-taken and ruled that the motion to amend R 17-22 was out of order.
Discipline of a Classis

22. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to develop one or more constitutionally appropriate proposals for amending the Book of Church Order (BCO) to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline by another classis and/or classes, and to present such proposal(s) for the consideration of the 2018 General Synod.

Reasons:
1. Book of Church Order Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 (2016 edition, pp. 77-80), includes procedures for the discipline of a member, elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, minister, General Synod professor, and a consistory, but not a classis.
2. Our current polity only allows complaints against a classis, and those complaints must be initiated from within a classis or an immediate lower assembly. The BCO does not provide appropriate or necessary judicial procedures to address issues when they are not internally initiated at the local level.
3. Such polity would be reflective of and consistent with our covenantal theology.
4. Other reformed and presbyterian denominations provide for similar disciplinary procedures.
5. While the Commission on Church Order is not responsible to make decisions regarding disciplinary procedures, the commission is the most appropriate body in the RCA to resource the General Synod in developing constitutionally appropriate BCO amendments.

In response to Overture 22, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-23
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to investigate the feasibility of one or more constitutionally appropriate proposals for amending the Book of Church Order to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline initiated by another classis and/or classes, and to present recommendations to the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Book of Church Order Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 (2016 edition, pp. 77-80), includes procedures for the discipline of a member, elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, minister, General Synod professor, and a consistory, but not a classis.
2. Our current polity only allows complaints against a classis, and those complaints must be initiated from within a classis or an immediate lower assembly. The BCO does not provide appropriate or necessary judicial procedures to address issues when they are not internally initiated at the local level.
3. The Commission on Church Order is the most appropriate body in the RCA to investigate the theological and practical implications of such changes.

Withdraw from Formula of Agreement

23. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures the 2017 General Synod to vote on the following recommendation:

To withdraw from the Formula of Agreement.
Reasons:
1. The justification for the Formula of Agreement (FOA) was stated as “a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past thirty-two years coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel of unity in contemporary society.” Since 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC[USA]) have changed their doctrinal views regarding marriage and gender. When the FOA was approved, the RCA sent a delegation to the United Church of Christ (UCC) to admonish them for their positions on marriage and gender. The UCC has not accepted this admonition as a reason for change. On the contrary, it has continued to move away from the RCA’s doctrinal understanding of marriage and gender. The changing positions of the other three members of the FOA have undermined and violated the “gospel unity” the FOA was intended to proclaim.

2. The FOA provides for “full communion” between its member denominations, recognizing “each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached … according to the Word of God.” The acceptance of same-sex marriage and the rejection of the traditional, biblical view of gender by the other three member denominations of the FOA violates the foundation of the FOA that the gospel is rightly preached according to the Word of God. Therefore, it is inconsistent and inappropriate for the RCA to be in “full communion” with the other member denominations of the FOA.

3. Withdrawal from the FOA would not change the existing BCO procedures for “Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14; 2016 edition, pp. 50-52).

4. Withdrawal from the FOA would not inhibit or prohibit appropriate ecumenical cooperation at the local church level.

24. New Thing Classis overtures the 2017 General Synod to vote on the following recommendation:

To withdraw from the Formula of Agreement.

Reasons:
1. The justification for the Formula of Agreement (FOA) was stated as “a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past thirty-two years coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel of unity in contemporary society.” Since 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC[USA]) have changed their doctrinal views regarding marriage and gender. When the FOA was approved, the RCA sent a delegation to the United Church of Christ (UCC) to admonish them for their positions on marriage and gender. The UCC has not accepted this admonition as a reason for change. On the contrary, it has continued to move away from the RCA’s doctrinal understanding of marriage and gender. The changing positions of the other three members of the FOA have undermined and violated the “gospel unity” the FOA was intended to proclaim.

2. The FOA provides for “full communion” between its member denominations, recognizing “each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached … according to the Word of God.” The acceptance of same-sex marriage and the rejection of the traditional, biblical view of gender by the other three member denominations of the FOA violates the foundation of the FOA that the gospel is rightly preached according to the Word of God. Therefore, it is inconsistent and inappropriate for the RCA to be in “full communion” with the other member denominations of the FOA.
3. Withdrawal from the FOA would not change the existing BCO procedures for “Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14; 2016 edition, pp. 50-52).

