Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The Book of Church Order states that “the commission shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2017 edition, pp. 109–110]). The Scripture that has guided our work this year is Isaiah 1:17: “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (ESV).

Mass Incarceration Coalition and Restorative Justice

General Synod 2016 voted to create a mass incarceration coalition composed of members of the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on Christian Unity, the Commission for Women, and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity to submit a report to General Synod every year for the next three years. This is the final report from the coalition.

The coalition identified restorative justice methodology as a useful tool for the church. Restorative justice is an advocacy approach to help victims of crime, those who have committed crime, faith communities, correctional officers, community leaders, and local representatives. Restorative justice methodology has the potential to bring new life and healing to families, formerly incarcerated citizens, citizens involved in criminal behavior, and communities. As an advocacy tool, restorative justice can be used to change laws and policies that relate to criminal and juvenile justice reform. The goals of restorative justice are to hold offenders accountable for crimes or offenses, afford an opportunity to repair the harm that has been done, restore their place in the community, restore safety to the community, and address underlying issues that lead to criminal or offensive behavior. The ultimate goal of restorative justice is to build the social competency of those who have harmed others in the community.

Restorative justice is also applicable to facilitating peaceful resolution to conflicts within the church. The Commission on Christian Action has identified resources and recommendations that can be helpful to churches that desire to know more about restorative justice, how they can be trained, and how they can utilize restorative justice in their church and community settings.

CA 18-1
To list Shalem Mental Health Network and the International Institute for Restorative Practices on the RCA website as resources for congregations that are interested in learning about restorative justice and/or hosting restorative practices for their communities. (ADOPTED)

CA 18-2
To urge RCA congregations to access the restorative justice resources listed in this report and to begin discussions in their local faith community about the use of restorative justice in the church and community; and further,

To post the restorative justice resources in this report on the RCA website for easy access for congregations. (ADOPTED)
Weaponized Drones

In the Reformed tradition, war is always seen as an evil, although sometimes evil requires the use of armed force. Once a decision is made to go to war, there are criteria for carrying out armed conflict that must be met for it to be viewed as just. The CIA has recently been given the authority to use lethal drone strikes more widely and more covertly than prior to 2016. Drone warfare causes an unacceptable number of civilian casualties and allows targeting of unidentified individuals. Drone warfare violates international human rights law and creates long-term hostility toward the United States in affected communities. Drone warfare also directly harms attempts to promote human rights and the rule of law.

As people of faith who value all of God’s children, we are deeply concerned that the U.S. lethal drone strikes have only been used in Muslim-majority countries.

Because of the nature of drone warfare, those charged with releasing drone artillery are distanced from the impact and effects of the strike. There is deep concern that by distancing people from kill decisions, drones lower the political and psychological costs of killing. Drones make it easier for politicians and other high-level decision-makers to choose violence and war rather than diplomacy. Using armed drones for targeted killings escalates conflicts.

We call on our leaders to take us off the path of unending war. As people of faith, we advocate the rigorous pursuit of peace, based on upholding dignity and human rights for all, with resources dedicated to this alternative at a level matching that spent on the current drone warfare program.

The Reformed Church in America must commit to educate ourselves on the ongoing issue of U.S. drone strikes around the world, particularly in countries that are not “war zones” as defined in the law of armed conflict or international law. The church must also commit to join our interfaith sisters and brothers in advocating with the U.S. government to follow the paths of justice and diplomacy rather than a path of war and violence.

CA 18-3

To urge congregations, classes, and regional synods to host showings of 30-minute videos and discussion groups provided by the Interfaith Drone Network; and further,
COMMISSIONS

To encourage those concerned about drone warfare to construct a quilt to represent those who have died in drone strikes and to use quilts as a point of discussion about drone warfare; and further,

To invite concerned RCA members to prepare faith-based op-eds and letters to editors for publications. (ADOPTED)

Resources

- Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare, www.interfaithdronenetwork.org
- Drones Quilt Project, dronesquiltproject.wordpress.com

Immigration Reform

As a follow-up to the report to General Synod 2017 related to immigration reform, the commission engaged in a review of action steps taken by our ecumenical partners and other faith communities to determine how the church might speak and act related to the issue of immigration reform. The statements, the scriptural call made by the church in the past, and communication to the president of the United States regarding our stance on immigration have been helpful; however, at this time in our national life, something more is required. Each of our Formula of Agreement partners (PC[USA], ELCA, and UCC) and many other faith communities have strong and bold policy statements regarding immigration. Not only do they have bold policy statements, but they also engage in active advocacy and education on behalf of undocumented immigrants and Dreamers.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) designates the first Sunday in May as Immigrants’ Rights Sunday. The denomination urges its congregations to lift up immigrants on this day to do the following: learn about their concerns, honor their contributions to our country and communities, hear their pain, pray for their well-being, and listen to where God is leading the UCC regarding issues of immigration. Stories about immigrants are included in worship services and ways to advocate for immigrant justice are explored.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America’s Office of Social Justice has a four-pronged approach: educate, worship, advocate, and connect. They conduct “Church Between the Borders” workshops, three-part interactive workshops that spark thought and discussion for Christian groups interested in engaging immigration from a biblical perspective. Participants reflect on the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger and consider what that means in their current context. Additionally, the Office of Social Justice has books, guides, worship resources, preaching resources, a blog, and a website dedicated to immigration reform.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a policy statement that calls for a commitment from both Presbyterians and the government to work toward welcoming immigrants into communities and providing just laws that affect those who live and work in the United States (oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/policy-immigration). Additionally, the PC(USA) has produced a video telling the stories of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients and the uncertainties they live with.

Christian Churches Together makes the following statement regarding undocumented immigrants and DACA: “While immigration is often viewed as an economic, social, or legal issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian and spiritual issue that directly impacts millions of unauthorized immigrants and the entire fabric of our society. The Bible frequently commands us to treat the immigrant justly. Further, every person is created in the image of God and possesses inestimable value. It is therefore paramount that our national
immigration system protects the basic human rights and dignity of all persons. Sadly, our current system fails to meet this test and requires comprehensive reform now” (CCT Statement on Immigration Reform, adopted February 2013, christianchurchestogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CCT-USA-Press-Release-Austin-02-01-13-with-Statement.pdf).

A review of other faith communities and their involvement in the issue of immigration reform and protection of DACA revealed a serious commitment from denominations to support immigration reform and to actively advocate for legislation on behalf of undocumented immigrants. After 20 years, it is time for the Reformed Church in America to join our Formula of Agreement partners and other Christians in making a bold and courageous statement on the issue of immigration reform and in taking active steps to support undocumented immigrants and DACA.

Today, many United States residents live in fear of deportation, and rightfully so. In recent months, husbands, wives, siblings, fathers, and mothers have been arrested while at their jobs, in the streets of our cities, and in their homes. They have been held in detention centers and sent to lands that they no longer call home. Many of these people have worked for less than minimum wage and contributed to building the economy and the growth of the U.S. They have raised their children to love the country. We all have the same dreams for our children. If the church really believes that we are to receive strangers with open hands and hearts, and if the church really believes that we are called to love mercy and do justice as we walk humbly before our God, then the church must also believe that we are called to action beyond our former statements of advocacy, for we live in a time where statements of advocacy must become statements of action.

CA 18-4
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting immigration reform and DACA; and further,

To urge congregations to encourage their local politicians to enact legislation that supports immigration reform and DACA.

A motion was made and supported to amend CA 18-4 as follows (additions are underlined):

…president of the United States condemning the separation of immigrant children from their families and strongly supporting . . .

A motion was made and supported to cease debate. The president directed that debate continue.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

VOTED: To adopt CA 18-4 as amended.

The final version of CA 18-4 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

CA 18-4
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States condemning the separation of immigrant children from their families and strongly supporting immigration reform and DACA; and further,
To urge congregations to encourage their local politicians to enact legislation that supports immigration reform and DACA. (ADOPTED)

Resources

- Minutes of the General Synod (MGS) 1987, p. 79
- MGS 1993, p. 86, pp. 88–89, p. 96
- MGS 1995, p. 90
- United Church of Christ immigration webpage, www.ucc.org/justice_immigration
- CRCNA Office of Social Justice immigration resources, justice.crcna.org/immigration
- Interfaith Immigration Coalition, www.interfaithimmigration.org
- Detention Watch Network, www.detentionwatchnetwork.org
- International Detention Coalition, www.idcoalition.org
- Migration Policy Institute, www.migrationpolicy.org
- American Immigration Council, www.immigrationpolicy.org
- Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., www.cliniclegal.org
- Human Rights First, www.humanrightsfirst.org

Gun Safety

In our 2017 report to the General Synod, the Commission on Christian Action determined to study the issue of gun violence in collaboration with the Commissions on Theology, Unity, and Race and Ethnicity and the Commission for Women and issue a report at General Synod 2019. However, in light of the bloodiest Valentine’s Day in the modern history of the United States, the commission would be remiss if it did not speak to the horrific and senseless killing of 17 innocent young people in a Florida high school. It is urgent that the church act now! It has been 41 years since the Reformed Church in America spoke in favor of gun control and adopted three resolutions; these can be found on the RCA website (www.rca.org/guncontrol). The church cannot and must not rest on its laurels of the past when children, youth, young adults, men, and women are daily losing their lives to gun violence. Seventeen young, vibrant, promising lives were snuffed out on Valentine’s Day, and the Reformed Church in America has been essentially silent. Our youth deserve the church to stand up for them, to stand with them, to speak out against evil that will harm them, and speak for laws that will keep them safe. If the youth of North America cannot turn to the church for safety, where can they turn?

As of March 14, 2018, data from the Gun Violence Archive reveals that the United States has experienced astonishing levels of gun violence this year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total gun violence incidents</td>
<td>10,804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total deaths by guns</td>
<td>2,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total injuries by guns</td>
<td>4,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children killed age 0-11</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teens killed age 12-17</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed in mass shootings</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officers shot/killed</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspects killed by police</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suicides by gun 8,514
Death by accident, ages 0-11 13
Death by accident, ages 12-17 16

According to the Gun Violence Archive, gun incidents have shown a progressive increase every year. That being the case, the U.S. can expect to outpace the 61,536 gun incidents of 2017.

Statistics can make our eyes glaze over, but understanding the pain involved for each of these families can only lead us to grieve like Rachel,

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15).

While the CCA will work in collaboration with our fellow commissions to offer specific and targeted recommendations for General Synod 2019, we urge the church today to walk along with our youth, to hear their voices, and to support their work. The young people of the U.S. have started a movement for righteousness and justice. The Reformed Church in America must listen to the prophetic voices of the young and act on behalf of our children and all North Americans. The church must no longer point to the past statements it has made about gun control. Now is the time for this denomination to act—to act with courage, to act boldly, to act justly, and to act as Jesus would act.

CA 18-5
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting gun safety; and further,
To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for gun safety.

A motion was made and supported to amend CA 18-5 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting strategies to reduce gun violence; and further,
To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for common-sense actions to reduce gun violence.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt CA 18-5 as amended.

The final version of CA 18-5 as amended and adopted reads as follows:
CA 18-5
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting strategies to reduce gun violence; and further,

To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for common-sense actions to reduce gun violence. (ADOPTED)

Resources

- Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, faithsunited.org
- PC(USA) gun violence policies, studies, and resources, www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/peace-making/gun-violence-resources
- The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, www.esgv.org
- Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, www.bradycampaign.org
- Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, www.lcav.org
- Violence Policy Center, www.vpc.org
- Gun Violence Archive, www.gunviolencearchive.org

Civil Discourse

The commission has been deeply disturbed by the malicious national discourse that has come forth in our society and among our leaders. As Christians, we are taught to “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). We seek to live out our call and commission to be in the world as ambassadors for Christ, and we realize the importance and power of our words as individuals and as a body. Throughout Scripture, God speaks to us of the value of our words, and we hear the call to words of grace and truth.

- Jesus was Word made flesh; he came with grace and truth.
- Proverbs 12:18 teaches, “Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”
- James 1:19-20 reminds us, “… let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Ephesians 4:25 and 29 and Colossians 4:6 give similar reminders about our speech.

In collaboration with the Commission for Women, we share the following clarion call to the church:

Speaking Christian

As Christians, we believe that in the beginning, when God spoke words, worlds were created. We believe that when the Word was made flesh, a new world was born. Words hold the capacity to create worlds and words hold the capacity to destroy worlds; to affirm and dignify humanity and to destroy and demean humanity.
In public discourse today, it’s not too far of a stretch to suggest that the adjective “civil” has been dropped from our discourse. Instead, we find ourselves inundated with half-truths and misleading truths. We listen to speech that demeans human beings created in the image of God. We hear words that denigrate and objectify women as sexual objects and that separate the world into “winners” and “losers,” “us” versus “them.” With these words being spoken, it is no wonder we find ourselves in the world that we do. Words create worlds and words destroy worlds.

As Christians participating in this discourse, our speech should be filled with truth, not half-truths or falsehoods. We should also speak compassionately, giving the benefit of the doubt to those who disagree with us and recognizing the image of God in the person we are addressing. We should speak beautifully, not using language in a utilitarian way but in ways that evoke God’s kingdom that has drawn near. And we should speak courageously, amplifying the voices of those unheard and challenging the voices that claim ultimate authority.

Words create worlds. May we, as Christians today, speak truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, and courageously, giving witness to the God to whom the whole world belongs.

If we desire change in the world, we must be the change we desire to see. The commission invites the church to reflect on and discuss “Speaking Christian.”

1. Which of these four “speak” words (truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, courageously) especially catches your ear? Why do you think that is?
2. How might each of these ways of speaking influence how you speak in a way that reflects Christ?
3. Where or with whom do you need to speak more truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, or courageously?

To aid the church to further deepen Christ-honoring action through our listening and words, we suggest resources that can grow us in speaking truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, and courageously. “Speak, Lord, we your servants are listening.”

**CA 18-6**

To encourage congregations to use “Speaking Christian” as a tool for discussion and reflection, and to ensure that our speech is gracious, seasoned with salt, and respectful of all we encounter. *(ADOPTED)*

**Resources**

- Social statements of the ELCA, www.elca.org/socialstatements
Environmental Justice

Out of concern for environmental justice, the commission has identified a liaison to the Creation Care Guiding Coalition. This coalition will give a full report on the Care of Creation Ministry Project. The CCA liaison will work with the coalition to educate, equip, and mobilize RCA congregations and people to protect, restore, and rightly share God’s creation and to serve as a bridge to identify issues of justice that the commission might address.

Expedient Christian Action

The commission has struggled with the inability of the church to act on critical social issues in a timely manner. We are called to engage the world around us, to name destructive systems that bind and blind our neighbors with the chains of injustice and oppression. These are the things the church is called to act against and to take swift action on. When the processes of the church cause a delay in our ability to take such action, there often arises a perception of inaction, unwillingness, or silence. We are called to preach deliverance to those who are held in bondage to suppressive systems, to remove the scales from the eyes of those who cannot see the injustices committed against them, and to liberate those who have been oppressed and beaten by the empire. The church is not called to be silent, inactive, or unwilling. The work of justice is hard, and it is work that often calls for immediate response. The work of justice is hard, and yet it is the work of our worship of the Lord.

Our present system of investigation, deliberation, presentation, and approval of the body of Christ is sometimes cause for recommendations to become irrelevant. An example is the need for the commission to speak to the issue of the mass killing in Florida now, rather than to wait until a full report on gun safety is completed and presented and voted on in 2019. Often social crises arise during the liturgical year that should not wait for the General Synod to meet; however, there is no other mechanism for such crisis to be brought to the church for action. As a church committed to social justice, it is imperative to act on critical social issues expediently. As we have watched in the past month, young people from all over the U.S. have taken swift and bold action in light of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. They organized quickly, and they activated a well-developed plan to rebut the slowness, inability, and lack of desire of the government to act to ensure the safety of our children. These young people are truly living the moral imperative of the gospel to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). They have put all else aside for the sake of saving the lives of children and youth in days to come. The church, too, must figure out a rapid response to issues that critically impact our society, our personhood, but more importantly, the church of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to bring the transforming light of God’s kingdom into the lives of individuals, communities, and society in the larger sense. The Holy Spirit does a quick work in the lives of God’s people; this is something for the church to emulate in times of social crisis.

Respectfully submitted,
Patricia Sealy, moderator
Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Continuing Education for Church Educators

The Commission on Christian Discipleship is tasked with advocating for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry. While we as a commission leaned into this work, we asked if there was any such standard that provided for continuing education for those who carry out the teaching ministry of the church across the denomination and then surveyed each of the eight regional synods and 46 classes. From our survey, we found that only one of our regional synods has such standards in place. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes and the classes within its boundaries have a policy for the compensation for church staff, which was created in response to a recommendation approved at the 2002 meeting of General Synod (MGS 2002, R-45, p. 211). That recommendation requested that regional synods “develop compensation guidelines for all types of church employees, e.g., educators, musicians, secretaries, youth workers, administrators, parish nurses, and custodians.” It is the norm across classes and regional synods to have in place compensation guidelines that allow for continuing education for ministers of Word and sacrament serving in local congregations, so in order to more fully support the teaching ministry of the church, the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education makes the following recommendation:

DE 18-1
To request regional synods, as part of their general superintendence of classes, to develop compensation guidelines that include continuing education allowance of time and money for non-ordained church employees who serve in the teaching ministry of the church, e.g., youth workers and Christian educators. (ADOPTED)

As a part of the Reformed theological tradition, our church places great value on learning and having educated leaders. Not having an expectation that those who serve to educate our members of all ages will receive education for their particular ministry fails to reflect this value. Allowing for continuing education for those who lead in these ministries helps to model that life-long learning in the Christian faith is a part of ongoing discipleship in the church.

In addition, to aid the commission in this work of advocacy, we make the following recommendation:

DE 18-2
To direct the General Synod Council to add a question to the annual consistorial report form asking how those who serve within the spiritual formation or teaching arena of the congregation have received ongoing or continuing education that year. The responses gathered shall be shared with the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education. (ADOPTED)

Such information will aid the commission in its work of advocacy for the ongoing preparation of those in the teaching ministry of the church by giving awareness to the involvement of our church educators in ongoing education and preparation. This information will also help the commission to connect educators to opportunities of ongoing
preparation. It will also help the commission to better understand where the commission might provide further support in ongoing preparation for those who serve the teaching ministry of the church.

**Directory of Christian Educators**

The commission is also tasked with the work of overseeing the RCA’s progress in the ministry of discipleship. As the commission has taken on this work, we have realized the importance of the connections and the relationships that we have with others who serve in the teaching ministry of the church. Much of this type of work is completed relationally by having conversations and meeting with those who serve the teaching ministry of the church. In our conversations about how to complete this work, we have discovered that a valuable tool for us would be to have a directory of those serving the educational ministries of the church. Such data is already collected in part through the annual consistorial reports, as contact information for a youth ministry contact for each congregation is gathered. The commission would benefit from having such a directory so that members of the commission could work on developing relationships with church educators throughout the RCA. Therefore, we make the following recommendation:

**DE 18-3**

To direct the General Synod Council to add a question to the annual Consistorial Report Form that will collect information for those who serve in the spiritual formation, discipleship, and/or teaching ministries of the congregation, in the same manner as information regarding youth ministry leaders is collected (current children’s ministry coordinator/director, adult ministry coordinator/director, etc.); and further,

To make the data available to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for its work of advocating for and monitoring discipleship ministry throughout the Reformed Church in America.

A motion was made and supported to refer DE 18-3 back to the commission.

**VOTED:** To refer DE 18-3 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for further work.

**RCA and CERCA**

In June 2005, the General Synod, meeting at Union College in Schenectady, New York, recognized the faithful service to the church provided by the Children and Worship program (celebrating its 20th anniversary) and CERCA (Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America—celebrating its 25th anniversary). In conveying the Synod’s gratitude for CERCA’s 25 years of faithful service to Christ and his church, the general secretary was to “communicate the synod’s encouragement for their continuing service in the years that lie ahead” (*MGS 2005*, R-38, pp. 133–134).

This past February, more than 30 CERCA members gathered at the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators’ (APCE) annual event in Louisville, Kentucky. The RCA and CERCA have maintained an affiliate relationship with APCE since 1983. At this year’s annual event, four RCA members provided presentations. Terry De Young and Paul Smith offered workshops and Carol Jones and Ellen Vellenga gave the mini-plenary,
“Sharing God’s Hospitality with Children.” The late George Brown, Jr. was remembered as the 2012 APCE Educator of the Year during the In Memoriam report. Eight RCA first-timers (five from Mescalero Reformed Church) received assistance from the Supporting and Equipping Educators’ Development (SEED) fund. During CERCA’s annual meeting at the event, Jill Ver Steeg, the RCA’s director of transformational engagement, member of APCE’s Coordinating Council, and ex-officio member of CERCA’s leadership team, provided an update on RCA discipleship ministries. CERCA members also enjoyed an evening of fellowship at The Old Spaghetti Factory during the free evening. All commission members except one were able to attend these events and meet with local church educators.

As a result, the commission makes the following recommendations to support the ongoing work of CERCA:

**DE 18-4**
To direct the General Synod Council to create a $5,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of $500 per year in order to provide for professional and personal growth of RCA educators and youth workers (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, expenses in conjunction with CERCA and APCE meetings, etc.).

A motion was made and supported to refer DE 18-4 back to the commission.

**VOTED:** To refer DE 18-4 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for further work.

**DE 18-5**
To instruct the General Synod Council to provide webpages for CERCA on the RCA website for the purpose of promoting opportunities for improvement of discipleship skills, supporting personal enrichment, advocating for church education, and recognizing the achievements and innovative contributions of church educators. (ADOPTED)

**Historical Publication**

As a result of our studies last year, the CCDE recognizes the importance of telling the stories of God at work in the people of God as an essential tool and effective strategy for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA. Thus, the CCDE is endeavoring to tell one such story as lived in the life of Frances Beardslee. The commission’s work on this has led to collaboration with the Commission on Theology, the Commission for Women, and the Commission on History on a forthcoming historical publication with the Historical Series. It is the hope of the CCDE that this story will be the first in a collection of children’s books or an anthology of stories aimed at children yet teaching the whole church and celebrating the work of God through the lives of faithful disciples.

