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 Brownson, 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 Nicene 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.