4. Withdrawal from the FOA would not inhibit or prohibit appropriate ecumenical cooperation at the local church level.

In response to Overtures 23 and 24, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-24
To direct the GSC to create a task force, including members of the Commission on Christian Unity, the Commission on Church Order, the overturesing bodies, and other parties deemed appropriate to review the RCA’s commitment to the Formula of Agreement, including its role in ecumenism and exchange of ministers, and report back to General Synod 2019 with recommendations for future General Synod action. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. The Formula of Agreement has broad engagement and its full purpose needs to be understood by the RCA.
2. Twenty years is a long history of engagement in relationship, and it is important to understand the various areas of relationship.
3. Change has happened over the last 20 years, and it is important to review our relationships.

Clarify “Appropriate Character” for Supervision of Students of Theology

25. The Classis of West Sioux respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to amend the Book of Church Order Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 6; 2016 edition, p. 45) to read:

Sec. 6. As the candidate pursues theological education, the classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits (1) appropriate character and lifestyle consistent with Christian morals and values, including a commitment to marriage as between one man and one woman; (2) call to the ministry of Word and sacrament; (3) comprehension of Scripture and of the history, theology, and church order of the Reformed Church in America; (4) requisite skills in interpretation and proclamation of Scripture, including sufficient Greek and Hebrew to understand nuances of the biblical text; (5) competence for ministry; (6) commitment to the unity of the church, the ministry of all Christians, and the proclamation of the gospel.

Reasons:
1. To bring clarity, unity, and consistency around “appropriate character” in regard to our shared understanding of marriage.
2. Classes are functioning under incompatible definitions of what constitutes “appropriate character” in regard to character, lifestyle, and marriage.
3. Students of theology have different expectations of character and lifestyle based on the classis in which they are examined. This lack of clarity is unfair to students of theology.
4. This clarification is consistent with the actions of the 2016 General Synod.
In response to Overture 25, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-25**
To deny Overture 25. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
The general secretary’s proposal, P-1, provides a way forward for the body which has more potential for manifesting unity, purity, and peace.

**Clarify Consistory’s Responsibility When Minister’s Insurance Is through Spouse**

32. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare such changes to *BCO* Formulary No. 5, paragraph 5 (2016 edition, pp. 132-133), that make clear a consistory’s responsibility for any additional costs borne by a minister and the minister’s family when that minister’s insurance comes through the spouse’s employer-sponsored plan, for report to the General Synod of 2018.

Reasons:
1. Many secular employers no longer cover the full cost of insurance for a spouse and family.
2. This creates consistency between the full coverage provided by the church and coverage provided by a spouse’s employer.

In response to Overture 32, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-26**
To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Board of Benefits Services, to prepare such changes to *BCO* Formulary No. 5, paragraph 5 (2016 edition, pp. 132-133), that make clear a consistory’s responsibility for any additional costs borne by a minister and the minister’s family when that minister’s insurance comes through the spouse’s employer-sponsored plan, for report to the General Synod of 2018. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Many secular employers no longer cover the full cost of insurance for a spouse and family.
2. This creates consistency between the full coverage provided by the church and coverage provided by a spouse’s employer.

**Minutes of General Synod Online**

33. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures the General Synod to direct denominational staff to make all Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod (hereinafter referred to as “the minutes”) available on the denominational website, for completion by December 2017.

Reasons:
1. Currently, only the minutes from years 1995–2016 are available on the website. Previous years are only available in print, which is not easily accessible.
In a denomination as old as ours, it is important that we know and remember our history. Having accessible means to revisit our history is important.

The General Synod was informed that the actions requested by Schenectady Classis are already being taken and that the acts and proceedings of all previous General Synods are scheduled to be available on the RCA website by the end of 2017.

Declarative Authority of the General Synod

34. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to establish a permanent and public record of the Declarative Acts of General Synod; that from this time forward, all declarative acts of General Synod shall be distinguished by beginning with the phrase, “In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares . . .”; and that, for the sake of the unity of the church as stipulated in The Representative Principle (BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle; pp. 3-4, 2016 edition), all declarative acts of General Synod shall be binding upon all assemblies and officers of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (BCO, “Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).

2. From time to time, doctrinal matters arise in the life of the church that are not addressed directly in our Standards. At such times, the church needs the wisdom and counsel of its leadership in knowing how to interpret Scripture and apply it to the current challenges facing its people. Thus, it is incumbent upon the officers of the church, for the welfare of the church, to exercise periodically its responsibility of declarative authority.