Respectfully submitted,
Lindsey DeKruif, moderator
Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (Book of Church Order [BCO], Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Sec. 5; 2017 edition, pp. 65-66). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (MGS 1974, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (MGS 1975, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements that reach all levels of mission in the RCA. The commission’s responsibilities are defined by the BCO in this way:

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America’s membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.

2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.

3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b; 2017 edition, p. 110).

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices, as outlined in “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by General Synod in 1996 (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and is a driving force behind bold and needed new ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they witness to the grace and gospel of Jesus Christ alongside believers around the corner and around the world. Periodically throughout the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, and in which we in the RCA are seeking to invest our whole selves into the work of “Transformed & Transforming,” we believe deeply in our clearly-stated commitment to “working with all the partners that God provides.” The commission is dedicated to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment to partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming around the globe at this point in history.
This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. The first portion of the commission’s report provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but also of the RCA itself. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in this church’s history, as the church continues to struggle with its response to Jesus’s prayer “that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

**World Council of Churches**

The largest and oldest organized expression of the modern worldwide ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.”

The WCC gathers its community from 345 churches in 110 countries, representing more than 500 million Christians worldwide. Member churches (or denominations) consist primarily of those from the historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox traditions, including most of the world’s Orthodox churches and scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed churches, as well as many United and independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC’s founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Pacific. However, some major parts of world Christianity, including churches from evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is also not a member of the WCC, though it does participate in various theological dialogues and cooperate in some other ways.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years; it gathered most recently in Busan, South Korea, in October 2013, under the theme “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace.” The Central Committee is the continuing body that implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget, secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies.

The work of the WCC is not simply programmatic or related to formal initiatives. At times, its work is to provide a Christian witness in ways that perhaps no other group in the world can do. “Together toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” is one example. This comprehensive study seeks to both affirm and challenge the church's biblical and trinitarian commitment to mission and evangelism, even as it sets our efforts in the rapidly changing contemporary context, the relevance of marginalized peoples to mission, and the larger purposes of mission and evangelism in God’s own mission of love to the world. It is available directly from the WCC, and it could be an excellent study resource for congregations.

Olav Fykse Tveit, an ordained pastor in the Church of Norway, is the general secretary of the WCC. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the WCC. For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, see [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org).
World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. The RCA was a charter member of the former WARC and enthusiastically worked to support the coming together of these two ecumenical bodies into one.

This renewed fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, Waldensian, United, and Uniting churches is a network of 230 Protestant churches in 108 countries with a combined estimated membership of 80 million people that is, in its words, “called to communion, committed to justice, that all may experience the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.”

The WCRC may be best known worldwide for the Accra Confession, a groundbreaking statement issued at the General Council of the then-WARC in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates for social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at wcrc.ch/accra.

The 26th General Council of the WCRC took place in June 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, with the theme “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” The council dealt with issues of justice, church unity, and world renewal. More than a thousand delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests gathered in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document initially forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation that has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. The General Council also celebrated the signing of the “Wittenberg Witness,” a document crafted between the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation that expresses a commitment to Christian unity as Reformed and Lutheran Christians live and work together to further a common Christian witness to a broken and troubled world.

The RCA’s Lisa Vander Wal was chair of the General Council Planning Committee. During the General Council, she was elected to serve as vice president of the WCRC. The commission wishes to publicly commend her for the important leadership she is providing to the worldwide church through her multifaceted work with the WCRC. The commission also thanks Monica Schaap Pierce, Stacey Duensing, and Carlos Corro for their participation in the General Council in Leipzig as RCA delegates.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, see http://wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence that is for the first time drawing world leaders from evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches into a new place of relational—rather than structural—fellowship. Formed quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, the GCF is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the Global South, often in Pentecostal and evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the
Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF’s work. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson has supported its development and continues to serve on its steering committee. Granberg-Michaelson also served as co-chair of the search committee for a new executive secretary.

In February 2018, the GCF announced that Casely Essamuah was selected as its next secretary. Originally ordained in the Methodist Church in Ghana, Essamuah has worked for the last 13 years as the global missions and local outreach pastor of Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Maryland. Essamuah describes himself as “evangelical and ecumenical.” Originally from Africa and now ministering in North America, he views himself as a “bridge-builder” between the churches in the Global North and Global South. Essamuah will take up the position in July 2018, following the retirement of Larry Miller, who has led the GCF for the last six years. Essamuah was presented as secretary-elect to the third Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Bogota, Colombia, on April 24–27, 2018. Attending the Global Gathering as representatives of the RCA were Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Stacey Duensing, and Lee DeYoung.

For more information about the third Global Gathering, visit www.globalchristianforum.org/bogota.html.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 NCC member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include 45 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC.

By necessity, the work of the NCC has evolved in dramatic ways over the last decade in response to a precipitous decline in revenue. NCC general secretary and president James E. Winkler presides over a very differently-structured organization than the one that existed a generation ago. Still, the NCC continues to offer an important witness to the power of a shared voice among Christians. The newest multi-year initiative of the NCC focuses on ending racism. The initiative was launched with a rally in Washington, DC, on April 3–5; nine members of the RCA attended. The NCC continues to respond to other urgent issues that Christians face, most recently mass incarceration and interreligious relations with a focus on peace. The RCA has placed members on the NCC’s Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations; Justice and Advocacy; and Christian Education, Faith Formation, and Leadership. The commission thanks Norma Coleman-James, Jeffrey Hubers, and Monica Schaap Pierce for their ongoing service on these Convening Tables.

The website of the NCC is www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us.

Christian Churches Together

Formed in 2007, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from the Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition, its membership includes six national organizations: the American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. It’s this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes the CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. CCT calls itself and
its member churches “to celebrate a common confession of faith in the Triune God; to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer and theological dialogue; to provide fellowship and mutual support; to seek better understanding of each other by affirming our commonalities and understanding our differences; to foster evangelism faithful to the proclamation of the gospel; to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible; and to promote the common good of society.”

In 2017, Christian Churches Together held a special gathering in Garden Grove, California, to discern the mission and future of CCT. With the theme “Beloved Community,” speakers and participants engaged in dialogue over how to have difficult conversations in community, racial reconciliation, and what it means to be a church for the poor. The RCA delegation consisted of Earl James, Don Poest, and Monica Schaap Pierce. Schaap Pierce also serves on the Steering Committee of CCT.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates laud the annual gatherings as opportunities to build personal relationships with people across the church in the U.S., to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Carlos Malave is the executive director of CCT, which has its offices in Indianapolis, Indiana. The CCT’s website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its mission and activity. There you will also find common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

RCA – Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the Reformed Church in America, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. For example, Daniel Meeter serves as a member of the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Paul Janssen serves on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s ecumenical committee, and representatives from the Formula of Agreement churches serve as corresponding delegates to this body each year. While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

The eighth round of Roman Catholic–Reformed dialogue began in 2013 and concluded in 2017. Included in the dialogue were representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic
Bishops, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Reformed Church in America. The RCA was represented by Allan Janssen, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Monica Schaap Pierce.

The dialogue focused on ecclesiology—particularly the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, unity, and diversity in the life of the church. The dialogue also examined ecclesial ministry and oversight and uncovered a unifying affirmation that ecclesial ministry and oversight are undertaken personally and collegially in service to the church, not just for the church’s own sake, but for the sake of the world God so loves.

The report of the dialogue, which is titled “The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World,” concludes with three important acknowledgements. First, the dialogue partners acknowledge that

[All] of our traditions see ministry as service to God through Christ, in the church and in the world, rooted in our common baptismal vocation. We further understand that ministry is exercised in both personal and collegial ways, and is undertaken in the context of the priesthood of all believers, who together share in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Although we ordain to different offices and have different requirements for ordination, none of that negates our acknowledgment of this fundamental reality.

Second, we acknowledge that God calls and appoints people to exercise the ministry of oversight (episkopé) in the church, and that this is primarily a service of love for the sake of the unity of the church, undertaken in obedience to Jesus Christ, for the sake of the gospel. We acknowledge that this oversight has significant pastoral as well as administrative functions. We acknowledge that this ministry of oversight exists in all of our communions. The forms differ, but the essential functions are very similar. We have learned that, among Reformed communions, the functions that are often (in the Roman Catholic Church) lodged in the person of a bishop are distributed among other individuals and collective groups, but the functions remain. We have learned that, in the Catholic Church, bishops function in a collegial and consultative manner, both with other bishops and with the priests and laity under the bishop’s oversight. We hold this to be one of the most helpful insights and significant fruits of this dialogue.

Third, we acknowledge that all of the baptized are baptized into the one body of Christ. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, those “who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.” This leads to an implicit acknowledgment of one another as communions of believers. We acknowledge that the body of Christ is present in all of our communions. While there are still challenges to full recognition and to full, visible communion, we can and must recognize in one another the work of God, the presence of Jesus Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit, our mutual service to a broken world, and our fidelity to the gospel that we all profess. It is our prayer that these acknowledgments become a foundation for eventual mutual recognition.

Following recommendations made in the report, the commission urges churches to reflect on the gifts that both the Reformed and Catholic churches have received from one another through the dialogue’s exploration of the mission of the church and the church’s ministry. Among these,
• That all of our churches acknowledge that many of the church-dividing issues from the Reformation era, such as those related to ministry and especially the office of the bishop, no longer pertain to the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church (see “The One Body of Christ,” chapter three, for further details).
• That all of our churches acknowledge and affirm the collegial and conciliar nature of oversight in the Catholic Church.
• That all celebrate our shared understanding that the purpose of ministry is service to both the church and world.
• That all acknowledge that, although it is expressed differently, we share the conviction that the act of ordaining marks a distinctive change in the one ordained vis-à-vis the community and that this is deeper than a change of function.
• That ministers from other churches be invited to be present as witnesses at ordinations and installations, just as the previous round of dialogue has encouraged for the sacrament of baptism.
• That Reformed ecclesiastical bodies and Roman Catholic bishops in local communities find ways to meet together, to learn from one another, to identify convergences in their practice of serving their communions, and to collaborate in service to the world.

The commission commends “The One Body of Christ” to churches for study. The text can be found on the RCA ecumenical webpage, www.rca.org/partners. The ninth round of dialogue will commence in the fall of 2018 with a focus on the relationship between justification and justice. The prospectus for the ninth round can also be found at www.rca.org/partners.

Christian Unity at Home and Abroad

The commission continues to focus time at each meeting exploring the explosive growth of Christianity in the Global South—the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia, where the Christian church is growing at a remarkable pace. As a commission, we believe that the witness of Christianity in the Global South has much to teach us in North America and in the RCA, and we are committed to discussing this reality and its possible impact on and lessons for the RCA. Just as the RCA was at the forefront of the ecumenical movements of the twentieth century, the RCA also needs to be deeply involved in these new realities for the twenty-first century.

The commission remains committed to the biblical mandate of unity in Christ and in joining with the work of the Holy Spirit as the gospel continues to cross boundaries of geography, society, and culture. What is also clear, however, is that ecumenism in this new reality is not the work of the commission alone, nor simply the work of a denomination. These changing patterns of global Christianity have produced the unexpected opportunities of “glo-cal” (global + local) ecumenical work. Many of the communities in which the RCA has congregations are now home to new immigrant Christian gatherings, the result of a global movement that brings millions of immigrants to the United States and Canada each year—75 percent of whom are Christian. Many of the groups have ties to churches in their country of origin, but not here. The ecumenical challenge, then, rests not only in formal groups or structures, but also locally, even reaching into each congregation with this challenge: to engage ecumenically in our own communities by exhibiting both the meaning and importance of radical Christian hospitality. In practicing such hospitality, local churches often find themselves recipients of remarkable grace and compassion. The commission will continue to hold this need before the church.

Additionally, many ministers of Word and sacrament, along with their congregations,
participate in local ecumenical expressions such as ministerial associations and councils of churches. Many such associations are long-standing, offer member pastors support on many levels, and engage together in mercy and justice projects. Historically, the Commission on Christian Unity has not engaged those local expressions. In the future, the commission might connect with those associations and councils to promote and enhance learning, identify opportunities for wider impact, and explore together how the denominational mandate for the commission can serve local Christian unity efforts, perhaps especially given the enormous “glo-cal” trends, emergencies, and climate.

Reflecting on its mandate for Christian unity, the commission is concerned about fissures of disunity within and among local churches and in the RCA as a whole. Diversity of thought is realistic and healthy. Diversity is realistic because the church is comprised of a multiplicity of people with sundry gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Diversity is healthy because through these diverse gifts, creativity emerges, and with it, fresh approaches to upholding sacred traditions as well as addressing new issues in changing times. Diversity is not inimical to unity. Rather, the unity that has already been established in Christ comes to its fullest expression through the various gifts of the faithful, which are unified in their service to the gospel.

The Reformed Church in America has a long history of collaborating with other Christians of diverse cultures, histories, gifts, and beliefs. Whether in hospitals founded by missionaries, in a local vacation Bible school hosted with neighboring churches, or in dialogue with other communions, we partner with other believers in order to advance Christ’s mission on earth. Our common, unifying work is a response to Jesus’s prayer that we “may all be one” (John 17:21). In the Bible, Christian unity is described as a gift and a call. It is a gift that has already been realized by Jesus Christ, who has broken down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). It is a call to bear one another’s burdens so as to make visible to all a unity that God already sees (Galatians 6:2).

Yet within our denomination, we have turned away from the gift of oneness. Stymied by fear and pride, we have fallen short of our call to manifest the unity that we have in Christ. Rather than modeling wholeness within the Reformed Church in America, we have allowed walls to be built up and hostilities to fester. The ecumenical pursuit of Christian unity is deficient without internal concord. It is inconsistent for us to reach out in ecumenical relationships while failing to reach across our own denomination to extend hospitality and strive for compromise.

The urgent work of reconciliation and cooperation within our denomination requires renewed strength and courage, which we can only find in God. It necessitates trust in and openness to the Spirit. It demands an unqualified, intentional, and prayerful commitment to heal the brokenness of the body of Christ. As a commission, we prayerfully urge our denomination to seek a deeper and more authentic expression of the oneness we have in Christ. Christian unity, while universal in God’s promise, must begin at home.

Celebrating, Lamenting, and Professing Christian Unity

In light of the RCA’s rich history of ecumenical involvement at home and abroad, there is much to celebrate in terms of accomplishments toward making whole what has been fractured. There is also much to lament when we consider the ways in which the unity of Christ’s church has been broken and disunity continues to foment. Therefore, we celebrate, lament, and profess our commitment to Christian unity.
We celebrate ...

... the recent strides toward unity with Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist Christians through the association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) in July 2017.

- With the WCRC’s association with the JDDJ and accompanying Statement of Association, Reformed Christians worldwide join efforts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant understandings of a doctrine that has divided the church for the past 500 years.
- With the association with the JDDJ, Reformed Christians not only affirm but enrich the existing consensus by adding our distinctive emphases to the doctrine of justification, particularly the Reformed emphases on the connection between justification and union with Christ and the link between justification and justice. (For the text of the Statement of Association and further information about the background and decision-making process, see http://wcrc.ch/jddj.)


- As the document states, “Together, we celebrate that we are one in Christ, sharing a common Reformation heritage and a common faith. We are united in confessing the gospel of Jesus Christ. We rejoice that there is no longer any need for our separation; our differences are not church dividing. We give thanks for the examples of those Lutheran and Reformed churches that have already declared church communion and now bear common witness together by sharing in worship, witness, and work for the world.” We celebrate this witness as a foundation for greater collaboration and partnership in ministry and mission between Lutheran and Reformed Christians. (The text of the Wittenberg Witness can be found at: http://wcrc.ch/news/lwf-and-wcrc-sign-the-wittenberg-witness-as-wcrc-joins-jddj.)

... the fruits of the U.S. Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue, which include a mutual acknowledgement that “all of our traditions see ministry as service to God through Christ, in the church and in the world, rooted in our common baptismal vocation. We further understand that ministry is exercised in both personal and collegial ways, and is undertaken in the context of the priesthood of all believers, who together share in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.” This current state of mutual acknowledgement might serve as the basis to determine how acknowledgement of each other’s ministries might lead to the mutual recognition of each other as “church” and, further, might serve as a step on the path to full, visible communion.

We lament ...

... that we live in a fragmented world. The church’s disputes and divisions have contributed to some of these problems. We are unable to sit down at the same Lord’s Table and set an example to the world of what it looks like to be united in Christ. A fragmented Christian witness exacerbates the fragmentation of the world. As the Commission on Christian Unity, we are committed to seeking unity in all forms.

- As part of our responsibility for caring for Christian unity, it is incumbent upon us to name the times and circumstances in which we have not lived together in unity as members of Christ’s church.
1 Chronicles 12:32 says, “Of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, two hundred chiefs, and all their kindred under their command.” We lament the occasions when we have known what we ought to do as followers of Christ who are called to seek unity, yet have not done it. This, we believe, grieves the heart of God.

The “Wittenberg Witness” states, “Together, we acknowledge, confess and lament that divisions still obscure our unity and hamper our witness. We regret that through our history we have too often formed divisive habits and structures, failing to discern the body of Christ. Injustice and conflict scar and scandalize our one body.”

We profess ...


We rejoice in the gift of unity: already realized in Jesus Christ.

We accept the task of unity: being made visible in the church.

We believe the promise of unity: to be fulfilled in the new creation.

THEREFORE,
We covenant to demonstrate our unity in Christ by maintaining the bonds of peace, speaking the truth in love, and bearing one another’s burdens.

We pledge to seek the unity of the church through communing with other Christians in worship and work, cooperating with other Christians in councils of churches, and uniting with other Christians in faith and order.

We promise to serve the unity of the world by proclaiming the gospel of peace and reconciliation, sharing the earth’s goods with the poor and hungry, and seeking justice among the nations.

Until the unity which God now sees may be clearly visible to all, so that the world may know that Christ was sent to demonstrate the perfect and everlasting love of God.

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to formally acknowledge the involvement of Dena Robins, who is leaving the commission. Michael Hardeman will assume the role of moderator of the commission for the 2018–2019 work year.

Finally, the commission expresses its profound appreciation for the inspired and capable work of our ecumenical associate, Monica Schaap Pierce.
COMMISSIONS

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship met three times over the past year. The group convened in person in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 12–14, 2017, in conjunction with the joint meetings of all the General Synod commissions and General Synod Council (GSC), and electronically on August 15, 2017, and February 7, 2018.

Worship Life of the RCA

Over the past few years the commission has been asking, what is worshipful for churches in the RCA? How does your congregation or your community worship together? How can we as a commission best resource the church? Two years ago, the General Synod committed $5,000 to help fund a survey on worship practices within the RCA to aid the commission in discovering answers to these questions and foster worship-based conversations across the RCA.

Joint CRC/RCA Worship Survey

The work of putting together and disseminating this survey is a joint effort between the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the RCA, in partnership with the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship (and the affiliated Center for Social Research). The answers from the survey will guide the future work of the commission and provide valuable direction for potential workshops and learning communities.

This survey has two complementary purposes. The first is to collect specific data about how congregations worship—what sorts of songs are sung, how long the sermons are, and so forth. This commission intends to use this information to guide the creation of resources that will be most helpful to pastors, worship leaders, and congregations in worship planning.

The second purpose is to stimulate reflection and conversation among those who take the survey. This commission encourages churches to take this survey in community—with a worship committee, a praise team, the board of elders, or some other collection of people typically responsible for overseeing worship at your church. The process of working through the survey, in other words, is part of its purpose.

The members of the Commission on Christian Worship from 2016 to the present day have worked on formulating the questions for the survey by utilizing information from previous worship surveys done in 1987 and 1994. All the questions and the survey’s organization were drafted and sent to representative groups in both the RCA and CRCNA. Feedback from those “test runs” was gathered and incorporated in late 2017. The survey will go through one more round of “testing” before it is sent to the Center for Social Research to help us discern the best way to actually deploy the survey.

Hopefully, this survey will bless those who participate and better equip all who are called to lead the worship of God’s people to do so with integrity and grace. In the meantime, the commission commends to you the use of the many worship resources available through the RCA website at www.rca.org/worship.

In Appreciation

The commission gives thanks for members Drew Poppleton, whose term on the commission concludes this year, and Katherine Lee Baker. The commission is grateful to Ron Rienstra
for his work as a consultant and his partnership with John Witvliet, Joyce Borger, and Noel Snyder on the worship survey.

Respectfully submitted,
Sarah Palsma, moderator
Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) met in person October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and again January 24–26, 2018, in New York, New York. Communication also occurred through numerous emails and phone calls. The CCO consulted with other commissions of the General Synod on the work assigned to it by the General Synod.

Referrals from 2017 General Synod

Six referrals from last year’s General Synod were received: R 17-20, R 17-23, R 17-26, R 17-30, R 17-31, and R 17-47. All are addressed in this report.

Task Force regarding Commitment to the Formula of Agreement

A member of the CCO (Philip De Koster) and an alternate (Joshua Scheid) were designated to represent the commission on the task force created in response to R 17-24 “to review the RCA’s commitment to the Formula of Agreement, including its role in ecumenism and exchange of ministers” (MGS 2017, R 17-24, p. 149).

Delegates Authorized to Vote on Final Declarative Resolution regarding Constitutional Amendments

The 2017 General Synod voted:

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 (MGS 2017, R 17-30, p. 162).

The commission composed text for the appropriate section that fulfills the directive from the 2017 General Synod’s instruction on this topic. The proposed text amends the section of the BCO captioned “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures” (2017 edition, p. 73).