3. The BCO gives authority to determine doctrinal matters exclusively to the General Synod. It is the General Synod alone that approves our Standards of Unity, BCO, Formularies, Liturgy, etc. There is no place in the BCO where any of the lower assemblies are granted such authority in doctrinal matters. An example: “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7).

4. Acts of declarative authority by the General Synod require acceptance and adherence by all RCA officers, leaders, and members. The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states “Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others” (BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle; pp. 3-4, 2016 edition). When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them” (BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle; p. 4, 2016 edition).
In response to Overture 34, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-27
To deny Overture 34. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
It is not within the authority of the General Synod to make this sort of declaration without making a change to the Constitution.

Adopt Act of Declarative Authority regarding Marriage

35. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to adopt the following act of declarative authority:

In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares that the Bible teaches: 1) marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman, and 2) all sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin, including same-sex sexual activity.

Reasons:
1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).
2. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with Holy Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7; Matthew 19:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 2:7-8; James 3:1; Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109).
3. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with previous acts and statements of General Synod.
4. This act of declarative authority will bring clarity to the denomination’s official and authoritative position on matters related to gender and marriage.
5. A precedent for such declarative acts has already been set. In his book Constitutional Theology, Dr. Allan Janssen, General Synod professor, writes, “When the 1979 General Synod approved the ordination of women to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, it did so because a previous synod (1958) had already declared that there were no clear biblical grounds against the ordination of women to ministry” (Janssen, Dr. Allan J., Constitutional Theology, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 25). If General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about women’s ordination, then General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about gender and marriage.

36. The Regional Synod of the Far West Region overtures the General Synod to adopt the following act of declarative authority:

In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares that the Bible teaches: 1) same-sex sexual activity is a sin, and 2) marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman.
Reasons:

1. According to the *BCO*, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (*BCO*, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (*BCO*, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).

2. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with Holy Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7; Matthew 19:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 2:7-8; James 3:1; Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109).

3. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with previous acts and statements of General Synod.

4. This act of declarative authority will bring clarity to the denomination’s official and authoritative position on matters related to gender and marriage.

5. A precedent for such declarative acts has already been set. In his book *Constitutional Theology*, Dr. Allan Janssen, General Synod professor, writes, “When the 1979 General Synod approved the ordination of women to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, it did so because a previous synod (1958) had already declared that there were no clear biblical grounds against the ordination of women to ministry” (Janssen, Dr. Allan J., *Constitutional Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 25). If General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about women’s ordination, then General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about gender and marriage.

In response to Overtures 35 and 36, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**R 17-28**

To deny Overtures 35 and 36. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

It is not within the authority of the General Synod to make this sort of declaration without making a change to the Constitution.

*Clarify Heidelberg Catechism’s Interpretation of Marriage*

37. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to clarify that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards by all assemblies and officers therefore entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons pertaining to the appeal to the Heidelberg Catechism:

1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and Constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.

2. In the 2014 Minutes of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA” (*MGS 2014*, p. 241). This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak
only against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.

4. The Catechism has always been understood to prohibit categorically same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, on the basis of biblical texts such as Genesis 2:18-25, Leviticus 18:22, Matthew 19:1-9, Acts 15:19-20, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:21-33, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10.

5. Some might argue that the Heidelberg Catechism does not specifically name same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriage. But this line of logic would lead us to conclude that adultery is the only specific sexual sin prohibited by the Catechism, when the clearly stated intention of the Catechism is to include all sexual sins, though not to provide a specific list of sins. The New Testament itself frequently does this when it uses the Greek term porneia, often translated “sexual immorality,” as an umbrella term for sexual sin rather than listing each particular sin. Since the Catechism is meant to be a summary of Scripture’s teaching on sexual morality, it should be taken to prohibit same-sex sexual activity, because this is precisely what Scripture does.

Reasons pertaining to the authority of General Synod to clarify the Standards:

1. The CCO states that the General Synod, “like the other assemblies, does carry out its work in deepest relationship to the teaching of the church (which is found in its Confessions) and under the authority of Scripture.” Furthermore, the CCO notes that the judicial decisions of all assemblies require them to “explicitly and authoritatively interpret the Constitution and Scripture” (MGS 2014, p. 240. See BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2, Section 1). The Commission on Church Order thus notes that the General Synod clearly has authority, but raises the question: what kind of authority does it have and how does it exercise it? The BCO answers that question.

2. By its authority as the “highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America,”4 the “General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy.”5 If the General Synod fails to speak and clarify the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, it would amount to giving lower assemblies the right to ignore the Standards or have lower assemblies interpret the Standards in ways that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. In that sense, the Standards would cease to be Standards of Unity and the RCA would be, functionally, congregational or classical in polity (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4.)

3. The BCO also states that “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.”6 The intent of this statement, however, is to make clear that the General Synod has ultimate oversight of the doctrine and teaching of the Reformed Church, not merely the theological seminaries, insofar as the theological seminaries are accountable to the General Synod, and not to any other assembly. Thus, our polity makes it clear that the doctrinal buck stops, so to speak, with the General Synod on matters of doctrine. As the BCO states, “the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.”7 If lower assemblies were granted the authority (functionally, even if not officially) to set doctrine on matters of sexual ethics addressed in the Standards, set denominational polity, or exercise independent oversight of theological students, true denominational unity would be sacrificed

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4 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1; p. 65, 2016 edition.
5 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4; p. 65, 2016 edition.
6 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7; p. 66, 2016 edition.
and the RCA would essentially be a loose federation or association of classes and/or churches.8

4. “The General Synod shall recommend to the churches such methods as shall effectively sustain the denominational program, ... to secure the largest dissemination of the gospel.”9 The current state of the RCA is such that the deep divisions over the question of same-sex marriage threaten the very existence of the denomination, let alone the “denominational program.” Furthermore, the time, energy, and effort put into this effort, though necessary in defense of God’s Word, take away from time, energy, and effort that could be put into further dissemination of the gospel. The General Synod must clarify the way in which the Heidelberg Catechism speaks to the matter of same-sex marriage, for the sake of the denomination but, more importantly, for the sake of the gospel.

5. The BCO states that the church, through its office holders, exercises “declarative authority,” which is “the right to speak in his [Christ’s] name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it...”10 The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states, “Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others.”11 When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly to clarify and declare the meaning of the RCA’s Standards, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”12 Failing to submit to the clarification and declaration made by the General Synod would foster disunity in the church and, thus, violate one’s vow as an officer or member of the church to seek “the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”13

6. The General Synod has taken upon itself the role of interpreter of the RCA’s Constitution in the past. Debates about whether women could serve in office turned on the interpretation of the word “person” in the BCO, as it stated at that time that “those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination...”14 When several classes moved to ordain women to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament prior to 1979, other classes filed complaints which were considered by the General Synod of 1979. As John Coakley notes, that General Synod decided that the matter could be treated as judicial business—“that is, as a matter of interpreting rather than changing the Book of Church Order. This meant that it was no longer necessary to secure agreement from two-thirds of all the classes.”15 Instead, all that was needed was the majority vote of General Synod. If the General Synod has the right and authority to interpret (not change) one aspect of the Constitution—the BCO—then it must have the right and authority to interpret another aspect of the Constitution—the Heidelberg Catechism. Furthermore, the Judicial Business Committee of 1979 declared that General

8 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 8; p. 66, 2016 edition.
9 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 10; p. 66, 2016 edition.
11 BCO, Preamble; p. 3-4, 2016 edition.
12 BCO, Preamble; p. 4, 2016 edition.
14 BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3; p. 11, 2016 edition, which now reads “those men and women...”
Synod had the right to clarify the meaning of the BCO on the basis that:
a) The General Synod had repeatedly voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that church offices were open to women (even though these amendments were not approved by two-thirds of the classes) and
b) The General Synod had taken no action on overtures that would have limited offices to men. (MGS 1979, p. 68).

In a similar way, on the issue of same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage,
a) The General Synod has repeatedly approved statements and voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that marriage is between one man and one woman and
b) The General Synod has taken no action on overtures which would have affirmed same-sex marriages.

The method of approving women in office thus sets an important precedent for affirming that marriage is between one man and one woman. If the General Synod has the authority to interpret what the BCO and, by implication, the Bible say about women’s ordination, then it certainly has the authority to interpret what the Heidelberg Catechism and, by implication, the Bible say about same-sex marriage.