The commission submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-1
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order, “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures,” for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

Sec 2.
a. Amendments to the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship shall be made only upon adoption by the General Synod at a stated meeting, with recommendation to the classes for approval.
b. At least two-thirds of the classes shall approve a proposed amendment in order to secure its adoption. Only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted are eligible to vote on the recommendation for approval.

c. If an amendment is approved by the classes, the General Synod, at its discretion, may pass a final declarative resolution on the amendment. When the declarative action has taken place, the amendment shall become effective. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-1.

Regional Synod Formation, Combination, and Disbanding of Classes, and Transfer of Churches from One Classis to Another

The 2017 General Synod voted:

To send Overture 44 to the Commission on Church Order for consultation with the Regional Synod of the Far West (MGS 2017, R 17-31, p. 163).

Overture 44 read as follows:

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” (MGS 2017, p. 162).

Following its October 2017 meeting, the commission sent correspondence to the president and synod executive of the Regional Synod of the Far West (Glenn Spyksma and Bruce Bugbee, respectively) requesting additional background information regarding the overture it submitted to the 2017 General Synod. A response was received from the stated clerk of the Synod of the Far West.

The commission at its January meeting drafted an amendment that the commission believes addresses the concern raised by the Synod of the Far West yet also protects the parties that could be affected by the changes inherent in the Book of Church Order rubric. The commission gave attention to the potential breadth of the phrase “all parties involved.” The amended rubric identifies that required consultations to be completed by the regional synod happen between the classis and consistories affected, not everyone who may want to be considered a “party” affected by the proposed change.

To provide protection for classes and consistories, the commission’s recommendation calls for consultations about proposed changes to occur at a regular session of the consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 20]) or a stated or special session of the classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 31]). The commission recognized that a special session of a classis only requires three
ministers and three elders. The special session quorum is a significant minority of the composition of the classis, which could result in the lack of information to all members and delegates and a lack of input from all members and delegates about this potential consequential change, hence the greater quorum requirement if the matter is discussed at a special session. The commission could not justify such a significant, consequential action as transferring a church between classes, changing the composition of a classis or classes, or disbanding a classis needing to happen in an “ad hoc” fashion. The commission recognizes that a process that happens in a slower, deliberate fashion with adequate time to discuss and reflect on the implications of a proposed change along with a process that fits into the schedule of the assembly that would be most affected by the change better protects those assemblies (consistory and/or classis). Furthermore, the commission recognizes that an “ad hoc” process achieved quickly could more readily lend itself to a type of gerrymandering or other manipulations of the assemblies within a regional synod.

Lastly, the commission is proposing separating the current Section 3 into two sections (Section 3 and Section 4) since each sentence in the current section configuration addresses a different action for the regional synod and causes confusion when both actions are stated within one section.

The commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 18-2
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 61) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

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.

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after consultation with the classes and consistories involved, form, combine, or disband classes. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a regular session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of the classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).

Sec. 4. The regional synod, after consultation with the classes and the consistory involved, may transfer a church from one classis to another classis within its bounds. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a regular session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of the classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).

[Remaining section renumbered.]

(ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-2.
Consistory Responsibility of Costs Borne by Minister when Source of Minister’s Insurance is Spouse’s Employer-Sponsored Benefit Plan

The 2017 General Synod voted:

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 (MGS 2017, R 17-26, p. 150).

The commission was instructed to consider the responsibilities of the consistory to the minister when the minister has elected health/medical insurance coverage through his or her spouse’s employer-sponsored group plan. Since many group plans have a portion of the premium that is to be paid by the employee, the question was raised if the consistory should compensate the minister for those out-of-pocket expenses, since the consistory is not paying insurance premiums because it is not directly providing such insurance.

Formulary No. 5 requires the consistory to provide health/medical insurance. However, in the situation cited in the previous paragraph, a consistory is not providing such insurance and so has no financial obligation. The CCO believes the spirit of the promises and obligations made to the minister by the consistory in the call document (Formulary No. 5) is rightly fulfilled when the minister is not expected to bear the financial burden of health/medical insurance premiums by whatever means health/medical insurance may be obtained.

The CCO therefore proposes language requiring a consistory to compensate the minister for the required employee contribution for a spouse’s employer-sponsored plan. This compensation is limited: up to the premium costs of the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) plan that meets the minimum standards as determined annually by the Board of Benefits Services. Under current tax law, this compensation would be taxable income to the minister, assuming alternate arrangements are not made.

To demonstrate how this language would work, here are some examples:

- The minister’s spouse’s employer-sponsored plan for a family requires an employee contribution of $600 a month in 2018. The premium cost of the RBA plan meeting the minimum standards in 2018 is $1,727 a month. The consistory would be responsible to compensate the minister $600 a month.
- The minister’s spouse’s employer-sponsored plan for a family requires an employee contribution of $1,900 a month. The consistory would then only be required to pay $1,727, the cost of the RBA plan. If the minister chose the employer plan, the balance of $173 would fall to the minister’s spouse unless the consistory opts to provide additional compensation.
- The minister’s spouse’s plan has no required employee contribution. The consistory would not be required to make any additional compensation to the minister.

In either the first or the third example, the consistory may choose to take the funds that it would have spent on medical insurance and use them as additional compensation to the minister or a contribution to an account such as a health savings account if one is available. However, there would be no requirement to do so if the amount that is compensated to the
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minister meets the required threshold. The calculations would need to be adjusted each year. If the required contribution for the employer’s plan becomes more expensive than the RBA plan, the consistory and the minister would need to discuss what option will best serve them moving forward.

In addition to this important change to the medical/health insurance, the CCO modified the call form in two places in an editorial manner. First, the current asterisk and footnote is eliminated. The definition that has been in the footnote is now incorporated within the text itself. Second, a new rubric is added stating that the signatures of the consistory and the classis leaders need to be part of the call form documents. The Formulary states that signatures are recorded, but the Formulary doesn’t have a provision for signatures. The BCO states that the call form shall be approved by the classis or classis president and clerk, but again, the Formulary doesn’t currently have a provision for the fulfilment of this requirement (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 14] and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 7 [2017 edition, p. 54]). CCO had been asked by a clerk whether a place for the signature of the minister should also be included in the call form. CCO is sympathetic to the request and recognizes that a classis may want to have a tangible acceptance of the call. However, CCO is not including a place for a minister’s acceptance signature in the Formulary because the call form is an action of a consistory and a classis to offer employment. The acceptance of the call by the minister is a corresponding response to the offer, but sending forth the call is an action of the consistory and the classis.

The CCO submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-3
To adopt the following changes to Formulary No. 5 in the Book of Church Order (2017 edition, pp. 132–133) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

...As long as you continue to be the minister of this church, we also promise to pay the stipulated contributions to the Reformed Church retirement plan and provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance for you and your immediate family* —which means those dependents eligible for family medical insurance according to the insurance plan documents of the Reformed Benefits Association. Such insurance coverages shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services.

If you and your immediate family elect medical coverage through your spouse’s employer-sponsored group plan, we promise will not be required to provide medical insurance to compensate you for any medical premium costs incurred by your immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated.

In addition we promise to provide a minimum of one week and a stipend equal to, not less than, the equivalent of 1/52 of the minimum cash salary established by the classis for a study program mutually agreed upon by you and us for your professional development, for each year in service with our congregation. By
mutual agreement this time and money may be accumulated to a maximum equivalent of four years of service.

We hereby bind ourselves and our successors for the performance of all the foregoing by the underwritten signatures of the consistory members to this instrument. May the Lord incline your heart to a cheerful acceptance of this call and send you to us in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of peace.

Done in consistory and subscribed with our names this ___ day of _____________, 20___.

Attested by _____________________________________________

____

Supervisor of the call

[Signature lines for all consistory members and the required classis officers must be inserted—see BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 regarding signatures of consistory members and BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 7 regarding the requirement for classis approval of a call prior to the call being submitted to the minister.] (ADOPTED)

(Note that in making its revisions, the CCO removed the present footnote regarding “immediate family.”)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-3.

Affiliation of Local Church with More than One Denomination

The CCO recommended to the 2017 General Synod certain amendments to the Book of Church Order that, if adopted, approved, and declared effective, would have had the effect of providing an orderly way for local churches to affiliate with other denominations (i.e., maintain membership status in at least two denominations). At that time, the CCO noted that examples of affiliated churches already in exist in the RCA and that the CCO was aware of other churches expressing interest in such a relationship. The commission did not offer an opinion on the merits of affiliation.

The amendments proposed by the CCO would have had no effect on the affiliating church’s relationship with the RCA, such as the requirements of Formulary 15, oversight of property, etc.

The 2017 General Synod voted to not adopt the proposed amendments (MGS 2017, R 17-46, p. 271). Notwithstanding this action by the 2017 General Synod, local churches in the RCA continue to affiliate (or contemplate affiliation) with other denominations. The greatest need for this new Article 9 is likely the formal organization of new churches that have been formed by the cooperative efforts of the RCA and the CRC. These congregations have only known an affiliated relationship, yet when these church starts move to formal organization, there currently isn’t a provision in our order for such a continued affiliated relationship. Apparently, such a new church would need to choose between denominations rather than continued unity. For this reason, the CCO addresses the topic again in this report.
Some delegates at the 2017 General Synod wondered about the meaning of “full communion” that was used in the version presented to them. There isn’t a clear written definition of this term, though it is used elsewhere in the BCO (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 14]). The CCO has now employed the phrase “an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers” to provide greater clarity. The General Synod has such written agreements.

Accordingly, the commission submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-4
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 9. Affiliated Churches

Sec. 1. A consistory or governing body, with approval of its congregation and classis, may affiliate with another denomination with which the Reformed Church in America has an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers. A consistory or governing body that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 2. The governing body of a church from a denomination with which the Reformed Church in America has an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers may affiliate with a classis of the Reformed Church in America upon approval of its congregation, the receiving classis, and the affiliating church’s current denomination/s.

a. Unless otherwise determined by the receiving classis, delegates from an affiliating church shall be corresponding delegates to the classis.

b. A minister of an affiliating church shall remain subject to the discipline of the minister’s denomination.

c. A church that affiliates with the Reformed Church in America remains subject to the governance of its current denomination, unless it is otherwise agreed.

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to refer CO 18-4 to the General Synod’s Commission on Church Order for refinement and clarity.

VOTED:
To refer CO 18-4 to the General Synod’s Commission on Church Order for further refinement and clarity.
Classis Divestiture of Interest in Property of Local Church Granted Leave to Withdraw from the Denomination for the Purpose of Affiliating with Another Denomination

The 2017 General Synod voted:

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 (MGS 2017, R 17-20, p. 139).

This commission was instructed to propose “constitutionally appropriate” amendments to the Book of Church Order (BCO) to accomplish the intent of Overtures 16 and 17.

The proposed text amendments to BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42) found in Overtures 16 and 17 were as follows:

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 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 (MGS 2017, p. 138).

The commission engaged in serious discussion regarding a constitutional way to accomplish this intent. However, it was unable to find one. Fundamentally, our Constitution teaches that we are a Church together, not a gathering of individual local churches. We understand the Church to be the body of Christ, not its individual components (see 1 Corinthians 12). Our Constitution embodies this scriptural understanding. Cleaving from the body without conditions finds no support in the Constitution, as departure is a consequential matter. It is appropriate that classes be able to impose conditions that attempt to repair the significant damage that may be caused by a church leaving.

Our Constitution is the structure that “constitutes” the church. It is not merely text on a page but is the framework and very life of the church. When looking at a “constitutional” way of acting, one must look not only to the BCO but to all of the following: “the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, this Preamble, and the Formularies” (BCO Preamble [2017 edition, p. 1]). Our order is presbyterial, meaning its foundation is based on the idea that authority is vested in assemblies. It is not a congregational form, which would provide autonomy to local congregations, with loose ties to other churches (see Allan J. Janssen, Constitutional Theology, p. 19 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000]). The Preamble provides that “[t]he local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern” (BCO Preamble [2017 edition, p. 4]).

Although our current society places much emphasis on individualism, the Reformed Church in America cannot and should not do so. “A Reformed understanding of church moves in quite the other direction. The church is not a product of human activity or belief.
God establishes and maintains the church” (Janssen, p. 2 [emphasis original]). Church is not built from the bottom up as an individualistic culture would teach. Rather, “[t]he Church is God’s work. And that needed to be expressed in the church order” (Janssen, p. 3). Throughout our history, the RCA has looked to Scripture and found a communal focus of decision-making (Janssen, p. 5). From the very beginning, the Reformed Church in America has been about the gathering of churches into assemblies (see Daniel J. Meeter, Meeting Each Other in Doctrine and Liturgy, pp. 34–35 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993]). The Explanatory Articles of 1792 proved that “[t]he reformed Dutch Church holds the middle station between two extremes. On the one hand, she denies all superiority of one Minister of Christ over another, and on the other, considers independent, unconnected congregations as unsafe and inconvenient” (Meeter, p. 124 [emphasis added]). Janssen furthers this understanding by writing, “At the same time [the classis] prevented the local church from assuming to itself all power. The classis reminded the local congregation that it lives in communion with other congregations” (Janssen, p. 103). Nothing in the Constitution grants local consistories the right of independence. Rather, they are “accountable to the greater church for [their] life and action” (Janssen, p. 106).

Other parts of the Constitution similarly underscore the need for a collective understanding. The Heidelberg Catechism recognizes the corporate nature of the church when discussing the Apostles’ Creed. Answer 54 reads:

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.

And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

Similarly, the Belhar Confession emphasizes unity. The second “We believe” says in part:

We believe that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16).

The key component, again, is a communal understanding of life as a Church. The Church is not a collection of individual churches, and is certainly not individual churches all on their own. Rather, it is a unified body—the body of Christ.

Chapter 1, Part II of the Book of Church Order contains numerous other examples of a communal church. For instance, a local church cannot birth itself (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 29]). Rather, the local church emerges from the life of the Church, as embodied in the classis (Janssen, p. 107). The classis has responsibilities for ministers and students (e.g., BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Sections 7–10 [2017 edition, p. 30]). Finally, Section 11 provides the broadest authority to the classis; it “shall exercise all ecclesiastical functions … which are not specifically delegated to other assemblies” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 11 [2017 edition, p. 30]). Janssen writes that this section of the BCO, which was added in 1968, maintains the local character of the church, but

protects against a congregational polity that would grant to the local expression of the church too great an authority. The governance of the church remains close
to that place where the Word is preached and the sacraments performed, but it does not finally devolve to either the congregation or even its consistory (p. 112).

When a local church is dissolved, the order provides that remaining assets vest in the classis. This, too, is consistent with the understanding that the Church is something broader than the local congregation. Far from being independent, “... the congregation is itself a member of the larger church” (Janssen, p. 141). As such, “[a] congregation cannot dispose of its life as it sees fit” because it is part of the church (Janssen, p. 142).

Coming to the issue of a local church transferring to a different denomination, the understanding is and must remain no different. A local church is not an individual possessor of assets, free to do with them as it wishes. Rather, it is part of the broader Church, which reasonably has expectations for that local church. Independence is an anathema to our order and to our understanding of Church. We are, as Christ compels, unified as a body to conduct his work in the world (see, for example, John 17). This unity compels all we are and all we have, including the physical possessions of a congregation. Any attempt to remove consequences from a local church for its departure finds no support in our Constitution. What might be classified as “fees and penalties” by some can be seen by others as a classis ensuring it is able to do ministry. The best interest of “Christ’s Kingdom” is not always what’s best for the local church.

The overtures presuppose that a local church leaving without consequences is in best interest of Christ’s kingdom. Rather, the leaving has serious consequences for the classis, so it is appropriate to allow for the imposition of conditions so as to not unbalance the scales. The Church is the Church together, not individual congregations; they are (nearly) inextricably bound together. Our Constitution provides no way to allow a local church to leave as if it were independent. To make such a change would be to change the Constitution and thereby to fundamentally change the Reformed Church in America.

The CCO is not presenting a recommendation since it is not possible to “propose constitutionally appropriate amendments.”

**Discipline of a Classis**

The 2017 General Synod acted:

> 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 (*MGS 2017*, R 17-23, p. 147).

*What Is Discipline?*

Before moving on to any determination of the feasibility of discipline, the Commission on Church Order first found it necessary to determine what is meant by discipline in the *Book of Church Order*.

Two perspectives were identified:

1. Some RCA members take the category “discipline” to consist of charges (leading to admonition, rebuke, suspension, deposition from office, excommunication), complaints, and appeals (i.e., all *BCO* Chapter 2 is “discipline”).
2. Some RCA members take the category “discipline” to consist of admonition, rebuke, suspension, deposition from office, and excommunication, and take the category “judicial procedures” to consist of charges, complaints, and appeals.

Only the second perspective is consistent with the BCO. The BCO physically separates discipline from complaints and appeals. Charges are the judicial procedure that can lead to discipline. Complaints cannot lead to discipline. The BCO says, “Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 77]). Unless an assembly decides to use admonition or rebuke pastorally, discipline requires presenting a charge against a person or consistory. A member of a local church may have a charge brought against him or her by the board of elders. A charge can be brought against an elder or deacon by the board of elders. A commissioned pastor or a minister of Word and sacrament may be disciplined by the classis in which the person has membership. A General Synod professor may be disciplined by the General Synod. If a charge is proven to the satisfaction of the judicatory, discipline is imposed. In the case of a member, the discipline could include admonition or rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership, or excommunication. In the case of an elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, or minister of Word and sacrament, the discipline could also include suspension from office or commission, removal from commission, or deposition from office (See BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Articles 1-3 [2017 edition, pp. 77–80]).

The only assembly against which a charge can be brought is a consistory (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]; Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 1 [2017 edition, pp. 81–82]; and Formulary No. 13 [2017 edition, p. 139]). A consistory is “under the care of the classis and [is] subject to its government and discipline” (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7 [2017 edition, pp. 32–35]; and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29]). Notably, different conditions are imposed for the discipline of a consistory, underscoring the unusual nature of disciplining an assembly.

A classis has the authority, after trial, to suspend a consistory accused of unfaithfulness to duty, or of disobedience to the classis, or of violation of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or the laws and regulations of the church. …The classis shall fulfill the responsibilities of the consistory …so suspended until a new consistory has been legally constituted (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]).

This provision provides the only model for discipline of an assembly, and therefore is useful to consider the implications of discipline of a classis, the next higher assembly.

The instruction from the General Synod directs the CCO to explore the constitutionality of allowing for the discipline of a classis. The commission understands this instruction to mean exploring the possibility of amending the BCO by adding a new section called, “Discipline of a Classis” to the list in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, and addressing the ramifications of that addition throughout the rest of the BCO.

Historical and Theological Understandings of Discipline

In our Reformed polity, only at the local level is the Church most fully the Church, because the sacraments are administered and the Word is preached at the local church. Particularly, the uniqueness of baptism is foundational to the Church and Christian formation. But, this state of being Church must be expressed in fellowship and communion with other
churches. This is what the classis does. The classis, and the classis alone, fulfills the episcopal function and all that it entails (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7 [2017 edition, p. 32]). The classis is the assembly given authority for all matters on which the BCO is silent, underscoring the tension Reformed polity provides between local autonomy and concentrated authority in a bishop (Janssen, pp. 19–20). For example, a classis administers a constitutional inquiry annually (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 32]). The consistory must respond with an update on the congregation’s spiritual fitness. A classis can supersede a consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9 [2017 edition, p. 37]). The classis also has sole responsibility for ordaining and demitting ministers of Word and sacrament (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13 [2017 edition, p. 80] and BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15 [2017 edition, p. 52]). The classis is responsible for enforcing “the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29]). These examples demonstrate some of the ways a consistory is accountable to its classis for its ministry.

Classes are not accountable to synods (regional or general) in the same way that consistories are accountable to classes. For instance, synods do not administer a constitutional inquiry. Synods cannot supersede a classis. Synods have no oversight of ministers of Word and sacrament. Perhaps most notably, the synod is not charged with enforcing “the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America” (compare BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29] with BCO Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 61]). Synods exist for the good order of the church, but are not the heart of the church, which must remain more closely tied to where “the Word is preached and the sacraments performed” (Janssen, p. 112). The Preamble states, “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” (2017 edition, p. 3).

It is instructive to understand the historical background out of which our church order emerged. The RCA has inherited the church order tradition and ethos of the Hervormde Kerk, which undergird the current Constitution. After the Synod of Dort, each province of the low countries had its own provincial synod, which was the forbearer of the RCA’s regional synod. The churches in the provincial synods had their own cultures, their own liturgies, their own practices, and their own variations on the church order.

The Hervormde Kerk was made up of classes and provincial synods containing as wide a variety of church life, practice, and order as the variety of the towns, cities, and provinces themselves. It was a church whose ethos and identity strongly centered in the ethos and identity of the classes, and the church order reflected and supported that diversity. What they shared in common was a confession of faith, like what the RCA calls its Standards of Unity. When the Dutch church came to North America, the churches in the colonies were first members of the Classis of Amsterdam. Then in the eighteenth century, through nasty conflict, the Dutch church in North America formed the provincial (“particular”) synod of New York.

Church conflict in the Dutch Reformed tradition has, from the beginning, been about the degree to which the whole church needs to practice and believe the same things and to what degree the integrity of local and regional autonomy should be retained. So it is with us today. The CCO observes that this historic division is the issue driving the current discussion on the matter of classis-versus-classis discipline.

It is important to see that the historical DNA and heritage of the RCA has had from the beginning a basic, assumed bias toward local integrity over and against universal
conformity. Nearly all the episcopal authority needed to carry on as the church resides in the classis. The synods are gatherings of the classes. It is also important to see that the Dutch Reformed form of church conflict is, so to speak, written into the fabric of the church itself, both in its ethos and in its church order. The recurring form of church conflict in the history of the RCA’s church order is one that always finds its crisis point as a conflict over the integrity of the local and regional church versus the integrity of the whole church.