38. The Regional Synod of the Far West overtures the General Synod to clarify and declare that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically forbids same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage insofar as it states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards therefore entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons pertaining to the Heidelberg Catechism’s declarations regarding human sexuality and marriage:
1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and Constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.
2. In the 2014 Minutes of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA.” This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.
3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak only against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.
4. The Catechism has always been understood to prohibit categorically same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, on the basis of biblical texts such as Genesis 1-2, Leviticus 18:22, Matthew 19:1-9, Acts 15:19-20, Ephesians 5:21-33, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10.
5. This condemnation of unchastity does not imply that Christians will be perfected in this life. Nevertheless, our failure to live perfectly into our calling does not mean that we are free to change the calling and commands that God has given us.
6. Some might object that the Catechism does not specifically name same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriage, and therefore it does not condemn it. But this line of logic would lead us to conclude that adultery is the only specific sexual sin prohibited by the Catechism, when the clearly stated intention of the Catechism is to include all sexual sins, though not to provide a specific list of sins. The New Testament itself frequently does this when it uses the Greek term porneia, often translated “sexual immorality,” as an umbrella term for sexual

17 See Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 114 and 115.
sin rather than listing each particular sin. Since the Catechism is meant to be a summary of Scripture’s teaching on sexual morality, it should be taken to prohibit same-sex sexual activity, because this is precisely what Scripture does.

Reasons pertaining to the General Synod’s authority to clarify the Standards of the RCA:

1. The CCO states that the General Synod, “like the other assemblies, does carry out its work in deepest relationship to the teaching of the church (which is found in its Confessions) and under the authority of Scripture.” Furthermore, the CCO notes that the judicial decisions of all assemblies require them to “explicitly and authoritatively interpret the Constitution and Scripture.” The Commission on Church Order thus notes that the General Synod clearly has authority, but raises the question: what kind of authority does it have and how does it exercise it? The BCO answers that question.

2. By its authority as the “highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America,” the “General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy.” The General Synod alone approves the Standards of Unity, BCO, Formularies, and Liturgy. There is no place in the BCO where any of the lower assemblies are granted such authority in doctrinal matters. If the General Synod fails to speak and clarify the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, it would amount to giving lower assemblies the right to ignore the Standards or have lower assemblies interpret the Standards in ways that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. In that sense, the Standards would cease to be Standards of Unity and the RCA would be, functionally, congregational or classical in polity.

3. The BCO also states that “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.” One might argue that this statement only speaks to the General Synod’s authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational policy in relation to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church. The intent of this statement, however, is to make clear that the General Synod has ultimate oversight of the doctrine and teaching of the Reformed Church, insofar as the theological seminaries are accountable to the General Synod, and not to any other assembly. Thus, our polity makes it clear that the doctrinal buck stops, so to speak, with the General Synod on matters of doctrine. As the BCO states, “the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.” If lower assemblies were granted the authority (functionally, even if not officially) to set doctrine on matters of sexual ethics addressed in the Standards, set denominational polity, or exercise independent oversight of theological students, true denominational unity would be sacrificed and the RCA would essentially be a loose federation or association of classes and/or churches.

4. “The General Synod shall recommend to the churches such methods as shall effectively sustain the denominational program, ... to secure the largest dissemination of the gospel.” The current state of the RCA is such that the deep divisions over the question of same-sex marriage threaten the very existence of the denomination, let alone the “denominational program.” Furthermore, the time, energy, and effort put into this effort, though necessary in defense of God’s
Word, take away from time, energy, and effort that could be put into further dissemination of the gospel. The General Synod must clarify the way in which the Heidelberg Catechism speaks to the matter of same-sex marriage, for the sake of the denomination but, more importantly, for the sake of the gospel.

5. The *BCO* states that the church, through its office holders, exercises “declarative authority,” which is “the right to speak in his [Christ’s] name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it ...”\(^{25}\) The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the *BCO* states, “Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others.”\(^{26}\) When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly to clarify and declare the meaning of the RCA’s Standards, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”\(^{27}\) Failing to submit to the clarification and declaration made by the General Synod would foster disunity in the church and, thus, violate one’s vow as an officer or member of the church to seek “the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”\(^{28}\)