Never has this tradition, however, compromised the episcopal integrity of the classis. Those churches that did change the episcopal integrity of the classis split off to form their own denominations (e.g., the Christian Reformed Church in North America over the decision to allow local consistorial discretion regarding lodge membership).

R 17-23 instructed the CCO to consider whether there are constitutionally appropriate ways to discipline a classis and, furthermore, whether another classis could file a charge. However, neither the regional synod nor the General Synod has an episcopal role over the classis in the same way a classis has an episcopal role over a consistory/local congregation. For either synod to take on this responsibility infringes on the constitutional responsibilities, authority, and autonomy of the classis. It would be awkward at best and certainly alters the concept of Reformed polity. From a historical and theological perspective, this is why CCO states that the proposal R 17-23 seeks would end this church and begin another church.

Procedural Questions and Concerns

Although the commission could have stopped its inquiry given the weighty historical and theological issues with R 17-23, it thought best to also address the significant procedural problems. Thus, the portion of this paper addressing the feasibility of allowing a classis to initiate discipline against another classis addresses questions that are basic to any disciplinary procedure and that must be answered before a classis could be disciplined:

1. Who could bring a charge?
2. What would be the threshold for presenting a charge?
3. Which judicatory would conduct the trial?
4. What kinds of discipline could be imposed on a classis?
5. What conditions would allow for restoration?

Who Could Bring a Charge?

This question refers to the concept of “standing.” Is it constitutionally appropriate to grant standing in a judicatory to one classis against another classis? R 17-23 does not ask the CCO to consider the possibility of granting such standing to members of local churches, to members of other classes, or to anyone other than a classis.

“Standing” is a mechanism that protects a person or group from being accused by one who has nothing to lose or who has not been aggrieved or violated. Standing ensures a judicial matter includes only those who have been harmed. In this way, standing addresses relationship and furthers the purpose of discipline—restoration. It is important to note that discipline occurs in the context of a relationship—e.g., a member with the board of elders; an elder or deacon with the board of elders; a minister with that minister’s classis; a commissioned pastor with that commissioned pastor’s classis as well as board of elders; a consistory with its classis. In other words, relationship is paramount in discipline, and standing confirms relationship.

The BCO provides this guidance regarding standing: “A charge may be brought by an
individual who is subject to the jurisdiction of the responsible judicatory” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 80]). Also, Explanatory Note 11 furthers this understanding; it reads as follows:

A person not subject to the discipline of the judicatory may bring an accusation to the responsible judicatory. The accusation must meet the requirements set forth for a charge in Section 1 of this article. The judicatory forwards the accusation to the appropriate committee of the judicatory that will assess the accusation as outlined in Section 4 of this article. The committee will determine whether the accusation is of sufficient merit to become a charge. The committee shall, in turn, introduce the charge and move it forward. The factual foundation for the charge(s) must be the same whether the charge(s) is brought by an individual or by a committee of the judicatory (BCO, Explanatory Notes on Chapter 2, The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures [2017 edition, pp. 96–97. Emphasis original.]).

Every resolution of a charge must include a decision about whether the accuser has standing—that is, has relationship. If the reason for initiating discipline is driven primarily by issue rather than relationship, the outcome of discipline will miss the intended purpose of discipline, which is restoration (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Sections 2 and 3 [2017 edition, p. 80]; see also Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 87] and Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 91] for rules about standing).

What Would Be the Threshold for Presenting a Charge?

If a classis were permitted to file a charge against another classis, how would the originating classis act on this urge? Such action is a very serious matter and raises many questions, such as:

- Does the recommendation to file a charge require a simple majority approval or a two-thirds super-majority approval of the classis’s members and delegates? Such an action would be extraordinary. It makes sense that it takes an extraordinary action to begin the process.
- Can the action be taken at a special session of the classis or must the motion be considered only at a stated session? The quorum for a special session is three elder delegates and three ministers. That number is significantly less than the 50 percent plus 1 requirement for a stated session.
- Is a “checks and balances” system needed as an intervening process that would require that a “Matthew 18” step of intentional, restorative discussion happen before a charge can be filed?
- Should a classis be required to submit a filing fee to cover the cost of the action when a classis is seeking to have a matter processed in the church judicatories? The judicial process can be very expensive, with travel for hearings and stenography work. Requiring a filing fee demonstrates the intent of a classis rather than the convenience of using the system that others need to fund. The judicial process within the RCA occurs at great cost to the greater church because of the rightful tediousness of the process, the time it takes for the judicatory to assemble, the important discernment of the judicatory, and by the significant stress to the body of Christ.

Which Judicatory Would Conduct the Trial?

In what judicatory would a classis be given standing if classis-to-classis discipline were part of our government? A regional synod doesn’t have episcopal authority and lacks
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the authority to enforce the requirements of the Government of the RCA. Nowhere in Chapter 2, Part I is a regional synod the original judicatory in which a charge is brought. The regional synod is rightfully limited to an appellate role, which reviews the procedure employed by a classis in its role as a judicatory. In the appellate role, the regional synod does not re-litigate the case. Its role is limited to review of the process that led to the decision to determine whether the judicatory followed the proper procedure and whether the decision was just (see BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 91]).

Even if the RCA were to become more episcopal in its structure, and a classis would present a charge, to which regional synod would the case be addressed? For example, if a classis in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics sought to charge, for example, the Wisconsin Classis for a violation of the Constitution, would the charging classis file the charge with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics or the Regional Synod of Mid-America? If it would be filed with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, why should the Wisconsin Classis respond to a synod that lacks any supervisory authority over it? Would the Wisconsin Classis get extradited to New Jersey to stand trial? Likewise, why would the charging classis have the right to demand the Regional Synod of Mid-America begin trial proceedings and hear the charge? Again, the issue of “standing” and relationship arises. The crossing of regional synod boundaries seems inappropriate because of a clear lack of standing. But still, even more basic is the missing element of episcopal relationship in the composition of the regional synod.

Is there standing for a classis within the same regional synod to file a charge against another classis in the same synod? Admittedly, there is a relationship, but this does not eliminate the procedural issues. For example, the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is composed of four classes. If one classis files a charge against another classis in that synod, both are recused for the judicial proceeding. This recusal would leave the other two classes to take the responsibility of the investigation and trial proceedings. The mission of the synod would be lost to this turmoil of litigation. It must be stated again: even more basic is the missing element of episcopal relationship in the structure of the regional synod.

What Kinds of Discipline Could Be Imposed on a Classis?

To answer this question, it is appropriate to look at the only assembly our current rules permit to be disciplined—a consistory. A consistory may be suspended and its members disqualified from re-election until disqualification is removed by classis. Further, Explanatory Note 8 says: “The classis has authority only to suspend a consistory and not to depose a consistory since a ‘consistory’ is not an office” (2017 edition, p. 96). This note indicates the limitations for disciplining a consistory, and the same idea would likely apply to discipline of a classis.

The CCO presumes one of the assumptions underlying this overture was a desire to change the action of the classis, which would require suspension of the classis. This is so because other forms of discipline (e.g., admonishment and rebuke) only reflect dissatisfaction with the action taken by that classis. What would it mean to suspend a classis? Is that feasible? If a classis were suspended, is the regional synod equipped to take over the vast responsibilities of the classis during suspension? What would be the status of suspended ministers? What would a suspended elder delegate be? These practical considerations alone suggested bringing a charge against a classis is unwise. Indeed, the term “suspended classis” is a contradiction of terms. A classis is an assembly composed of enrolled ministers—who are members by virtue of their ordination—and elder delegates. If it were suspended, there is no classis. This same logic applies to a local church. That body can’t be suspended. It either exists or it doesn’t exist.
There does not seem to be any other action a judicatory could take when disciplining a classis against whom a charge has been sustained. With a consistory, other church members can be elected to replace the disqualified elders and deacons. No such people exist on the classical level. One is a member of a consistory because of election wherein one is then ordained to office. One is a member of a classis because one has been ordained to office. Membership in classis isn’t an elected position where someone else can fill the void that would be created in the event of suspension.

**What Conditions Would Allow for Restoration?**

The stated purpose of church discipline is “to promote [the church’s] purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 77]). The intention of discipline is repentance, not punishment (see Janssen, p. 298). Attempting to promote restoration gives rise to many questions, such as: What conditions allow for restoration? How, and to whom, would a classis report its repentance? How would a classis meet to take any action toward repentance? Special session, quorum, and majority voting rules enter in this discussion. However, one major factor overrides these questions: A suspended classis doesn’t exist, so how could it “do” anything?

If a classis were suspended, how would a classis meeting be called in order to begin the restoration process? The suspended members would not have the privilege of vote to act to communicate its repentance. A suspended classis is a nonexistent classis. Wouldn’t the suspension of a classis result in the deposition of the officers of the classis (e.g., president, vice president)? How then is a president to call a classis session into meeting? Even if a regional synod sought to call a suspended classis to order, who would come? Suspended members do not have voice or vote. As discussed earlier, discipline is an action that addresses matters of relationship. The purpose of discipline is to right a relationship and care for a person. To use discipline simply to enforce a particular view or preference regarding an issue eviscerates not only the discipline process but also the pattern and conditions for restoration.

**Summary**

On practical, theological, and historic grounds, CCO is convinced that inventing a way to discipline a classis is unnecessary, unwise, undesirable, and most importantly, unconstitutional.

The changes implied in R 17-23 would change the 400-year-old DNA of the RCA by changing the relationship between classes and altering the basic structure of jurisdictional bounds of classes. It is not that it cannot be done, of course, but it should not be done without conducting a rigorous, legitimizing investigation into the magnitude of the change proposed. The impact of the R 17-23 proposal is not merely a pragmatic nor procedural change. It would be a change to the Constitution of the church. Implementing the changes sought by R 17-23 would not strengthen the RCA as a church. It would make the RCA another church—an unrecognizably different church than it has been for more than 400 years. A structure that would allow the filing of charges across classes’ boundaries is indeed fundamental in the historic life of the RCA. Changing the jurisdictional integrity of classes would be the end of this Reformed Church in America.

Former RCA general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson addressed the 2014 General Synod on the matter of seeking cross-classis discipline, which was an issue at that synod. He said,
The nearly 400 years of history in the Reformed Church in America has seen us deal with the most severe conflicts: between the conferentie and the coetus, where there was physical fighting over pulpits. Around the question of slavery, where some preached in favor of slavery and others preached against. Around the question of women’s ordination, more recently. And for all this time we have learned the priority of how our witness is strengthened when we stay together. One of the features that has enabled us to do this is our polity. It is a gift that allows us to deal with diversity while maintaining the unity of the Spirit and the priority of our witness. This overture does two things. It destroys that tradition of polity, and it opens the opportunity for further division. Denomination after denomination is seeing the ill fruits of that division. We have a chance to make a different witness.

(https://vimeo.com/album/2958581/video/101295442, 1:00:52 mark; see the 2014 Minutes of General Synod, pp. 136–138, for the context in which these remarks were shared.)

If No Change Is Made, What Actions Can a Classis Take?

Our present church order permits any classis to act in the form of discipline through admonition and rebuke, including addressing another classis. “Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 77]). In other words, a classis can send a communication to another classis that the action or inaction of the classis is not affirmed by the sender of the communication. Such an action does not require a judicatory and avoids the myriad constitutional questions of standing, governance, and procedure.

This form of communication is not new. In historic minutes of classes, a term for communication between classes in which actions like “admonition and rebuke” may be exercised is observed. The minutes called such communication “fraternal letters,” and exchanges of letters happened commonly. Different classes within the RCA exchanged different opinions and expressed their convictions of right and wrong with and to one another. The term “fraternal letter” is no longer a proper phrase in our time. However, the word “fraternal” recognized that the two classes were connected at a deeper, familial level. “Fraternal” communicated respect and equality from the sender for the recipient. The letters reminded all that “we are the church together.”

In conclusion, the Commission on Church Order finds it is not constitutionally appropriate “to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline initiated by another classis and/or classes,” and therefore makes no recommendation to the General Synod for amendments to the BCO in response to R 17-23.

Commissioned Pastors: Tensions around the Title; Possible New Designation

The 2017 General Synod acted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to investigate the tensions around the title of commissioned pastor, and, if appropriate, to present a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” for presentation to General Synod 2018 (MGS 2017, R 17-47, p. 275).
The Commission on Church Order met in a joint session with the Commission on Theology (COT) and the Commission on History (COH) to discuss the tensions of the title “commissioned pastor” in October 2017. Specifically, there is ongoing confusion due to the title disparity of using “commissioned pastor” to describe someone who is an “ordained elder.” The BCO defines a commissioned pastor as “an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 58]).

**Tensions Identified**

First, there is a tension around the word “pastor.” Though a commissioned pastor is an ordained elder, the word “pastor” is often a synonym for “minister.” Additionally, “pastor” is used to identify a role, which may be held by a non-ordained person, such as a “youth pastor.” This tension is exacerbated because, by definition, commissioned pastors perform substantively similar functions as an ordained minister. For more on the history, role, and understanding of commissioned pastors in relation to office, the commission recommends the COT’s paper “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” (MGS 2017, pp. 314–317), CCO’s paper “The Commissioned Pastor in the Reformed Church in America” (MGS 2017, pp. 249–252), and COH’s paper, “Commissioned Pastors in the Reformed Church in America: A Historical and Contextual Survey” (MGS 2015, pp. 197–203).

Another significant tension is training. While a commissioned pastor is “trained,” the BCO specifies that the classis “approve and supervise a training plan for that person” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 58]). As a result, the training that commissioned pastors receive varies, sometimes significantly, from classis to classis and may not properly prepare them for the duties of their commission. Additional tension is created because others feel the education provided and/or the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process, either through RCA seminaries or the MFCA, is deficient and not to be trusted.

Finally, other tensions identified include a misconception that there is a shortage of ministers in the RCA and a lack of parity in compensation of ministers and commissioned pastors (see the COH’s paper “Ministerial Supply, 1900–2010: A Historical Perspective” in MGS 2017, pp. 286–297). For example, the provisions in Formulary 5 require consistories to provide certain medical and retirement benefits for ministers of Word and sacrament but not for commissioned pastors who may be performing in a substantively similar capacity.

**Possible Ways to Resolve the Tensions**

The commission spent considerable time discussing alternative designations in place of either “commissioned” or “pastor.”

- “Pastor” could be changed to “elder.” While this change would align with our understanding of office, it would not clarify the confusion around function, and in some cases could be seen as a detrimental demotion in contexts where a commissioned pastor is looked to as a pastor by members of the congregation.
- “Commissioned,” “licensed,” and “ordained” are three options with existing meaning and significance in ecclesial and legal settings. “Licensed” and “ordained” already have meaning in our order; thus, using them here would cause confusion. Removing “commissioned” or using an alternate word in its
place merely introduces a new set of problems in place of any it may solve.

- An inquiry to other denominations provided similar combinations of the aforementioned designations. The title “commissioned pastor” does share commonality with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA); however, in the CRCNA, commissioned pastor specifically is an office.

A different possible path to resolve some of the tension would be to better define and standardize the training provided to commissioned pastor candidates or to provide a more consistent route for commissioned pastors to become ministers of Word and sacrament.

Another possible resolution, admittedly a drastic one, would be to eliminate the commissioned pastor altogether. The title, while contributing to the tension, may not be its main source. This possibility recognizes that there are underlying concerns regarding commissioned pastors, but these tensions lie outside of the commission’s scope of resolving the title. Furthermore, it seems unwise for this commission to pursue such action given that the 2017 all-synod advisory committees largely affirmed the “work, service, and impact of commissioned pastors in the life of the church” (see “Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team” in MGS 2017, pp. 273–282).

**Conclusion**

“Commissioned pastor” is simply a title. The commission could not identify an alternate designation that would likely solve the underlying tensions or broadly improve the understanding of the good and important work that commissioned pastors do. Substantive changes may be the only way to reduce the underlying tensions. The commission is hopeful that the amendments to the BCO adopted as R 17-41 by the 2017 General Synod, if approved by the classes and declared effective by the 2018 General Synod, will clarify the role of commissioned pastors in the life of the Church. Accordingly, the commission does not find a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” to be helpful in reducing or eliminating the identified tensions, and therefore is not presenting a recommendation regarding the title.

**Election of Moderator and Secretary; Appointment of Corresponding Delegate to 2018 General Synod**

The commission elected Philip De Koster to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2018. The commission appointed Larry Schuyler to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2018 General Synod.

Respectfully submitted,
Larry Schuyler, moderator

The following motion was made and supported:

To instruct the CCO to fulfill their previous instruction from GS 2017 regarding Classis Divestiture of Interest in Property of Local Church Granted Leave to Withdraw from the Denomination for the Purpose of Affiliating with Another Denomination.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the motion.
Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” (MGS 2003, R-41, p. 159) and further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5 [2017 edition, pp. 111–112]). This is our fifty-second report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history:

- The transformation begun 20 years ago when we installed the first woman professor of theology,
- The transformation begun 25 years ago when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president,
- The transformation begun 30 years ago when we ordained the first woman of color,
- The transformation begun 40 years ago when we expanded our polity’s definition of “persons,”
- The transformation begun and continued 50 years ago when we renewed our liturgies,
- The transformation begun a century ago when Ida Scudder opened Vellore Woman’s Medical College,
- The transformation begun 135 years ago when the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions established The Mission Gleaner to “keep the women of the Church at home informed of the progress of the work on the field,”
- The transformation begun 170 years ago when a group of immigrant churches in western Michigan formed a classis,
- The transformation begun 205 years ago when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since then, and
- The transformation begun 390 years ago when Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America—a multiethnic, multilingual congregation open to everyone.

Countless other transformations have occurred both before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God’s faithfulness and allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective that is not just a historical perspective but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.
To do this work, the commission met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 12–13, 2017 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council), and in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 12, 2018, as well as communicating regularly via email.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America is celebrating the half-century mark this year. The first half of this year should see the publication of four new volumes:

- **A Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 1848–1876: A detailed record of the Persons and Issues, Civil and Religious, in the Dutch Colony of Holland, Michigan** by Earl Wm. Kennedy;
- **In Peril on the Sea: The Forgotten Story of the William & Mary Shipwreck** by Kenneth A. Schaaf;
- **A Constant State of Emergency: Paul DeKruif, Microbe Hunter and Health Activist** by Jan Peter Verhave; and
- **Timothy Christian Schools** by Robert Swierenga.

Several books are also in process toward publication, including *An Enduring Hope: A Sesquicentennial History of Hope College*, edited by Jacob Nyenhuis; *Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York* by Francis Sypher; a revised edition of *Constitutional Theology* by Allan Janssen; *Another Look at the Canons of Dort* by Eugene Heideman; and a supplement to the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America* by Russell Gasero. Beyond these projects that have been approved by the commission, your commission is looking forward to a story about John Otte, medical missionary to China, by Linda Walvoord DeVelder; a look at some of the correspondence of Horace Underwood by James Jinhong Kim (our first potential book on the mission to Korea that started at New Brunswick Theological Seminary); and a story about the Global Grace Café at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, by Elizabeth Estes.

This fiftieth year has been a time of transition for the Historical Series. The world of publishing has changed dramatically since this project began, and it continues to change. At the end of December, the Historical Series staff found out that William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, our publisher since the beginning, was downsizing, changing the nature of its operations, and would no longer be carrying “consignment” publications such as the Historical Series. In January, books from the Series that were housed in Eerdmans’ warehouse were moved into the RCA Archives’ underground storage in Grand Rapids, along with books moved out of the basement of Western Seminary’s library due to their current construction project. In February, your commission received, with thanksgiving to God for his service, Donald Bruggink’s letter of intent to retire as general editor of the Historical Series.

**H 18-1**

That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:

WHEREAS the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America published its first volume, *Ecumenism in the Reformed Church*, in 1968, and has since published 97 other volumes to help both the church and the academy engage the story of our history and mission, and
WHEREAS the resources and expertise of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company were vital to the early success and growth of the Series, and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Donald J. Bruggink has faithfully stewarded the growth of this Series and its revolving fund since its inception, and

WHEREAS both Dr. Bruggink and Eerdmans Publishing are now retiring from a half-century of voluntary labors,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the 7th through 12th days of June, 2018, hereby offers thanksgiving to God for Donald J. Bruggink and the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, and lifts up heartfelt prayers for this ministry they have nurtured and their future endeavors; and further,

That the synod rise, in body or spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving. (ADOPTED)

Donald Bruggink was named general editor emeritus by your commission. There will be a time of celebration at this synod for everyone to thank him and representatives from Eerdmans and to celebrate the launch of this work into the next 50 years.

The Commission on History has been keenly aware of the importance of this time of transition and has taken steps to insure the continued growth and success of the Historical Series. Already in October, before news of the change in our relationship with Eerdmans, this commission had been discussing a strategic plan to move forward in what was sure to be a time of change. Working with the RCA Archives and Communication and Production Services, this commission has approved a plan that will continue the series under Reformed Church Press and will allow us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon and Patreon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and soon-to-be past moderator of this commission, has been serving as associate general editor and will take up the responsibilities of general editor of the Historical Series on July 1. Andrew Klumpp, currently a Ph.D. candidate at Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University and a member of the commission, has been appointed associate general editor. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church in New York and an adjunct faculty member at Western Theological Seminary, continues as editor of the Congregational History Series.

Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with the RCA archivist, Russell Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee (formed of commission members) and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the Archives. He serves as production editor for the Historical Series and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries. This past year, the assistance of the Archives has been invaluable during work with the Commission for Women and the General Synod Council to plan a time of celebration and thanksgiving for the gifts and ministries of women in the Reformed Church at this synod.
This coming November marks the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the great Synod of Dordt (in the spirit of ecumenism, the Christian Reformed Church spelling has been adopted). Your commission has been working with the Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and representatives from New Brunswick, Western, and Calvin seminaries on an observance of this anniversary, which should come as a series of lectures and programs at all three schools during the 2018–2019 academic year—the synod ended in May of 1619. This continues the cooperative work with the CRC that was begun with select volumes in the Historical Series; Timothy Christian Schools will be another CRC-related story in the series.

In addition to many other anniversaries, this year marks 40 years since the RCA first hired a professional archivist to look after the denomination’s collection. His offices are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the Archives be not just a Dutch-American history resource but a well of information for all of the cultural expressions that now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, archivist Russell Gasero and the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management. With more than 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October of 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing needs of the Archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the trustees of NBTS pledged an annual grant of up to $10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC), for each of ten years to expand the work of the archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its new president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. In just two years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, and video and audio tapes.
- Staff has been added to aid in the digitization projects.
- With new staff and equipment, documents from the Amsterdam Correspondence—some of the earliest records of the RCA—have been scanned for a major retranslation project; records from the Regional Synod of Canada, recently moved to New Brunswick, have been digitized so that they may be kept in long-term storage, relieving space issues—more than 80 boxes of material were processed within two months; and a pilot project has begun to provide low-cost digitization of significant records to local congregations.
- Some of the costs of transferring records to underground storage have been underwritten.
- New displays in Sage Library have enhanced programs for both NBTS and the denomination and have helped publicize the Historical Series.

All of this has helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history
more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Development Office and the Archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the Historical Series Revolving Fund and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of NBTS. While there are virtues in thrift, however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

Deliberate, Wise Transformations

Part of this commission’s meeting time this year was spent discussing a proposal to have all commission reports at General Synod be done in a two- to three-minute video format unless there are recommendations being made to the synod. While the Commission on History recognizes the need for change and innovation, it has also raised several concerns.

- Producing brief video reports requires time, and there has been no offer to increase commission budgets to allow for extra meeting time.
- Between 200 and 400 person hours go into the work that produces the typical Commission on History report; can that be adequately represented in a short video?
- While the intent is to have every delegate read and comprehend all the reports before arriving at General Synod, we must all remember—especially as we approach a Dordt anniversary—that RCA members believe in total depravity. At least some delegates won’t do this.
- If some reports—those with recommendations—are presented orally, while others are presented on video, it could appear that some commissions are more important than others.
- Synods have, historically, been understood to be deliberative assemblies where office-bearers walking together have wrestled with issues, spent time in discussion and prayer together, and sought to discern God’s will. Video presentations often dampen discussion and deliberation, fundamentally changing the work of the synod.

Your commission recognizes that change is also a key element of history—these stories are stories of transformation. Certainly there is a way to incorporate the best possibilities of video presentation with the character and strengths of what the synod is formed and called to be. Just as there was discussion among commission moderators over the past several months, the Commission on History looks forward to meaningful conversation among the commissions and the GSC in the months ahead.

Being Informed by Past Transformations

As General Synods continue to struggle with issues of gender identity and sexuality in the life of the RCA, the debate and discernment continues to touch on different areas of our self-understanding. At the 2017 General Synod, delegates entered into discussions that touch on how the RCA looks at the Standards and their place in the Forms of Declaration and the role of ecumenism in the life of the RCA. As such discussions are likely to continue into this and future synods, your commission offers the following two papers to the synod and the church.
Since the 2017 General Synod passed R 17-29—“To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states [sic] 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”—there have been concerns expressed about what this means for ministers and General Synod professors. Bearers of these two offices, as well as licensed candidates for ministry under care of classes, are unique in the RCA for being required to subscribe to a Form of Declaration that states: “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.”

The primary question seems to be whether, given this wording of the forms, the interpretation affirmed by the 2017 Synod can be used to discipline candidates, ministers, and General Synod professors. What exactly is meant by “historic and faithful” in the Forms of Declaration? A brief historic examination of this wording and its use by the Reformed Church in America seems to be in order.

The phrase “historic and faithful” has only been part of the declarations since 1972. The change came in response to overtures from the classes of Queens and Bergen, which expressed concerns over the forms and what they said about the place of sixteenth-century doctrinal statements in a late-twentieth-century context. Queens Classis stated its reasoning as follows:

Christianity is an [sic] historical religion, rooted in the long history of God’s mighty acts, culminating in His mightiest act in Christ Jesus, and we affirm with joy the part the Reformed Church has played in the long history of God’s dealing with His people.

However, as God’s covenant people we are a pilgrim people, called as was Abram to go from our father’s house to a land that God will show us, confident that when we arrive, God will be there ahead of us.

This requirement that we be a pilgrim people means that we be open always to the activity of the Holy Spirit as He may require us to re-think and re-state our theological position, and we must therefore hold with honor, but hold with open minds, the theological statements which served our fathers so well 400 years ago, ready if the Spirit requires, to re-state these pronouncements. We do not reject our history but rather affirm our openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our own day.

The Classis of Bergen took a somewhat different reasoning:

1. The Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the Form of Declaration for Ministers and the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology all contain statements which imply that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America are equated with the Word of God. Statements include “We believe the gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as truly set forth in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America,” (the Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates and the Form of Declaration for Ministers) and
“We believe that these Standards agree with the Word of God ...” (the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology). While some might place the Standards on the same level as the Scriptures, it is not right to force a person who believes that the Scriptures are the normative witness to the Word of God to assent to this statement.

2. What may have been a witness to the Word of God in one particular historical setting may not be a witness to the Word of God in a new historical setting. For example: in order to combat the abuse made of the use of images in the churches, the Heidelberg Catechism poses the following question and gives the following answer: “But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity? (question 98) Answer—No ...” Because of a particular political situation, the Belgic Confession of Faith makes the following statement in regard to church-state relations: “and their (magistrates) office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.” (Article XXXVI) The entirety of the Canons of the Synod of Dort is based upon a philosophical presupposition of Determinism which led to such statements as “… Some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves ...” (Article XV) Are such statements still a witness to the Word of God in today’s life-situation?

3. While we should acknowledge that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America did speak to a certain group of people at a certain time in a particular historical setting, we do not have to hold that they speak to men today in the same way. If statements in the Declarations prove to be stumbling blocks to brethren who cannot assent to them because of conscience and the Word of God, these stumbling blocks must be removed! The matter was referred to the Commission on Theology, whose report to the 1971 General Synod did a masterful job of exploring the historical understanding of the place of the Standards in the life of the church.

The Purpose of Standards: The Reformed Church is an evangelical confessional church in the historic sense. This means that we are one of those branches of Protestantism which has distinguished itself from the Roman Church (and from some other Protestant bodies) by subscribing to an evangelical statement (or statements) of faith as the basis for our unity. The intent of such standards of unity has varied greatly among the confessional churches and in our own tradition as well. Subscription to a standard may be understood as a witness of that body to its understanding of the faith without any controversial or polemical intent. In the time of the Reformation and the century following, however, such standards were nearly always intended as a means of distinguishing the body which accepted them from other Christian bodies which held other viewpoints. As such, these standards were also symbols of disunity within the Body of Christ, professing to distinguish the true church from the false church.

This polemical intent inevitably led to a second purpose and use of standards: discipline. Since they were understood to embody the right doctrine (orthodoxy), they could also be used to distinguish heresy and consequently become the basis...
for excluding from the body those who did not conform. The history of the Reformed Churches reveals numerous such uses and some still favor such use today.

The main stream of Reformed tradition, however, has not understood the standards in this way. We have not claimed an exclusive corner on the truth. We have not viewed those outside our tradition as apostate, but considered other traditions as viable expressions of the Faith and other communions as fellow members of the Body of Christ. We have tended to look upon our standards as faithful witnesses to the Word of God to which we give our hearty consent, without making them binding upon our consciences as of divine authority.

**Relationship to Scripture:** The above leads naturally to a consideration of the relationship between the standards and the Scriptures. We hardly need to remind ourselves that the battle cry of the Reformation was *sola Scriptura!* (Scripture only) In reaction to the encroachments of Roman tradition upon the Christian conscience, the reformers took their stand upon Scripture as the sole authority—the rule (measuring stick) of faith and life. We still give loud assent to this principle today as the *raison d’être* of the churches of the Reformation. Yet in the heat of battle in the centuries following the Reformation, Protestants found themselves invoking their standards in as final a way as any Romanist and with an authority which equalled or even surpassed that of the Scriptures.

Thus we see an ambivalence in our own tradition. On the one hand, we affirm the supreme and sole authority of Scripture. On the other hand, we have at times made the standards equally binding upon the Christian conscience. This ambivalence is enshrined in the Government of the R.C.A. … This still does not answer the basic question, however: What is the proper place of the standards in the life of the church? How do they unite us with one another and separate us from other Christians?²⁶

The commission went on to argue that the extreme positions—either that the Standards were irrelevant historical curiosities or that they were the final determination of orthodoxy for all time—must be rejected and advocated for a middle way based on the following principles:

1. **The Standards must always be subordinate and subservient to Scripture.** “Scripture alone can be the measure of our faith and life as Christians. … This means no statement of faith, however faithful to the Scriptures, can be placed on a par with the Word of God.”
2. **The Standards are historical documents.** “As such, they are the products of their times and the circumstances which produced them … we must take note that the century which produced them was different from our time in some significant ways. … We are called upon to bear the good news in contexts that would be utterly foreign to the 17th century Christian.”
3. **A Standard must have usefulness in the church.** “It must be an effective teaching aid within the church, and an effective witness to the world of the meaning of the Christian faith in our day.”

The commission concluded—and the synod affirmed by accepting their report and the recommendation to add the “historic and faithful” clause to the Forms of Declaration—that the Standards were faithful to Scripture as witnesses to the Word of God, but that they were “three among many witnesses to the faith … understood as defining what is the
Reformed tradition and what our fathers understood to be a faithful statement …” and that they are “limited in their applicability to our day by the difference between the historical circumstances in which they arose and those in which we live.”

The understanding that led to calling our Standards “historic and faithful witnesses” clearly includes the idea that we cannot expect them to comprehend or respond to modern scientific and/or sociological situations. We also cannot bind those who read and sign the forms to be binding themselves to some strict adherence to sixteenth-century—or even late twentieth-century—concepts of sociology, science, or even theology. Nor are they meant to be disciplinary tools. Ministers, professors, and candidates are promising to engage the Standards—acknowledging their limitations—as they wrestle with the Scriptures, listening for the Word of God.

H 18-2
To commend the paper “‘Historic and Faithful Witnesses’: Reflecting on the Standards and How They Have Been Used in the Forms of Declaration and the Church” to all ministers of Word and sacrament, General Synod professors, and licensed candidates for ministry, as well as all classis committees charged with the care and supervision of candidates and ministers. (ADOPTED)

ECUMENISM IN THE RCA

Four centuries ago, the Synod of Dort gathered in an attempt to extinguish the smoldering theological debate between Arminian Remonstrants and orthodox Calvinists, and in doing so, they welcomed ecumenical delegations from throughout Protestant Europe. At this pivotal moment in the development of both the theology and polity of the Dutch Reformed Church, representatives from the Church of England as well as churches in the Palatinate, Hesse, Switzerland, Geneva, Bremen, Emden, and France took part in the process of theological discernment. Even in its nativity, the Dutch Reformed Church did not go it alone.

In the 400 years that have passed since the Synod of Dort, the Dutch Church and specifically its daughter church, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), has continued to wrestle with how to embrace calls for Christian unity, doctrinal purity, and denominational uniqueness. This paper provides an overview of the RCA’s long history of ecumenical engagement and its efforts to balance an inclination toward ecumenical collaboration with a bent toward denominational independence.

Ecumenism during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The history of the RCA’s ecumenical engagement begins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the colonial churches often focused their energies on survival, especially after the British conquest of New Amsterdam in 1664, they also entertained calls to unify with other Reformed churches in the British colonies in North America. In fact, the Dutch churches nearly united with their Scottish Presbyterian and German Reformed counterparts in 1743 but were stymied by an inability to resolve the language differences between the three communions.

At the same time, firebrand Theodorus Frelinghuysen exhibited an ecumenical disposition when he crossed denominational lines to partner with Presbyterian preachers like the revivalist Tennent family. Despite dust-ups with his congregation and the Classis of Amsterdam, Frelinghuysen’s flair eventually caught on with his Presbyterian neighbors and would go on to influence the most well-known evangelist of the Great Awakening,
Calvinist Methodist George Whitefield. While not solely responsible for this intercolonial and interdenominational religious awakening, Frelinghuysen’s ecumenical ministry encouraged local collaboration and fostered a burst in evangelism.

After the American Revolution, the RCA successfully separated itself from the church in the Netherlands, yet even as it began to exercise its independence, the church entered into new ecumenical partnerships. During the period of the early republic, this was most evident in the church’s missionary efforts. For example, in 1796, less than a decade after severing ties with the Reformed church in the Netherlands, the RCA lent its support to the New York Missionary Society. This early missionary society focused on ministry to the Native Americans, and John Livingston—the father of the RCA—even served the organization as one of its earliest officers.

The New York Missionary Society marked the beginning of the RCA’s engagement with ecumenical missionary efforts. In 1810, the RCA partnered with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which operated as an ecumenical missionary organization during the first half of the nineteenth century. Influential and pioneering Dutch Reformed missionary John Scudder stands out as just one example of some of the prominent RCA missionaries who received their initial support from the ABCFM. Despite its engagement with the ABCFM, in 1832, the RCA founded its own Board of Foreign Missions, which initially worked in conjunction with the ABCFM before ending the partnership in 1857.

Regardless of the RCA's disassociation with the ABCFM, seven years later the denomination was heralded for its “pioneering leadership in missionary ecumenism.” This was largely due to the efforts of a host of RCA missionaries who worked in tandem with other Protestant missionaries throughout the globe, particularly in China, India, and the Middle East.

The ecumenical mission in Amoy, China, offers an illuminating example of the ecumenical nature of the RCA’s robust missionary apparatus. Throughout the 1850s, a fruitful partnership existed between missionaries from the RCA and English Presbyterian missionaries in Amoy. An organic union grew between these two missionary groups, and together they founded a small network of Chinese churches. The biggest conflict that arose for the mission in its early years came about due to pressures from the General Synod to tamp down the ecumenical nature of the mission and force sole affiliation with the RCA. A heated scuffle lasted from 1857 to 1863. The missionaries resisted, but the General Synod was insistent. Eventually, after threatening to resign, the missionaries won the day, and the General Synod adopted a more cooperative posture toward ecumenical missions.

While the hullabaloo about the Amoy mission presents a striking example of the tensions that came along with ecumenical mission work, its ecumenical character was not unique. In 1872, the RCA’s Japanese mission followed Amoy’s example and united with the English Presbyterians. Similarly, nineteenth-century missionary work in India, led by the Scudder family, and in the Middle East, led by men like Samuel Zwemer, nurtured ecumenical partnerships. In the twentieth century, the RCA’s missionary work in Africa would exhibit the same ecumenical impulses.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the RCA’s most prominent and successful ecumenical endeavors centered on its commitment to missionary activity. Through both institutional affiliations with groups like the ABCFM and also local, ecumenical collaboration between individuals, ecumenism in the RCA became associated with spreading the gospel and an extensive missionary network.
Twentieth-Century Institutional Affiliations

Throughout the twentieth century, the RCA explored membership in a number of larger ecumenical bodies, and these conversations incited a bevy of debate and disagreement within the denomination. The earliest—and least controversial—of these broader church affiliations brought together various Reformed churches throughout the world. Founded as the Reformed Churches throughout the World holding a Presbyterian System in 1875, the group now known as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) functioned as a space for theological discussion and fellowship. The RCA joined this communion as a founding member and has continued to engage in this forum for global Reformed theological discussion.

The RCA's membership in other national and global associations proved to be far more contentious than its participation in the WCRC. For instance, in 1908, the RCA became a founding member of the Federal Council of Churches, which would become the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1950. Similarly, the RCA was also a charter member of the World Council of Churches, which was established in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II. Both groups brought together diverse communions not only for theological discussion but also for cooperative action through relief efforts, publications, and other joint endeavors.

Despite initial enthusiasm about these ecumenical bodies, opposition to the RCA's membership in both of these bodies arose shortly after the denomination joined them. The first objections arose in 1930. Since then, fears about the formation of a unified church or significant doctrinal differences have flared intermittently and led to attempts to withdraw the RCA from both bodies. In fact, the General Synod of 1969 saw the denomination nearly withdraw from the NCC, and similar debates took place throughout the 1980s. Nevertheless, the RCA remains a member of both of these larger organizations.

While the RCA embraced the ecumenical efforts of the NCC and WCC, it stalwartly resisted joining the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which arose in the mid-twentieth century in order to explore the possibility of union between a diverse group of denominations, ranging from Presbyterians to Methodists and Congregationalists. The RCA never became an official member of this organization but did maintain observer status. It ultimately rejected participation due to suspicions about the organization's aims and a firm commitment to the uniqueness of the Dutch Reformed tradition.

At the close of the twentieth century, rather than pursue organic union between denominations, the RCA, along with many other denominations, worked to recognize full communion between distinct denominations. In particular, at the behest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the RCA explored the possibility of greater cooperation between Reformed and Lutheran churches in the United States. These efforts led to the Formula of Agreement, which was signed by members of the RCA, Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) with the ELCA in 1998. This agreement accomplished two primary goals. First, it rescinded four centuries of anathemas that had existed between Reformed and Lutheran communions, dating back to the Reformation era. Second, it acknowledged mutual recognition of sacraments and ministers between each of these four denominations. This has led to the opportunity for Lutheran and Reformed ministers to serve in one another's churches, a development that was paralleled with the unification of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Netherlands into The Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

Much like other ecumenical efforts throughout the twentieth century, the Formula of
Agreement provoked disagreement within the RCA. This opposition initially focused on the UCC’s open stance toward LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage—a position that both the PC(USA) and ELCA would also eventually take. Yet, the Formula of Agreement provided for “mutual admonition” between denominations, which has led to many of those who oppose the position of the other members of the Formula of Agreement to exercise this clause to admonish views that conflict with the RCA’s own position on these particular social issues.

**Twentieth-Century Unification Efforts**

The RCA exhibited considerable handwringing about its membership in larger ecumenical bodies throughout the twentieth century, but even more heated disagreement arose regarding unification with other Reformed denominations. The RCA was not immune from the ecumenical fervor that led to a spate of mergers during the twentieth century, but ultimately, despite numerous appeals to join other like-minded traditions, the RCA chose to remain independent.

In 1945, the RCA explored a union with the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPC), a small Presbyterian denomination located in Ohio and Pennsylvania. These efforts failed. Many members of the RCA, particularly in the Midwestern classes, feared the loss of denominational identity and the familial feeling they associated with the RCA. Others suggested that just because two traditions had much in common did not mean that they needed to merge with one another. Christian unity could exist spiritually while structurally remaining separate. In the end, the General Synod voted in favor of the union, but only 19 classes approved of it, far short of the 34 required by the commission overseeing the union.

Ecumenism was still in the air in the early 1960s. The General Synod of 1962 received eighteen overtures about union—eight for the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), eight for the UPC, one for the UCC, and one for the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The RCA chose to explore a proposed merger with the PCUS—the southern Presbyterian Church.

When the General Synod voted to move ahead with a committee to explore the union in 1965, opposition was already on the rise. Objectors feared a loss of denominational uniqueness and the dilution of Reformed doctrine. What is more, in 1966, PCUS joined the COCU, a perennial lightning rod for controversy in the RCA. Despite this move by the PCUS, the General Synod of 1968 approved the merger. Nevertheless, the classes rejected it, with all of the classes east of Detroit voting in favor and all those west of it voting against, for a final vote of 23 for union and 22 against, well shy of the two-thirds approval required.

Since the first efforts to unite the church with other Reformed traditions during the colonial era, the RCA has entertained 12 attempts to unite with another denomination. All have failed. Yet, in each case, serious talks have taken place. This willingness to explore the possibility of union exhibits the RCA’s underlying ecumenical commitment. Throughout these efforts, there have been both cultural and theological reasons for resisting mergers that reflect a fear of losing the distinctly Dutch Reformed theological tradition, most evident in our creeds and confessions. There was also a fear that these mergers might lead to a slippery slope of mergers first with larger Presbyterian bodies and eventually even larger bodies like the COCU.
A Special Relationship to the Christian Reformed Church

While many proposed mergers between the RCA and other Reformed traditions took place throughout the twentieth century, one denomination was conspicuously absent but must be a part of any discussion of the RCA’s relationship with other denominations: the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Prior to the two major secessions that led to the establishment of the CRC, the RCA was not a stranger to internal division. Some of the most rancorous debates dated back to colonial disputes between Coetus and Conferentie, which began in the 1730s. Unlike those early divisions, which eventually healed, the nineteenth-century divisions between the RCA and the CRC remain; however, in many ways the CRC has become the RCA’s closest partner.

The two primary moments of secession took place in 1857 and 1882. The first division reflected tensions in the Midwestern immigrant community about the Classis of Holland’s affiliation with the RCA in 1850. The division that occurred in 1882 also originated in the Midwest; however, it focused on disagreements between the immigrants and the American church about the role of freemasons within the church. For decades, these disagreements had flared at General Synod. The latter secession strained the relationship with the mother church of many of the immigrants, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland, which meant many new immigrants chose to join the CRC rather than the RCA.

Over the past half century, the RCA’s relationship to the CRC has warmed significantly. At the request of the CRC, more open dialogues began in the late 1960s. The CRC harbored anxieties about the RCA’s ecumenical memberships in the NCC and WCC and a perceived lack of enforcing doctrinal purity by the RCA. These talks in the 1960s eventually waned and ultimately ended without any result.