6. The General Synod has taken upon itself the role of interpreter of the RCA’s Constitution in the past. Debates about whether women could serve in office turned on the interpretation of the word “person” in the *BCO*, as it stated that “those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination...”\(^{29}\) When several classes moved to ordain women to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament prior to 1979, other classes filed complaints which were considered by the General Synod of 1979. As John Coakley notes, that General Synod decided that the matter could be treated as judicial business—“that is, as a matter of interpreting rather than changing the Book of Church Order. This meant that it was no longer necessary to secure agreement from two-thirds of all the classes.”\(^{30}\) Instead, all that was needed was the majority vote of General Synod. If the General Synod has the right and authority to interpret one aspect of the Constitution—the *BCO*—then surely it has the right and authority to interpret another aspect of the Constitution, the Heidelberg Catechism. Furthermore, the declaration of the 1979 General Synod on women in office was rooted in the repeated amendments that the General Synod had repeatedly approved constitutional amendments in favor of women in office. In a similar way, the General Synod has repeatedly made statements and approved amendments clarifying that marriage is between a man and woman. If the General Synod has the authority to interpret what the *BCO* and, by implication, the Bible say about women’s ordination, then it certainly has the authority to interpret what the Heidelberg Catechism and, by implication, the Bible say about same-sex marriage.


\(^{26}\) *BCO*, Preamble; p. 3-4, 2016 edition.

\(^{27}\) *BCO*, Preamble; p. 4, 2016 edition.


\(^{29}\) *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3; p. 11, 2016 edition, which now reads “those men and women ...”

In response to Overtures 37 and 38, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-29
To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons:
1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.
2. In the 2014 Minutes of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA” (p. 241). This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.
3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak only against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.
4. This condemnation of unchastity does not imply that Christians will be perfected in this life. Nevertheless, our failure to live perfectly into our calling does not mean that we are free to change the calling and commands that God has given us (see Heidelberg Q&A 114 and 115.)

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows:

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman. To urge the GSC to consider carefully Overtures 37-38, along with Overtures 29-31 and others, as they fulfill the mandate of R 17-18.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate. The president ruled it out of order because the motion to cease debate was made by a corresponding delegate. Thereafter another motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to refer R 17-29 as follows:

To refer R 17-29 to the Commission on Theology, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Church Order to report back to General Synod 2018.
A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not refer R 17-29.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A point of order was raised, claiming that R 17-29 was a violation of the Belhar Confession and therefore out of order.

The president ruled that the point was not well taken.

A motion was made and supported to appeal the ruling of the president.

The vice president assumed the chair.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To sustain the ruling of the president.

The president assumed the chair.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows (deletions are stricken, additions are underlined):

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires and whatever may incite someone to them and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows (deletions are stricken):

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.
VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-29.

The final version of R 17-29 as adopted reads:

R 17-29
To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman. (ADOPTED)

The following motion was made from the floor:

General Synod 2017 affirms that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 74 categorically states that infants as well as adults are included in God’s covenant people and therefore infants should be incorporated into the Christian church through baptism and that faithful adherence to the RCA standards requires pastors and consistories to incorporate this standard in their baptismal practices.

A point of order was raised questioning whether the motion was germane to the prior motion. The president submitted the question to the full assembly for its decision.

VOTED: To consider the point of order well taken (and thus to declare the motion out of order).

Clarify Which Classes May Vote on Constitutional Amendments

39. The Regional Synod of Albany respectfully overtures the 2017 General Synod to declare that only classes that have seated delegates at a General Synod which recommends a proposed change to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America to the classes for approval may vote on that proposed change,

And furthermore, to instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose language for the Book of Church Order to clarify this matter, for recommendation to General Synod of 2018.

Reasons:
1. The Bylaws of General Synod are explicit in stating the configuration of classes and regional synods for determining delegates to General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1b and 1c; p. 103, 2016 edition). Having a clear statement regarding which classes can vote on proposed changes to the Constitution would be helpful.
2. When classes are formed between stated sessions of General Synod, formal action must be taken by the General Synod Council to send proposed changes to
these new classes. There is no standard practice for this, and this overture asks the General Synod for clarification.

3. The General Synod is composed of delegates from “each of the classes” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; p. 65, 2016 edition) who conduct the business of the Reformed Church in America. It seems to be out of order for classes, who are not yet imagined by the General Synod and are not represented during the General Synod in which proposed changes to the Constitution were approved for recommendation to the classes, to be permitted to vote on these proposed changes.