More recently, a renewed partnership has arisen between these our two denominations. This is most evident in joint publications, shared missions, and simultaneous annual meetings. In 1999, Maple Avenue Ministries in Holland, Michigan, became the first congregation to hold dual membership in both the CRC and RCA. More recently, the dual denominational membership of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, marked a significant symbol of ecumenical partnership and healing between these traditions due to its role as Albertus Van Raalte’s church and as the site of the particularly acrimonious secession of 1882. The RCA has continued to grow closer to the CRC into the twenty-first century, signaling a promising future of ecumenical engagement.

Local Ecumenism in the Past Half Century

The history of the RCA’s involvement with ecumenical movements tends to focus on denominational affiliations, initiatives, and efforts; however, ecumenism in the RCA also includes pastors like Frelinghuysen and Livingston and the host of missionaries who served throughout the globe. These individuals suggest that an essential element to the history of ecumenism in the RCA is the role of local churches engaging in ecumenical partnerships in order to serve their communities.

A brief historical case study illuminates how a local church, even in a small town in the Midwest, exhibits the RCA’s ecumenical commitments. Over the past half century, Sanborn First Reformed Church (FRC) in Sanborn, Iowa—a town of 1,300 residents with eight churches—has embraced ecumenism as a means of fulfilling their call to ministry. For more than three decades, the church has hosted the only vacation Bible school that
attracts children from all of the other churches in town. FRC participates in community-wide luncheons during Lent that draw members from both the town’s Protestant and Catholic churches and takes a leadership role in the coordination of community worship services. What is more, for over a decade, it jointly hired a youth pastor with a United Methodist Church in the next community in order to offer robust youth programming to its children. In this rural community, for the past 50 years, FRC has provided a model for ecumenical leadership.

Sanborn FRC is not unique in its classis, synod, or the RCA. A history of collaborative ecumenical engagement exists in churches ranging from Highland Park, New Jersey, to Paramount, California, to Grand Rapids, Michigan. From volunteers from New York churches serving during Billy Graham’s crusades in 1957 to ecumenical children’s programs in rural Iowa, RCA churches have a history of adapting the tradition’s ecumenism to their needs and context. A shared commitment to the Gospel and a desire to serve local communities remind us that the history of ecumenism in the RCA is not solely one of failed mergers and spats about association memberships. It is a story of a people striving to fulfill their call to mission.

H 18-3
To commend the paper “Ecumenism in the RCA” to all consistories and classes, and to invite them to enter into discussions over the paper, encouraging them to send responses to the questions below to rgasero@rca.org no later than February 1, 2019.

1. What does it mean that ecumenism has been such a key element to our identity in the past?
2. How does and should this understanding shape the future ministry of the RCA?
3. How is your congregation engaging in ecumenical relationships in your community? (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
James Hart Brumm, moderator

1 MGS 2017, 161.
4 MGS 1970, 83–85. The Bergen overture also let the Synod know that these two classes had taken steps to alter or amend the forms.
5 The Standards here refer to the Heidelberg Catechism and its Compendium, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The Belhar Confession was not added to the Standards until 2009.
6 MGS 1971, 212–213.
7 MGS 1971, 214.
9 Herman Harmelink III, Ecumenism and the Reformed Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 7.
Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Office of the General Synod received two judicial matters since the 2017 session of the General Synod. Each was referred to the Commission on Judicial Business (“CJB”) for review, recommendation, and report to the 2018 General Synod. The matters considered by the CJB, and the CJB’s reports and recommendations regarding them, are as follows:

Appeal by Phil and Diane Forner against the action of the Commission on Judicial Business of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Phillip and Diane Forner (“Forners”) filed with the Office of the General Synod an appeal (“Forners/GLJBC appeal”) from an action taken by the Commission on Judicial Business of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (“RSGLJBC”). The Forners/GLJBC appeal was received by the clerk of the General Synod on September 25, 2017, and subsequently referred to the CJB. The CJB received the appeal on September 29, 2017, and the record of the case on October 4, 2017. The CJB met via conference call on October 25, 2017, to consider the case.

The factual background of the case is available to the reader in MGS 2015, pp. 214ff. At the General Synod (“GS”) meeting in 2015, the CJB recommended, and the GS adopted, the following:

To remand the case to the Zeeland Classis for hearing on the merits of the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner regarding their membership in Spring Valley Reformed Church (MGS 2015, p. 216).

Per the action of the General Synod, Zeeland Classis (“ZC”) held a hearing on the complaint on September 19, 2016, and determined that “the record of the case makes it clear that a complaint against the [Spring Valley Church] Board of Elders, which is the focus of the January 26, 2013, complaint, is without merit.”

Unsatisfied with the action of Zeeland Classis, the Forners filed an appeal with the RSGLJBC. RSGLJBC found the appeal to be procedurally in order. RSGLJBC agreed with the finding of ZC that the complaint of the Forners was without merit. Pursuant to its authority granted in Book of Church Order (BCO) Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2017 edition, p. 93) (“If the appeal is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the committee may dismiss the appeal without a hearing”), the report of RSGLJBC indicates the following:

The motion was made, seconded, and carried to dismiss these two pending appeals without a hearing. This action will be reported to the Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes on May 6, 2018, but this decision is considered the final action of the regional synod in response to these appeals.

This action is the subject of the Forner appeal.

The Forners allege that both ZC and RSGLJBC handled their original case (dating back to 2013) improperly. Specifically, the Forners argue that the appropriate bodies failed to consider what the Forners deem to be relevant items of record. Further, they contend that the findings of ZC and RSGLJBC dismissed their case unfairly on the grounds that it was “without merit,” where the BCO states that a case may be dismissed at the committee level if it is “clearly without merit.” They argue that these alleged irregularities amount to a pattern of bias and prejudice, originally on behalf of ZC but (by implication) on behalf of RSGLJBC as well.
The CJB met by conference call on October 25, 2017.

The purpose of the meeting was to deal with the appeal of Phil and Diane Forner against the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes.

Upon consideration of the 284-page record, the commission determined that the case was in proper order.

The commission measured the grounds for appeal (BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 91]) against the record of the case and found the following:

1. CJB could detect no irregularities in the proceedings of the board of elders, the classis, or the regional synod relative to this case;
2. CJB was not able to locate any occasion at which a lower judicatory refused reasonable indulgence to any party in the case;
3. CJB found no incidents of the receipt of improper evidence in the case. The Forners’ allegation that the regional synod failed to receive minutes from the Classis of Zeeland was not found to be dispositive;
4. CJB, having examined the minutes of lower judicatories, found that lower judicatories acted in good faith, and exhibited neither bias nor prejudice;
5. CJB therefore found no manifest injustice in the determination of the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes to dismiss the two pending appeals without hearing.

Further, the CJB notes the patience and pastoral concern that the Interim Leadership Council of ZC manifested in attempting to deal with a thorny situation. While it is certainly the case, as the Forners argue, that a board of elders “shall receive as confessing members of the church only those persons who have made a profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2017 edition, p. 21]), a board of elders is not thereby required to receive everyone who makes such a profession. Boards of elders are entrusted to discern the sincerity of those who come before them promising “to accept the spiritual guidance of the church; to walk in a spirit of Christian love with this congregation; and to seek those things which make for unity, purity, and peace” (Worship the Lord, p. 35). At the same time, the Belhar Confession guards against arbitrary decisions by boards of elders by rejecting any doctrine “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church” (Belhar Confession, Section II).

Finally, CJB notes that “the judicatory hearing the appeal shall give deference to the decision of the lower judicatory ... and shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole” (BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 11 [2017 edition, p. 93]). Given that significant restriction and the ample record of a case (dating back four years) that demonstrates considerable forbearance on the part of ZC and RSGLJBC, the CJB determines it right and proper to give such deference to the lower judicatories in question.

In sum, the CJB:

- finds no grounds for appeal, per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 91);
- affirms the authority of a board of elders to receive confessing members per BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b (2017 edition, p. 21); and
- defers to the decisions of the lower judicatory per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 11 (2017 edition, p. 93).
Therefore, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to find the appeal of the Fornersto be frivolous and clearly without merit, and the CJB then dismissed the appeal without ahearing, per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2017 edition, p. 93).

**Appeal by Rev. Brian Randazzo against action by the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of New York**


The general facts of this case appear to involve a disciplinary matter initiated againstRev. Randazzo as a result of alleged conduct by him while attending and serving as adelegate to the 2016 session of the General Synod. Action in the nature of discipline wastaken by the Classis of Orange, but it does not appear that any formal charges againstRev. Randazzo were ever filed or acted upon by the classis. Nevertheless, apparently inresponse to action by the classis or one of its committees, Rev. Randazzo filed an appealwith the Regional Synod of New York (“RSNY”). The appeal was considered by theRSNYJBC. In a September 12, 2017, letter the stated clerk of the RSNY reported thefollowing to Rev. Randazzo and the stated clerk of the Classis of Orange:

> On August 29, 2017, the Synod of New York Judicial Business Committee metto discuss the appeal filed by the Rev. Randazzo against actions taken by theClassis of Orange.

The decision of the committee regarding the appeal is as follows:

> The Judicial Business Committee herewith dismisses the Appeal aswithout merit, as the Appellant offers no evidence that ‘a judgmenthas been rendered in a lower judicatory’ (BCO 2.III.1.1), nor is thereany evidence of the same in the records of the classis.

> With the dismissal of the appeal, no further action will be taken in regard to theappeal.

Put simply, the RSNYJBC did not conduct a hearing on Rev. Randazzo’s appeal becausethere was no formal decision by the classis from which to appeal, and therefore Rev.Randazzo’s “appeal” was improper.

It is from this “action” that Rev. Randazzo has filed his appeal with the General Synod.(The word action is put in quotes intentionally because it is actually inaction by the RSNYthat has precipitated the appeal.)

This commission took the same “inaction” as that of the RSNY and for the same reason.There has been no formal judgment with respect to the behavior or misbehavior of Rev.Randazzo by any judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. There being no formaljudgment, necessarily there can be no other decision than to dismiss the appeal of Rev.Randazzo, and such was the action of this commission.

We are disturbed, however, by what we perceive to be unfair treatment of Rev. Randazzo by the Classis of Orange. On the one hand, it can be argued that the suspension of Rev.
Randazzo was defective ab initio since the BCO gives authority to a consistory to close the pulpit to a minister for “‘any notorious or scandalous offense’ (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 4b [2017 edition, p. 78]); the consistory of Brick Church took no such action. Alternatively, classis (no mention of a committee of a classis) “shall have exclusive jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a minister … if the charge is proven” to suspend or depose from office (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 4c [2017 edition, p. 78]).

In the instant case, the Administrative Committee of Orange Classis made a decision on its own that Rev. Randazzo committed “notorious and scandalous” acts at General Synod and should be suspended from ministry for some indefinite period. The committee, without hearing or trial, decided that the case was proven and took action to suspend Rev. Randazzo. Even if it is assumed, notwithstanding the language of the BCO, that a classis committee could suspend a minister of Word and sacrament (the committee’s own decision being the only proof required), we come to an action of Orange Classis at its regular session on February 23, 2017, which by its resolution RS17-18 lifted the suspension of Rev. Randazzo and by the quoted words of the stated clerk of classis “… the Rev. B. Randazzo’s suspension has been lifted he once again became a voting member of the classis … ” This could, and possibly should, have been the end of this matter.

Classis, or some part of classis, was not satisfied with this result. The Administrative Committee had already put in place a Charge Committee which intended to charge Rev. Randazzo with the civil crimes of assault, battery, and defamation (which are beyond the scope of church discipline), as well as the BCO offenses of violation of his ordination oath, unseemly behavior, and lack of knowledge of RCA polity. It was these charges that were to be considered in executive session at the February 23, 2017, meeting. Prior to the meeting in an “email dump,” several letters and statements from purported witnesses to Rev. Randazzo’s bad behavior at General Synod were sent to all members of classis and possibly others, in violation of the BCO prohibition against circulation by anyone of “any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any charges before the final disposition of same …” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 11b [2017 edition, p. 83]). These now-public letters and statements were to be used in determining whether or not to bring formal charges. The BCO assures parties that they may cross-examine witnesses and specifically prohibits the use of affidavits at trial. Rev. Randazzo had no opportunity to challenge these statements, nor to cross-examine the authors thereof, nor to bring in statements for his defense. Yet, even with no rebuttal whatsoever of the statements against him, the delegates’ votes on the charges were in favor for bringing some of the charges by the barest of margins. It seems these charges now exist but are not acted upon, casting a dark shadow across the mission of the Classis of Orange and especially the life of the Brick Church, to say nothing of the devastation caused to the life of Rev. Randazzo and his family.

From the record before us, it appears that the entire matter of Rev. Randazzo’s actions at General Synod 2016, and his subsequent suspension, is unresolved. We would urge that some resolution be made promptly. The Book of Church Order sets forth the Nature of Discipline in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, both as to its purpose (Section 1) and its exercise and the levels thereof (Section 2), be they pastoral or judicial. We suggest that the Classis of Orange give careful consideration to pastoral discipline in this case, but it may be that a trial with the full protections to the parties provided by Articles 4 and 5 of BCO Chapter 2, Part I (2017 edition, pp. 80–85) is the best alternative to reach a final decision. Classis must rely upon prayer and Christian love to discern the best way to end this continuing discord, but end it must.

Respectfully submitted,
Russell Paarlberg, moderator
The CJB met by conference call on Wednesday, October 25, 2017; Wednesday, December 13, 2017; Wednesday, January 3, 2018; and Thursday, February 15, 2018. For reasons stated in this report, no hearings were conducted. Commission member Jack Van Slambrouck (representing the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes) did not participate in any discussions of the matter filed by Phillip and Diane Forner, and commission member Kendra Van Houten (representing the Regional Synod of New York) did not participate in any discussions of the matter filed by Rev. Brian Randazzo.
Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations convened in person on October 12–13, 2017, and January 16, 2018, and teleconferenced on February 13, March 6, April 3, April 24, and May 8, 2018. Two final electronic votes were held through email, ending on May 15 and May 18.

Throughout the year, members of the commission actively sought qualified candidates, solicited completed profile forms (a brief two-page document), and checked references of those who were interested in serving on a commission or agency of the General Synod or on the board of directors or trustees of an RCA-related institution. In these ways the commission sought to fulfill its responsibilities as stated in the Bylaws of the General Synod—namely, “in consultation with the general secretary, [the commission] shall search the denomination for suitable nominees. In making nominations it shall consider the geographic location, occupation, and record of previous service to the denomination of persons suggested by classes, regional synods, and other sources. It shall consider this and other pertinent data in light of each commission’s or agency’s responsibilities, membership needs, suggested nominees, and place and schedule of meetings” (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8c[2]; 2017 edition, p. 114).

The commission seeks to nominate individuals for service on agencies, commissions, and boards of directors on the basis of their spiritual gifts, interests, heart (or passion), abilities, personality, experience, and special leadership abilities. When possible, it also seeks to involve young adult members of the RCA so that they can be nurtured and encouraged to serve the RCA in a variety of ways in the future. Through its efforts, the Commission on Nominations has proactively fulfilled its responsibility to “search the denomination” and believes those nominated have traits that make them well-suited for the work of the positions to which they are being nominated. The commission is pleased to report once again that it has, to the best of its ability, fulfilled its responsibility to ensure that the requirements of the Book of Church Order are upheld.

When the number of qualified candidates from which to choose increases, the commission’s work is enhanced and the work of the General Synod’s agencies and commissions is carried out more effectively. Consequently, the commission encourages anyone interested in serving to submit a completed profile form to the Commission on Nominations according to the instructions indicated on the form. Profile forms are available from Laura Tarbous, denominational staff to the Commission on Nominations (908-812-7897 or ltarbous@rca.org), or on the RCA website (www.rca.org/profile).

Nominations

Nominees identified by the Commission on Nominations are as follows (* indicates a final term and # indicates an official nomination from the assembly, institution, or agency listed):
GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL
Class of 2019
Rev. Jamie Dykstra
Class of 2021
*Betty Jo Shuster
Class of 2022
*Rev. Ned Beadel (Regional Synod of the Far West) #
*Hellen Harvey (African American Black Council) #
*Rev. Robert Johnson
*Rev. Kent McHeard (Regional Synod of Albany) #
*Eric Moreno
*Rev. Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries) #

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Class of 2020
Rev. Mark Ennis
Reginald Smith – Reformed ecumenical observer
Kim Winchell – ELCA ecumenical observer
Class of 2021
Elizabeth Carroll
Rev. Ellen Jo (E.J.) Emerson
Cameron Van Kooten Laughead

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION
Class of 2019
Rev. Troy Nanninga
Class of 2020
Derek Taylor
Class of 2021
Rev. Chad Farrand
*Rev. Bethany Popkes
Rev. Mark Swart

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Class of 2021
*Rev. Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew
*Rev. Kathryn Davelaar Guthrie
Lowell TenClay

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Class of 2019
Rev. Lisa Tice
Class of 2020
Rev. Dirk Gieser
Class of 2021
Rev. Kent Frens
Rev. Troy Van Beek

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Class of 2021
*Philip De Koster
*Rev. Linda Gold
COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Class of 2021
Alexander Arthurs
David Tripold

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Class of 2020
Rev. Kendra Van Houten (Regional Synod of New York) #
Class of 2021
*Rev. Paul Janssen (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics) #
*Russell Paarlberg (Regional Synod of Mid-America) #
*Rev. Barry Wynveen (Regional Synod of Canada) #

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Class of 2021
*Rev. Carl Boersma (Regional Synod of the Heartland) #
Rev. Ock Kee Byun (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries) #
*Rev. Micheal Edwards (Regional Synod of New York) #
*Robert Montgomery (Regional Synod of Canada) #

COMMISSION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY
Class of 2020
Rev. Matthew Waterstone
Class of 2021
*Karla Camacho
Rafael Garcia (Council for Hispanic Ministries) #
Rev. Kelvin Spooner (African American Black Council) #

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
Class of 2020
Rev. William Russell – ELCA ecumenical observer
Class of 2021
Rev. Travis Else
Elizabeth Estes
*Kristen Johnson

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Class of 2021
Rev. Melisa Blankenship
*Kristin Intelisano
Rev. Daniel Jelsma

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES
Class of 2021
Dana Chapman
Ralph Condis

As is provided for in its bylaws, BOBS has reduced its membership from 13 to 12 for the 2018–2019 year.

CHURCH GROWTH FUND
Class of 2021
*Rod Douma
*Diane Smith Faubion
MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY
Class of 2021
Rev. Scott Christiansen
Rev. Shirley Lin

The 2017 General Synod approved a revision to the MFCA bylaws resulting in a membership reduction from 11 to 9.

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2021
*Danielle Brown
Rev. Gregory Dunlap (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics)
Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier
*Gay Morris (Regional Synod of the Far West)
*Evan Spagner
*Amaury Tanon-Santos

As is provided for in its bylaws, the NBTS board has reduced its membership from 23 to 21 for the 2018–2019 year.

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2020
Percy Gilbert
Fred Johnson
Class of 2021
Rev. Andrea Godwin-Stremler
Matthew Haworth
Alden Highstreet
Timothy Hillegonds
Doug Honholt
Philip Miller
Steve Spoelhof
Rev. Cora Taitt
Vacancy (RSC)
Vacancy (RSH)

CENTRAL COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2022
Barbara Kniff-McCulla

HOPE COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2019
Rev. Dennis Voskuil
Class of 2022
Rev. Grace Claus

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2020
Catherine Bloom

To elect the above-named nominees to the General Synod commissions and agencies and the boards of directors or trustees of RCA-related educational institutions as indicated. (ADOPTED)
To elect Carl Boersma as moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2018–2019 term. (ADOPTED)

The Commission on Nominations thanks Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu, Dan Gillett, and Don Poest for their service. Their membership on the Commission on Nominations is concluding, and we are grateful for their prayers, insight, and contribution to our ministry. The Commission on Nominations appreciates Laura Tarbous, RCA staff to our commission, for her tireless attention to detail and diligent service in so many ways. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,
Carl Boersma, moderator
Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb…” (Revelation 7:9).

The RCA: Thriving, Missional, Multiracial

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are Douglas Banks, Karla Camacho, Rick DeBruyne (moderator), June Denny, Rafael Garcia, Jo Anna Lougin (vice moderator), and Kyunghoon Suh. Alina Coipel serves as staff to the commission.

CORE had one vacant seat beginning in January due to the resignation of Minsuk Lee. Minsuk returned to her home country to care for her ailing mother. The commission was sorry to see her go and thanks her for her service.

The commission met via video/phone conference on March 21, May 16, June 27, September 18, November 8, and December 13, 2017; and February 14, March 14, and May 9, 2018. It also met October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

CORE thanks James Steward, a member the Commission on Nominations, for attending and observing our October meeting. CORE also thanks James Nakakihara for his willingness to attend and observe this spring; however, the commission did not hold a second face-to-face meeting.

CORE had a conference call with staff member Earl James on March 7, 2018, and quarterly connect meetings with the three staff coordinators for the racial and ethnic councils on October 4, 2017, and January 17 and April 18, 2018.

Official Responsibilities of CORE

The Book of Church Order names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (p. 113, 2017 edition):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Toward a Multicultural Future Freed From Racism

CORE affirms the direction and progress that has been made in the RCA toward being a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church, but also recognizes that there is still more to be done. While we have made gains in terms of the number of people of color involved and actively participating in the structures, life, and ministries of the church, there are deeper questions of how power is shared, how our racial/ethnic churches
and members are involved in setting the pace and direction of the church, and how our story is changing so the various streams of culture and color are included in the narrative of who we are and what we do.

Monitoring of Recommendations from R-91 Task Force on White Privilege

The 2014 General Synod instructed the Commission on Race and Ethnicity “to monitor the successful implementation of recommendations proposed by the R-91 Task Force on White Privilege and adopted by the 2013 and 2014 General Synods; and further, to include this information in their reports to General Synod for the next five years” (MGS 2014, R-17, p. 116).