In response to Overture 39, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-30**

To declare that only classes that have seated delegates at a General Synod which recommends a proposed change to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America to the classes for approval may vote on that proposed change, and furthermore, to instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose language for the *Book of Church Order* to clarify this matter, for recommendation to the General Synod of 2018. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The Bylaws of General Synod are explicit in stating the configuration of classes and regional synods for determining delegates to General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1b and 1c; 2016 edition, p. 103). Having a clear statement regarding which classes can vote on proposed changes to the Constitution would be helpful.

2. When classes are formed between stated sessions of General Synod, formal action must be taken by the General Synod Council to send proposed changes to these new classes. There is no standard practice for this, and this overture asks the General Synod for clarification.

3. The General Synod is composed of delegates from “each of the classes” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; 2016 edition, p. 65) who conduct the business of the Reformed Church in America. It seems to be out of order for classes that are not yet imagined by the General Synod and are not represented during the General Synod in which proposed changes to the Constitution were approved for recommendation to the classes to be permitted to vote on these proposed changes.

*Further Amendment to Regional Synod Responsibilities*

44. The Regional Synod of the Far West overtures the 2017 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to amend the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 to read as follows: “The regional synod shall form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds. Prior to these actions, the regional synod will provide a 60-day notification of its intended action with all churches and classes being effected.”

Reasons:

1. Additions and changes to the *BCO* are intended to reflect changes to our polity and/or bring further clarification to how we do ministry together. The prior
reading was simple and clear (BCO, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2; p. 61, 2016 edition):

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds.

2. The recently ratified change adds confusion and disputable language (as underlined):

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, form, combine, or disband classes. The regional synod, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, may also transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds.

3. The terms “reasonable” and “timely” have not been used in the BCO to designate timing. “Reasonable” and “timely” as a standard is vague, and is subject to various interpretations.

4. The standard “reasonable and timely” does not properly address the problem of allowing sufficient interaction prior to the forming or disbanding of classes or the transfer of churches between classes.

5. Clear and verifiable language, such as “60 days” is a definitive and measurable way to allow for communication, scheduling of meetings, and meaningful dialogue.

In response to Overture 44, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-31

To send Overture 44 to the Commission on Church Order for consultation with the Regional Synod of the Far West.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-31.
FROM THE REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-2, P-3, P-4, and P-5 from the Report of the President (see pp. 33-35), were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business. The advisory committee’s response to P-4 was included in R 17-22 (see p. 146). P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary was also referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business; for the resulting recommendation see R 17-18 on pp. 134-137. Additionally, the Committee of Reference referred one item of new business to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business (see p. 19).

In response to the president’s proposal P-2, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

R 17-32

1. This falls within the current Transformed & Transforming initiatives and will be run by General Synod staff, specifically under the direction of the Global Mission team.
2. RCA missionaries and mission personnel have already developed and will continue to develop job descriptions and ministry opportunities across the globe.
3. It is requested that RCA churches and classes help recruit young adults for these opportunities.
4. RCA churches and classes are invited to think creatively about ways of sending, funding, and supporting the change of this corporate norm for the sake of the kingdom. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. This falls under the full scope of Transformed & Transforming.
2. It builds another level of relationship with our missionary partners and young people.
3. In light of our need to rebuild trust and community, this refocuses our energy on God’s mission.

In response to the president’s proposal P-3, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

R 17-33
To urge every church in the RCA to use the three-part video series and discussion guide on the RCA website entitled, “A Light to My Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians.” (ADOPTED)

Reason:
“A Light to my Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians” is a tool to assist us in a deeper understanding of interpretation of Scripture, a concern addressed in Overtures 29–31.

In response to P-5 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:
A motion was made and supported to refer R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt the motion to refer R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

Thereafter, in response to the referral of R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business as well as the item of new business that was referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business by the Committee of Reference, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

**R 17-35**

To urge all RCA assemblies and other bodies and all RCA members to maintain our covenant bonds with each other, especially with regard to the conflict over human sexuality; and further, to urge classes to refrain from approving the requests of churches to transfer to another denomination prior to the conclusion of General Synod 2018, instead focusing on our God-given mission. (ADOPTED)

**Reasons:**

1. We want to take seriously the appeal for trust, conversation, unity, building relationships, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture, as well as the uses and limits of our polity that was so prevalent in many of our overtures.

2. A church divided is not God’s intention for his people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt R 17-35.