One of the approved recommendations (MGS 2014, R-15, pp. 113–114) directed the General Synod Council to create a task force to assess the RCA's governance utilizing the Five-Fold Test and make recommendations for changes to its order that are consistent with the tenets of the Belhar Confession and that will aid the RCA's transition to becoming a more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism.

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

The task force was to make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016. In 2016 CORE expressed concern that “since June 2014, when these two recommendations were passed at General Synod, very little has been accomplished to carry out the mandates” (MGS 2016, p. 300). Last year CORE reported that it was pleased with the new progress and momentum of the task force. The task force had been meeting, it selected a chair, had a conference call with the ECC, and was enthusiastic about engaging its work.

Unfortunately, with the loss of Tom De Vries and Tony Campbell, the work faltered and the task force has not been able to regroup. The task force is reporting to this General Synod that it has not been able to complete its assignment and is recommending that the effort be discontinued.

Joint Meeting of CORE, Councils, and Staff

CORE had been in conversation with the general secretary, members of the Five-Fold Test Task Force, and some members of the racial/ethnic councils about having a joint assembly of the councils in fall 2018 to hear the voices of our racial/ethnic members and to discern where the RCA is and what still needs to done for the RCA to be a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. Again, with Tom De Vries’s resignation, the death of Tony Campbell (who was staffing the task force), and ensuing confusion about the proposed joint meeting, the event was cancelled.

Racial/Ethnic Councils

CORE continues to inform itself about the work of the racial/ethnic councils by having periodic calls with the staff coordinators of the racial and ethnic councils: Earl James (staff to the African American Black Council), Eddy Alemán (coordinator of Hispanic ministries), and En Young Kim (coordinator for Pacific and Asian American Ministries).
CORE thanks the coordinators for their time and willingness to help CORE keep current. Members of CORE who are also members of the councils also keep the commission updated.

Native American/First Nations

CORE continues its effort to include Native American/First Nations people in its work. We are pleased to report that June Denny, a member of the Mescalero Apache and Mescalero Reformed Church in Mescalero, New Mexico, is serving as a commissioner. Thank you, June, for being willing to serve and thank you to the Commission on Nominations for your part in bringing June on.

June Denny, Rick DeBruyne, and Alina Coipel had a videoconference meeting with Luis Ruiz, who works with the RCA’s Native American congregations. For the last year Luis has been holding monthly meetings with pastors of the Native American churches. June Denny will be participating in those monthly meetings as well.

In 2017 Jo Anna Lougin attended the annual gathering of the Native American/First Nations people to represent CORE. June Denny attended the 2018 gathering, which took place April 23–25, in Hinton, Oklahoma.

Monitoring Diversity

CORE continues to perform its task of monitoring the racial and ethnic makeup of staff, GSC, commissions, task forces, etc., to make sure that all voices are heard. Of 144 total people currently on the GSC, commissions, and agency boards, 18 are African American/Haitian American, 12 are Pacific/Asian American, 10 are Hispanic, and 2 are Native American/Aboriginal. The total racial/ethnic representation is 29 percent (42 people out of 144). It is encouraging to see that more racial and ethnic people are serving on most commissions and on the GSC. CORE thanks the Commission on Nominations for its diligence and persistence in its ongoing efforts toward inclusivity.

As stated last year, CORE is concerned that the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business have no racial/ethnic commissioners. The same is true for the Church Growth Fund board. CORE recommends that General Synod encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions themselves to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates for these and other commissions. CORE has also suggested to the Commission on Nominations that they review their processes and update their forms and outreach methods in ways that will be more user-friendly for all of the church.

RE 18-1
To continue to actively encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates to serve on commissions, particularly the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business. (ADOPTED)

Ministry in Local Congregations

In 2008 the General Synod instructed the General Synod Council to revise the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) to include two questions: How does your church reflect the racial and cultural context in which you conduct your ministry? What are you doing to
build bridges that develop and deepen mutual ministry that is multiracial or multicultural? 

In the intervening years, a two-page section that included these questions was eliminated 
from the CRF. Last year’s General Synod approved adding these questions back into the 
Consistorial Report Form for at least five years. CORE looks forward to receiving the 
responses and will report further to the 2019 General Synod.

Mass Incarceration

CORE continues to support efforts being made with regard to mass incarceration in the 
U.S. This is an important matter. Although the work of CORE is specifically focused on the 
RCA’s commitment to a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural future freed from racism, 
it affirms and supports work that addresses racial/ethnic concerns within society at large.

Webinars

CORE continues to be in conversation with Earl James about more effective formats, as 
well as new topics, for webinars.

Electronic and Social Media

CORE maintains a Facebook page to stay in touch and communicate with the rest of the 
RCA. Please visit and “like” the page at www.facebook.com/RCACORE. Please contact 
Alina Coipel (acoipel@rca.org) if you would like to receive emails from CORE about its 
current activities and issues.

Giving Thanks

Again, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity thanks Minsuk Lee for her contributions to 
CORE. The commission also thanks Alina Coipel, its staff person, who has been tirelessly 
invaluable in accessing information, organizing meetings, and faithfully serving CORE in 
so many ways.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator
Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and February 9–10, 2018, in Atlanta, Georgia. It also met by video and conference call on February 22 to complete work in progress for inclusion in this report.

The COT is privileged to do this work for the church and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way. The commission’s primary task this year was assigned by General Synod 2017; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding a Theology of Office at Assemblies

From General Synod 2015, R-51 directed the General Synod Council to create a task force to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the Book of Church Order (BCO) regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels (MGS 2015, p. 242).

During General Synod 2017, the report of the Diaconal Assemblies Task Force included two recommendations. The first was “to encourage classes and regional synods to form diaconal conferences in all the assemblies of the church, for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries; and further, to instruct the general secretary to help facilitate the creation of at least one such diaconal conference utilizing Transformed & Transforming funding” (MGS 2017, R 17-15, p. 89). The recommendation was adopted. The second recommendation was to include deacons in all assemblies of the church (classis, regional synod, and General Synod) through a local option that authorized consistories to choose whether to delegate an elder or a deacon—a change from permitting only elders to serve as delegates (MGS 2017, R 17-16, pp. 91–94). The second recommendation was referred to the Commission on Theology.

In response to General Synod 2017 (“To refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology for the review of the matter of office at assemblies and report back to General Synod 2018,” MGS 2017, p. 94), and in its desire to serve the church well, the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on History, reviewed the matter of a Reformed theology of office at assemblies and presents the following paper.

THE NATURE OF OFFICE AND ASSEMBLY

Overview

Current denominational discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is governance. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, but they are neither the same nor interchangeable. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. The recommendation of this commission is to affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper “The Nature of Office and
Assembly” that offices are not interchangeable and that, as currently structured, the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament.

Introduction

A few elders and ministers representing three churches are seated around a table, coffee in hand, waiting for the General Synod meeting to begin. To everyone’s relief, there are no contentious issues on the day’s agenda. As the group settles in, one elder cautiously asks, “If everything is going well, do we really have to meet?”

A few others at the table look shocked, but most look curious, their eyes glancing toward one of the ministers. The unspoken question hangs in the air: WHY are we here? Why are WE here? What is the purpose of these people gathering in this group?

This table shares these questions with many in our denomination. Competing accounts differ on why we gather as classes, regional synods, and General Synod, as well as on who should be present at these assemblies and what qualifies them to be present. At every level of our polity, people are asking WHY are we here? And why are WE here?

This paper will argue that a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office. After a brief overview of our current conversations around office and assembly, it will examine two different visions for the nature of ecclesiastical office, before answering why we have assemblies in the church.

Current Conversations on Office and Assembly

Our current discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. For decades, we have debated whether deacons should be included in these higher assemblies. A consistory is made up of ministers, elders, and deacons. Why should classis only have elders and ministers? Should the deacons be included, especially when so much of the ministry discussed at the higher assemblies is seemingly diaconal in nature—namely, ministries of “mercy, service, and outreach”? Is the work of the classis more akin to the board of elders, which would not require the presence of deacons? Much ink has been spilled, but the issue has not been settled. Beneath the presenting question of deacon inclusion are the deeper questions about who should go to our assemblies and why.

More recently, the manner of how commissioned pastors should be included at higher assemblies has sharpened these questions. A commissioned pastor is an elder who has been commissioned to a particular ministry within the bounds of a classis. Commissioned pastors are members of that classis for the duration of their commission. How should they go to General Synod: 1) As one of the members of classis, all the rest of whom are ministers; or 2) as one of the elders, none of whom is a member of classis? A paper authored by the Commission on Theology in 2017, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies,” argued that commissioned pastors ought to attend General Synod in the office to which they have been ordained: elder.

These various discussions reveal a need for a more integrated understanding of the relationship between a Reformed understanding of church office and a Reformed understanding of the assemblies of the church.
Two Visions of Ecclesiastical Office

The challenge of a theology of ecclesiastical office centers on the offices’ relationship to the common ministry of the church and the ongoing ministry of Christ. Every Christian receives a ministry. As our liturgy says, “By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work.” On the one hand, there are those who argue that ministers, elders, and deacons are simply participating in this common ministry of the church. They have no special authority or representative function. These office-bearers simply exercise a particular set of gifts for ministry. Office is functional in nature. The ministers, elders, and deacons are just like every other member of the congregation but happen to do this particular service based upon the calling and equipping of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are those who favor a more “sacramental” understanding of office, whereby the offices represent Christ in a strong sense and come with the authority of Christ himself. Thus, the work of the minister, elder, and deacon is different from the ordinary ministry of the non-ordained person and should be more closely identified with the ongoing ministry of Christ.

The Reformed Church has often undertaken the difficult task of navigating between these two poles. The offices cannot simply be identified with the ministry given to all believers. Instead, ministers, elders, and deacons are “set apart for a ministry.” They “represent Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.” At the same time, ecclesiastical office is one of “servanthood and service.” It is a calling through which the ordinary ministry of the church is built up. It is never merely naked authority or a title devoid of responsibilities. The Reformed Church has sought to avoid both of these extremes.

However, our recent discussion has often brought more confusion than clarity.

An initial study, “The Nature of the Ministry,” presented a functional view of ecclesiastical office: ministers, elders, and deacons were called not to an office, with its “rights and privileges,” but to do the particular task of ministry, with its emphasis on service. The study lamented the current church structures that, it argued, drew sharp distinctions between clergy and laity, privileged authority over service, and were artifacts of the seventeenth century. The paper argued that a functional view of office is rooted in the New Testament. Christ is the head of his body, the church, and all believers are equal members of that body. “There is no hierarchy of members——The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.’ The only distinctions are those of function or service.” According to 1 Corinthians 12, all members are equally important in the body but have their specific gifts for service. Ministry is the responsibility of the whole church and can be structured in different ways to accomplish this goal. The various different lists of functions in the New Testament highlight this flexibility. The Holy Spirit calls and equips people for the common ministry of the church. “There is no one biblical form” of church government. The special forms of service that we call “offices” may change as the Spirit leads the church into new contexts.

“The Nature of the Ministry” argues for removing the language of ordination from the Reformed Church Constitution and practice and replacing it with the language of “commissioning.” Ordination is not an “indelible mark” placed upon the one ordained. A functional view of ministry means that one only inhabits the office during the period in which one is serving in that function. Commissioning would end when the service in that position ends, and one would need to be recommissioned in each subsequent ministry. In this way, the paper sought to emphasize the common ministry of all Christians by virtue of their baptism. The various officeholders in the church exist to serve the church in its common ministry. The distinction between officeholders and the rest of the congregation is
a practical one that exists solely for equipping the church in its common ministry.

A subsequent study, “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry,” presented both a response and a clarification to this purely functional view of ministry. Offices are the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church; they include specific functions but cannot be reduced to function alone. “Function is an important aspect of office, but it is not an adequate definition of office.” In the Old Testament as well as the New, the people of God were given particular offices to serve as a continuing authority in the church. The Holy Spirit came upon and anointed Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus is the true fulfillment of these offices, and his Spirit has come upon the church. However, not all gifts of the Spirit are the same. Even in a church filled with the Spirit, there is need for particular gifts “for the purpose of quickening and directing all other gifts.” The frequent mention of elders, deacons, and bishops/overseers in the New Testament attests to the reality of what we today call offices. While they include particular functions, offices are given by God to the church to “represent, interpret, and proclaim the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ through the generations, and in doing so, to govern the church authoritatively by his grace and according to his purposes.” The offices of minister, elder, and deacon represent Christ and his authority to the church. They are the God-given means by which Christ exercises his lordship over the church in a continuous way.

“The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry” argues for retaining the language of ordination. Ordination is neither an “indelible mark” whereby the ordained is given special grace, nor merely a prayer of blessing for someone about to undertake the task of ministry. Instead, ordination is a setting apart of an individual for a particular duty. “By it the church sets apart for specific duties those in whom it sees the gifts and divine calling requisite for the ministry of the gospel of grace and the authority necessary to govern and serve God’s people.” Ordination is a consecration. The one who is ordained is presented before God as a holy, living sacrifice before the Holy Spirit to be filled and strengthened and before the church as one with the calling and gifts needed for the office. Ordination is also a legitimation. The one who is ordained is now authorized to perform the tasks of his or her office.

These two papers share many common commitments. Both claim that Christ is the prototype and source of Christian ministry. Both seek to emphasize ministry as service instead of privilege. Both seek to honor the common ministry given to the church by Christ. Both reject ordination as an “indelible mark” and the stark division between clergy and laity.

However, there are numerous tensions between the papers. Most significantly, they differ on whether the offices of minister, elder, and deacon should continue as offices and whether those who serve in those offices immediately renounce their office upon leaving their post. Whereas “The Nature of the Ministry” sees an antithesis between function and office, “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry” sees them as compatible concepts. Additionally, there is disagreement on the nature of the church’s spiritual power. The initial study pushes strongly against any form of hierarchy within the body of Christ, so that no believer can truly stand in authority over another. However, the second study sees the proper exercise of authority by those ordained to office as part of the way Christ exercises authority over the church. While they agree on the source of ministry (Christ) and the goal of ministry (the building up of Christ’s church), a vast chasm separates them regarding how Christ accomplishes this work and the role ministers, elders, and deacons play.

Recommended changes to the Book of Church Order stemming from “The Nature of
the Ministry” were passed by the 1973 General Synod and confirmed by the classes in 1974. Perhaps the most prominent of these, still in our current Preamble, is the claim that “the ecclesiastical offices which the Reformed Church deems necessary for its ordering are understood to be essentially functional in nature, and the term ‘office’ is everywhere viewed in terms of service.” Since then, various smaller changes have been made to other areas of the BCO, cumulatively pushing our polity in the direction outlined in “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry.”

The way forward, it seems, is to remember that office and function should not be set in opposition. In every instance, officeholders within the church carry out their ministry in service to the body of Christ, which is to say that they do not carry out ministry as the exercise of power. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. As the doctrinal standards, Liturgy, and the Book of Church Order teach, elders must be prepared to set forth the doctrine, worship, and government of the church. Accordingly, unlike deacons, elders and ministers are particularly responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church. This ministry (function) is itself the outworking of the calling, gifting of the Spirit, and election to the office of elder or minister. A Reformed understanding of office is one that maintains a vision of parity rather than hierarchy. When this critical insight is lost, a political rather than properly ecclesial understanding of authority and power threatens the proper exercise of office. All who are ordained to offices in the church carry out their ministry in service to Christ through the anointing and guidance of the Spirit. The church is one ministry—the ministry of Christ. The parity under consideration is manifest in exercise of ecclesiastical authority by “presbyters” or “elders.” Accordingly, ministers and elders share equally in the responsibility to govern the church. Indeed, this is the case at “higher” assemblies—classes, regional synods, and the General Synod—where minister and elder delegates exercise the ministry of governance.

The Nature of Ecclesiastical Assembly

Church governance is a matter of wisdom rather than divine law. There were no “classes” or “synods,” as we know them, in the New Testament. They were not needed, because the church still had the apostles, who visited, instructed, and guided the churches. In addition to the whole church, each individual church can rightly be called the “temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16), the “bride of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2), and the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). There is no hierarchy between churches but a fundamental parity between them. Each church is equally a part of the larger church and believers constitute the united body of Christ through union with an individual church. These various churches, while independent, were in relationship to one another through mutual prayer, mutual support, and the teaching of the apostles. These churches gathered among themselves to settle disputes but also, on occasion, sent delegates to other churches to settle disputes. The gatherings of Acts 1, 6, 15, and 21 demonstrate that “synod” gatherings are permitted by Scripture even if they are not mandated. The synodical structure of the church is not necessary for the essence of church but is permitted and necessary for the well-being of the church.

The desire to uphold the clear commands of Scripture across the broad communions of the church led to the development of classes and synods. The church is to “[make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The one body of Christ must not be torn asunder, nor should it be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftsmanship in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). The church is to maintain the truth of the gospel in the face of false teaching (2 Timothy 4:3-4; Acts 20:28-30; 2 Peter 3:14-18; 1 John 4:1-6; Matthew 7:15-
correct faults for the purpose of living faithfully (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Timothy 3:16, 4:2), continue to reach out in mission (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:47; Romans 10:13-14), and care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan (Matthew 25:35; Luke 4:18, 14:14; 1 John 3:16-17; James 1:27–2:6; Acts 24:17). In doing these things, “we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV). On a local level, Christ has given the church the offices of minister, elder, and deacon to bear witness to Christ’s ongoing ministry and guide the common ministry of the church into flourishing and faithfulness. As Herman Bavinck says, “The office does not suppress the gifts [of the church] but, rather, only guides them.”

The ministers teach and admonish so that the garden of the Lord might be watered and produce much fruit. The elders exercise governance so that the sheep might be protected from wolves and faithfully follow the voice of the good shepherd. The deacons take leadership in mercy and compassion to free the oppressed and preach good news to the poor. Each office fulfills its calling so that the body grows up into maturity. Again, in the words of Bavinck:

The church is a field that needs to be constantly weeded, a tree that must be pruned at the proper time, a flock that must be led and pastured, a house that requires constant renovation, a bride who must be prepared to be presented as a pure virgin to her husband. There are the sick, the dying, the tested, the grieving; those who are under attack, conflicted, in doubt, fallen, imprisoned, and so forth, who need teaching and instruction, admonition and consolation. And even apart from these things, the church must increase in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In order that this might be so, Christ gave his church apostles, prophets, and evangelists and continues to give the church ministers, elders, and deacons (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3; 1 Peter 5). On a local level, the three offices of deacon, minister, and elder aid the congregation in carrying out the mission of its head, Jesus Christ. “Together they enable the whole mission of the church. Everything in the church will be done decently and in order when faithful persons are called to office, and responsibly fulfill their charge.”

The ordinary ministry of ministers, elders, and deacons takes place within churches and communities. But how does the church maintain unity of doctrine, discipline, and worship across its breadth, while also responding faithfully and as one to the particular challenges of this historical moment? This unity is found in Christ and secured by Christ. He is the sole head of the church and has united his church into one body. Yet, the way Christ exercises this headship has been conceived in different ways. The Roman Catholic Church maintains unity of doctrine, life, and witness through hierarchy. The unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of any given church is maintained by its communion with and submission to its bishop and, particularly, through the bishop of Rome. One congregation maintains its relationship with the head of the church, Christ, by maintaining its relationship with Christ’s vicar, the Pope. The Reformation rejected this formulation for at least two reasons and has recognized that this governance is exercised through the offices of minister and elder. First, the Reformation denied that the apostolic office continued in the person of the Pope. The office of apostle was an extraordinary office that ceased upon the death of the first apostles. The apostolic character of the church is maintained by its faithfulness to the witness of the apostles (Old and New Testaments), not by submitting to their successors (papacy). Second, the Reformation denied the hierarchy of various churches. One church does not have inherent authority over another. Whether a church was large, was home to a prominent minister, or was placed in a prominent location did not give it authority over any other church. Even parent churches were not of higher authority than the churches they planted. The churches were bound together, not by unity under the bishop of Rome.
and the churches under his authority, but under the authority of the apostolic teaching, the Word of God.

The stewardship of this apostolic teaching and the governance of the body of Christ were exercised through the ministry of ministers and elders. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, yet remain distinct. All three are offices of “servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit.” All three serve, all three represent Christ, and all three are empowered by the action of the Holy Spirit. Yet, these three offices are neither the same nor interchangeable. “The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way.” Elders are “to study God’s Word, to oversee the household of faith, to encourage spiritual growth, to maintain loving discipline, and to provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.” Deacons “are set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach.” Both elders and ministers are charged with three main tasks: Word, sacrament, and discipline. They both proclaim the Word and guard the proclamation of the Word from error and abuse. They both provide for the administration of the sacraments and guard the sacraments from being profaned. They exercise discipline. The ministry of mercy, service, and outreach performed by the deacon is vital for the health of the church. It is a calling from God and of immense value for the life and witness of the church in the world. Yet, these three offices are different and fulfill different callings within the body of Christ.

Yet how could this unity of doctrine, life, and witness be maintained beyond the local level to the larger church? In other words, how could Protestants, who maintain the Scriptures as the only rule for faith and life, hold to both the apostolicity and catholicity of the church? The sixteenth-century church developed synods in response this problem.

Synodical church government first developed in France. Meetings of pastors had taken place in Zurich, Geneva, and the Lutheran church from early in the Reformation. However, it was the Huguenots who first gathered for a synod in Paris on May 26, 1559. The church in France was expanding quickly, and the synod gathered to adopt a common confession and church order. Both historically and ontologically, the General Synod was prior to the other higher assemblies. The General Synod created provincial synods and, in 1572, created the first classes. National synods were gathered to maintain unity of doctrine, worship, and discipline so that the local churches could be united in mission.

The Dutch Reformed churches were one of many Reformed bodies—including those in Poland, Hungary, Germany, Scotland, and England—later to adopt synodical church government. However, almost upon its inception, there were objections to the structure of synods. It was believed to reintroduce hierarchy into the church and promote the tyranny of the synod over the individual church.

The assemblies of the church actually serve to subvert hierarchy. The Preamble to the BCO states that there are three kinds of authority exercised by the church: ministerial, declarative, and spiritual. In particular, the spiritual authority of the church “is the right to govern the life and activity of the church and to administer its affairs.” This authority is given to office-bearers and is exercised within the assemblies of the church. Spiritual authority is exercised by the gathered assembly, not the individual or even a handful of members. 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.” The synod structure seeks to ward off
abuse by circumscribing the spiritual authority of the church so that it is exercised in its proper place. Not every person will be called to office, and “some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. 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.” The placement of assemblies serves to protect one person or one group from exercising undue authority over others without saying that there is never a place for authority to be exercised. By placing boundaries around the exercise of spiritual authority, assemblies can subvert the natural hierarchies found in our culture based on wealth, prestige, gender, race, and power.

There is profound wisdom in having regular assemblies of the church. While having no biblical mandate, it represents a wise way of maintaining the catholic and apostolic character of the church. The church is called at all times to faithful witness to Jesus Christ, and that faithful witness is encouraged by the work of the offices as they assemble to promote the unity of the church’s worship, discipline, and doctrine.

**Who Should Gather in These Assemblies?**

The Reformed Church has maintained that the church is governed best by those called by God to serve in the ordinary offices of the church. Having been called, they are equipped for this work of service for the good of the church and therefore for the good of the world. The various assemblies are gatherings of those who have been called by God to help maintain the unity, faithfulness, and witness of the church. As the Preamble to the *BCO* states:

> While governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies, the church expresses its full ministry through all its members in a variety of tasks. Each assembly is charged with determining the nature and extent of its ministry in faithful obedience to Scripture and in responsible concern for the church’s mission in the world. Every member receives a ministry in baptism and is called with the whole church to embody Christ’s intentions for the world.

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. In short, guidance and governance. This perspective about the purpose of the assemblies is reflected in the *BCO*, which states that “the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its Head—to announce the good news of his Saviorhood and extend his Lordship throughout the world.” The assemblies are said to have judicial and legislative powers, with the board of elders, classis, regional synod, and General Synod having both powers. The deacons only have legislative power in the consistory and never judicial power. This is a result of the specific nature of the callings of the different offices and the work required by the various assemblies. Therefore, since the task of the greater assemblies is guidance (legislative) and governance (judicial), the offices that should be gathered at those assemblies should be those tasked with guiding and governing the church. It is for this reason that the Reformed Church has filled its greater assemblies with elders and ministers. According to the Preamble to the *BCO*, in the New Testament:

> The churches then were ruled by “presbyters” or “elders,” just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed
churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the “teaching elder.” Ministers and elders therefore govern the church together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church.  

The Reformed churches followed the New Testament — where rule was exercised by elders and ministers — because the particular calling of their office entails the particular functions required for the larger assemblies. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. If the primary purpose of the greater assemblies is guarding the unity of the doctrine, life, and witness of the church, then these assemblies should be filled with elders and ministers.

As the recent paper “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” concludes, “Careful distinctions, alongside a fundamental commitment to the parity (rather than hierarchy) of the offices, are necessary to the good order and wellbeing of the church and its witness to the gospel.” Behind this affirmation lay the presiding issue of how commissioned pastors could be delegates at the higher assemblies of regional and/or General Synod. The Commission on Theology affirmed the teaching of the church set out in the Preamble to the BCO, that “since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. 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.”

Recognizing the need to honor and celebrate the unique ministry of commissioned pastors (ordained elders whose ministry often shares a functional semblance to that carried out by ministers of Word and sacrament), and, at the same time, signaling the importance of their ordination as elders, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” argued that commissioned pastors ought to be permitted to serve as elder delegates on the basis of their office as elder.

Conclusion

The coffee break midway through the General Synod meeting is about to be interrupted so commission reports can continue, and one elder is brave enough to ask: “So WHY are we here?” Every eye turns toward the ministers, and the silence hangs around the table. It is a question that has been asked before and left unanswered.

Only this time, one quiet elder softly says, “God has called us here. He placed us here to help the church be faithful, to help the church proclaim the Word of God, baptize, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, to reach out to the lost, and to praise Jesus. I’m sure God could do all that without us, but he doesn’t choose to.” There are a few nods as everyone takes a deep breath and gets back to work.

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. If a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office, the perspective of this commission is that the offices of elder and minister best serve the greater assemblies.
TH 18-1
To affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper “The Nature of Office and Assembly,” that offices are not interchangeable and that the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament. (ADOPTED)

Ongoing Work

The COT continued discussion of items assigned to it as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and February meetings, the commission continued examining the roles and training available for commissioned pastors. The COT hopes to serve as a support and resource for those involved in training commissioned pastors and other leaders in the church. The COT also consulted with the Commission on Church Order regarding the tensions around the term “commissioned pastor.” It also agreed to offer support to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education as it begins a project to produce resources to teach children about a Reformed understanding of faith, covenant, and identity using historical exemplars of the faith. Finally, responding to a request from the RCA director of communication, the COT began the process of reviewing the “Questions of Faith” pages on the RCA website.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the RCA and specifically the General Synod and brings glory to the triune God.

Acknowledgments

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Jill Caratini, a specialized minister from Atlanta, Georgia, and John Young, an elder from LaGrangeville, New York, for their faithful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the COT is deeply grateful for their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Respectfully submitted,
Laird Edman, moderator

1  BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13); Chapter 1, Part I, Article 6, Section 1 (2017 edition, 22).
3  Worship the Lord, Order for the Profession of Faith, 42.
4  BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 8; 10 (2017 edition, 13).
5  BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 8; 10 (2017 edition, 12–13).
6  MGS 1968, 185–189.
7  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 118.
8  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 119.
10  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 125.
11  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 126.
12  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 128.
13  The Church Speaks, Volume 1, 134.
14  MGS 1974, 119.
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15 BCO, Preamble (2017 edition, 2).
17 Bavinck, 433.
18 Bavinck, 418.
19 Bavinck, 422.
20 Liturgy for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons (2000).
21 BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 4; 8; 10 (2017 edition, 12–13).
22 BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 4 (2017 edition, 12).
23 BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8 (2017 edition, 13).
24 BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13).
25 Bavinck, 432.
26 BCO, Preamble (2017 edition, 2).
27 BCO, Preamble (2017 edition, 3).
30 BCO, Preamble (2017 edition, 1).
31 BCO, Preamble (2017 edition, 1).
33 MGS 2017, 317.
Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women (CfW) is a group of eight women and men, lay and clergy, committed to the work of advocacy in the Reformed Church in America. Honoring the gifts of women strengthens the church and invites the full participation of all of God’s people. The Commission for Women seeks to raise awareness to provide opportunities for women in the church, to provide information so that women can participate in the leadership and life of the church, to work on systemic changes in the church for the full inclusion of women, and to collaborate and celebrate with other RCA bodies on women’s issues.

The Commission for Women met twice this year; our fall meeting was held in Grand Rapids with the other commissions and General Synod Council, and our 2018 winter meeting was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 2 and 3. We were hosted by Liberti Church in Philadelphia and were heartened to see the good work that they are doing for their community and the support they have for women’s gifts and talents in the life of their church.

There were several topics at hand that the Commission for Women discussed, including the celebration of 40 years of women’s ordination in the RCA at General Synod 2018, working with the Commissions on Christian Action and Christian Discipleship and Education on their respective projects, and continuing to hear the stories of women in the RCA. However, the CfW felt that the main issue that we wanted to focus on and highlight in 2018 is the issue of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women, especially in light of the #metoo and #churchtoo movements and the #wearespeaking statement put out by the RCA (www.rca.org/we-are-speaking/full-statement). To this end, we would like to make the following recommendation:

W 18-1
To affirm the #wearespeaking statement; and further,

To encourage that this statement and the subject of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence be used to inform services of worship; to encourage pastors to preach on this topic as well as to care for victims of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence; and to encourage congregations to form study groups to explore and reflect upon this topic. (ADOPTED)

In addition to being a moral and ethical issue, harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women is also a financial issue. The CfW understands that there are churches already being dropped by insurance companies because these companies deemed churches to be a liability and a risk. Hence, the Commission for Women would like to submit the following recommendations:

W 18-2
To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and further,

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistories, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation.
A motion was made and supported to amend W 18-2 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and further, furthermore ensure that investigations into such allegations will result in protection and non-retaliatory behaviors toward the reporters; and

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistory, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation.

VOTED: To amend W 18-2.

A motion was made and supported to refer W 18-2 as amended to the Committee of Reference to consider and report back to the General Synod before conclusion of the 2018 session.

VOTED: To not refer W 18-2 as amended.

VOTED: To adopt W 18-2 as amended.

W 18-2
To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and furthermore ensure that investigations into such allegations will result in protection and non-retaliatory behaviors toward the reporters; and

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistory, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation. (ADOPTED)

W 18-3
To urge every classis to have a sexual harassment training in place by General Synod 2019 and to have a plan for sustained accountability through continued education. (ADOPTED)

In this joyful year of celebrating women’s leadership, gifts, and roles in the Reformed Church in America, the Commission for Women remains dedicated to honoring women’s stories and experiences. We believe that a church that honors women honors all people of the church, strengthening the work that we do together in service of God and God’s people.

Respectfully submitted,
Shirley Lin, moderator
Report of the Professorate

The office of General Synod professor involves representing “the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry” as well as exercising “the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 70]). We fulfill this office both individually and collectively. Elected and installed by the General Synod, we remain amenable to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, striving at all times and in all ways to fulfill our calling faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully. This is the professorate’s seventh annual report to the General Synod.

We have met twice in the past year. Our fall meeting was held September 29–30, 2017, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Our spring meeting was held March 2–3, 2018, at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

Part of our collective calling is to facilitate theological reflection throughout the church so that our witness as a church may be more faithful and effective. One of the ways we lived into this calling this past year was by engaging with General Synod president Lee DeYoung, General Synod vice president James Nakakihara, and interim general secretary Don Poest in a discussion of the nature, purpose, and history of the office of General Synod professor. We very much welcomed this opportunity, which came at President DeYoung’s invitation. This discussion took place in Holland, Michigan, on January 28, 2018, with the Midwestern members of the professorate in attendance. The discussion served as a rich reminder of our call “to offer, collectively and individually, the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole, and to represent the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 70]).

In accordance with this calling, we have been active this year in matters of theological education and the formation of persons for ministry. We are represented on the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (formerly the Call, Care, Standards, and Collaboration group) and are sharing with that group the task of evaluating the RCA’s eight Standards for the Preparation for Ministry. We are also represented on the committees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) that recommend the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to, respectively, students at non-RCA seminaries and candidates pursuing the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) to ordination. We also set and evaluate the written examinations for the AAR candidates.

There are presently nine General Synod professors: Jaeseung Cha, Renée House, and Allan Janssen from New Brunswick Theological Seminary; Carol Bechtel, Timothy Brown, James Browson, and Thomas Boogaart from Western Theological Seminary; and Chad Pierce and Cornelis Kors from the MFCA. Each professor was nominated by a theological agent of the General Synod and then elected by the synod so they can exercise a substantial and continuing role in preparing candidates for ministry in the RCA under the authority of their nominating agency.

This year we express our deep appreciation for the work and leadership of three of our number who anticipate retirement in the coming year. Allan Janssen and Renée House will be retiring from their teaching responsibilities at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in June 2018, while Thomas Boogaart will be retiring from his teaching responsibilities at Western Theological Seminary in December 2018. We are grateful for their collegial spirit, their love for the church of Jesus Christ, and for countless hours poured into preparing students for effective ministry in the RCA. We pray every grace upon them in their retirement.
According to the Book of Church Order, the professorate is responsible to “engage the church in reflection on theological matters that in its judgment are central to the life and ministry of the church” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 6, Section 2a [2017 edition, p. 117]). Toward this end, we offer the following two reflections that we hope will encourage not only the current General Synod but also the whole church to engage in deep and prayerful discussion of matters that are of critical importance to the health and witness of the Reformed Church in America. The first is in the tradition of the biblical lament psalms, which feature not only laments but praises. The second is a reflection on the role of geography in establishing the boundaries of classes in the Reformed Church in America.

Laments and Praises

The first responsibility of the professorate is that it “shall engage the church in reflection on theological matters that in its judgment are central to the life and ministry of the church” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 6, Section 2a [2017 edition, p. 117]).

The Reformed church has enjoyed the heritage of a polity that broke from a hierarchy where the church was governed by individuals (bishops) to a synodical form of governance. We have defended that synodical polity as biblically and theologically sound. It has served us well. In recent years, some have become frustrated as majority opinion in a synod could not achieve the requisite super-majority among the classes. There are advantages to this polity; it has allowed the church to act deliberately when constitutional changes are considered. The result of the frustration has been a polarization that threatens to estrange brothers and sisters in Christ in a church division.

Hence, the professorate fulfills this responsibility by offering the following laments and praises:

- We are saddened by a polarization within the church that threatens both the unity and the catholicity of the church (two fundamental attributes confessed in the Nicaean Creed). We see members of the synod—and of the church—retreating into echo chambers with decreasing chance for dialogue, in contrast with the focus of our own Belhar Confession on the centrality of reconciliation. In our paper on the unity of the church (MGS 2016, pp. 323–328), we noted that unity is not uniformity. Indeed, we pointed out that the declaration that ministers and professors make to “subscribe to the Standards as ‘historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God’” allows for considerable diversity, including the meaning of the Standards themselves (MGS 2016, p. 324). While our unity is in Christ (not in ourselves), so our diversity is the work of the Spirit, whose work is inherently multifaceted (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12).
- We are saddened by the paucity of scriptural engagement around issues within the synod itself, particularly as the synod gathers in its annual session. Scripture (and confessional) debate and discussion appear to be little more than citations that allow little or no time for deeper reflection. This deficiency has particularly plagued recent deliberations on human sexuality.
- We are saddened that the historic Reformed polity has been diminished. Reformed polity has insisted that matters be determined in a mutual conversation, and that in Reformed governance, decisions are made at the most local level possible, and the greater assemblies practice appropriate oversight. That polity is being transformed. It is our task to remind us all that decisions that shaped that polity emerged from theological commitments, and that a shift in polity is a shift in how the church manifests its nature.
- We are saddened that, in the loss of discussion, we have lost an avenue given to us by God to discover the truth. For in discussion we meet our brother or
sister in Christ as the “other,” as one who challenges our certainties, indeed our prejudices. This is particularly true in scriptural discernment, as we listen to the voice of the other (both as one who comes to us from the past and as one who meets us in the present), thereby to listen together for what God might be saying to the church.

• We are saddened as we see bonds of unity stretched, and as we also hear the pain of those who have been left behind in the church’s councils. And yet we do not despair. For our trust is not in human plans and projects but in the God who has led God’s people through wilderness places and waters and feeds them along the way. God will not be deterred but will use even God’s own struggling church for the glorious purposes of God’s reign.

• We are grateful to be servants of a church that, with its mothers and fathers and with churches throughout the world, believes that Jesus Christ is Lord of all times and places.

• We are grateful to be part of a church constituted by Christ’s presence in Word and sacrament and to follow in joyful obedience the Scripture that addresses us with that Word. Moreover, we are glad as professors to educate ministers of Word and sacrament in a deeper and broader understanding of Scripture.

• We are grateful to be part of a church that has heard the Lord’s call to “go … and make disciples of all nations,” as a church that has, from its outset, set itself in mission to the uttermost parts of the globe (Matthew 28:19).

• We are grateful to unite in a tradition that cherished its past while looking to a future where all God’s children are welcomed around the Lord’s one table, open to confess our sin, and encouraged by grace to venture forward.

• We are grateful to enjoy a polity that requires us to deliberate together until we can come together, “together on the way” (synod).

• We are grateful to follow a sovereign Lord whose reign has already begun, whose Spirit roams widely beyond the church, and whose beloved community will triumph, beckoning us forward.

• We are grateful to stand in a tradition that refuses to compromise in its confession of God’s graceful turn toward creation.

• We are grateful to serve together in a church that delights in God’s good creation, united in the Lord who speaks to us and meets us in the struggles and joys of our created reality.

• Finally, we are glad to serve the synod and the church as stewards of a biblical and theological tradition that you have given us as our responsibility, always ready to share with the church the fruit of our faltering labor as sisters and brothers serving the one Lord for the sake of his beloved world.

Classis Bounds and Geography

The professorate would like to raise some issues surrounding the role of geography in establishing the boundaries of classes in the Reformed Church in America. At stake is the meaning of the words “bounds” or “boundaries” as found in the Book of Church Order. At the opening of the section of the BCO devoted to classes (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1 [2017 edition, p. 29]), it states, “The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds.”

What is the meaning of this last, underlined phrase? The same word appears in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 9; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 19, Section 1; and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 19, Section 2. Moreover, this word is interpreted in an explicitly geographic way
in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6 (2017 edition, pp. 36–37), which states,

When an organizing church is initiated by a classis not within the classis’s own geographic area, the initiating classis shall receive the permission of the classis in which it intends to initiate its ministry. Since a classis is composed of “all the churches within its bounds” (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1), normally an organizing church shall become a part of the classis to which it is geographically most proximate within a period of ten years from the date of its first gathering for worship. However, the transfer of the congregation to the other classis happens through consultation between the two classes and the regional synod or synods affected, and the vote of approval by both classes, acting for the best interests of the new congregation.

Moreover, the same word, “bounds,” occurs at multiple points in the BCO discussion of regional synods (Chapter 1, Part III, Article 1, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 1, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 4; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 4, Section 2; and Chapter 1, Part III, Article 7, Section 1), as well as in various portions of the BCO devoted to the General Synod (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8.c.3), as well as in Formulary #2 in the Appendix. Twice the BCO speaks of “boundaries” rather than “bounds” (Preamble and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3).

Events over the last number of years, however, have called into question the traditional meaning of “bounds” or “boundaries,” which are interpreted geographically in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6. The creation of City Classis by the Regional Synod of the Far West originally defined its bounds as equivalent to those of the Far West Region of the RCA. This, of course, overlapped with many other classes in that region, but some clarity was provided when it was made clear that the focus of the new classis was upon urban areas with populations greater than 500,000 people. Thus some sort of geographic bounds were envisioned. The inclusion somewhat later into this classis of churches in the Philadelphia area complicated this discussion of “bounds” even further, because these churches are geographically not found in the Far West Region at all, though a generous interpretation of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6 in the BCO (listed above) conceivably allows for such a provision.

But recent action by the Regional Synod of the Far West in creating the Classis of the Americas complicates this matter even further. Its proposal states that it will be a new classis “in the Far West Region for the unique and primary purpose of doing ministry from, to, and through multi-generational and multicultural Hispanic communities.” The proposal goes on to state that “all Hispanic pastors and congregations will be invited to consider being a part of Classis of the Americas. Each will have the opportunity to accept that invitation or to continue in their current classis.” Thus, the new classis again will not be defined by any sort of geographic boundary but instead by the ethnicity of the churches that are members of the classis. Although the proposal doesn’t say so explicitly, one assumption appears to be that Hispanic churches that are part of other regional synods can also join this classis, though this apparently has not yet happened.

But even if this has not yet happened, we see within the Far West Region a radically different interpretation of the meaning of “bounds” in the BCO, understanding it to refer not to geography but to ethnicity.

This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, other regions of the RCA have already rejected in the past some proposals to establish ethnic classes (e.g., a proposal to establish a Korean classis from the Classis of Greater Palisades). These other parts of the church...
that have considered this option have resisted it, pointing to the Belhar Confession, with its focus upon reconciliation and the catholicity of the church, as well as the Belhar’s insistence that the church’s unity “must become visible.” In addition, the New Testament itself speaks of churches using geographic terminology (e.g. “the churches in Galatia”) and profoundly resists demarcation along other—particularly ethnic—lines (e.g. “Jewish” or “Gentile” churches). Furthermore, the professorate believes that matters of guidance and discipline in a classis are significantly more difficult when churches are spread widely and are not geographically contiguous with each other, even when they are ethnically similar. Finally, the professorate believes that ethnic minorities need to be heard throughout the RCA and should not be focused in only one classis, which, we believe, would ultimately diminish their influence in the RCA overall. Ethnic minorities are already represented in racial/ethnic councils established by the General Synod Council (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b [2017 edition, p. 105]) and thus centralized access to denominational structures is already in place. What need to be cultivated are broader contacts throughout the denomination, and consolidating ethnicities in a single classis would work against this. Individual classes can also find a variety of means to empower the voices of minorities in their own life.

The professorate of the RCA therefore believes that this non-geographic interpretation of classis “bounds” needs to be tested, because it represents a substantial change in our order going forward. With this in mind, the professorate offers the following recommendation:

TE 18-1
To request the Commission on Church Order to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order, defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod.

A motion was made and supported to amend TE 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined):

To request the Commission on Church Order, Commission on History, and Commission on Theology to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order……

VOTED: To amend TE 18-1.

TE 18-1 as amended was before the house.

VOTED: To adopt TE 18-1 as amended.

The final version of TE 18-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

TE 18-1
To request the Commission on Church Order, Commission on History, and Commission on Theology to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order, defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod. (ADOPTED)
Conclusion

In all of this work, we continue to explore new possibilities for our collective role. We are grateful for having been charged with this call and are deeply sensible of our responsibility to the church. We solicit your prayers and your advice, and we are committed to engaging conversation at all levels of the RCA’s life and work.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Bechtel, moderator
together with the entire professorate, including Thomas Boogaart, Timothy Brown, James Brownson, Jaeseung Cha, Cornelis Kors, Renée House, Chad Pierce, and Allan Janssen.