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 [2018 edition, pp. 111–112]).

Through prayer and discernment, the Commission on Christian Action has come to a clear understanding that the work and identity of this commission as God has mandated is a call to biblical justice. Therefore, the Scripture that has guided our work this year is Micah 6:8, “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the **Lord** require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (KJV).


Quality time was spent during our fall meeting reviewing the Commission on Christian Action’s report to General Synod 2018. This gave us opportunity to have meaningful discussion about the progress of the commission and to think collectively about where God might be leading us for 2019 and 2020. This report informs the church of both ongoing and future work of the commission.

Biblical Justice

Biblical justice draws on the Scripture (Genesis 1-3) that tells the story of a just and righteous God who created a just world. God’s intended state of *shalom* is for humankind to live in a right relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation. Justice is at the very heart of God’s character and at the core of what he desires from his people. According to the psalmist, “The Lord is known by his acts of justice” (Psalm 9:16, NIV) and “a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom” (Psalm 45:6, NIV). The Creator executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoner free, and watches over the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan.

The Lord says, “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land” (Deuteronomy 16:20, NASB), and he ties the future of his people to their treatment of the oppressed, the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow. What God wants from humankind is that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with him.

The church’s responsibility is to expose the social injustices in the world and to take just and merciful action to bring unjust acts in line with God’s justice. When the body of Christ is living the way God has called us to live as righteous and just people, the world will be the kind of world that reflects God’s kingdom on Earth. The church is the empowerment and mobilization of a biblical justice into the world. The Commission on Christian Action is the empowerment and mobilization of a biblical justice in the Reformed Church in America. Therefore, the work and identity of this commission is the work of biblical justice.

Commission on Christian Action on the Road

During our fall meeting in 2017, concerns were brought about how we raise and discuss issues of social justice with RCA college and seminary students and how we inform students of the work of the Commission on Christian Action. That discussion lead to the concept of a “CCA on the Road” initiative. Through prayer, sharing our idea with college and seminary leaders, and thoughtful discussion, CCA on the Road has taken form and will be implemented this year.
The purpose of CCA on the Road is as follows:

- To inform and interconnect the social justice and advocacy work of CCA with students and faculty of RCA colleges and seminaries.
- To hear social justice and advocacy concerns of college and seminary groups.
- To stir and advance our living out as the body of Christ the call to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

CCA on the Road will be delivered via a short video featuring topics of creation care, immigration, and criminal justice reform; each topic will be tied to the three pillars of Transformed & Transforming. The video is designed to promote conversation about critical social issues, share what the commission has done and continues to do related to such issues, and query students as to where the commission, the church, and their campus can engage social justice matters. The proposed colleges and seminaries to experience CCA on the Road include Central, Northwestern, and Hope Colleges and Western and New Brunswick Theological Seminaries. Commission on Christian Action on the Road is available at the CCA table in the display area for all delegates to experience.

**Weaponized Drones**

The commission continues to work in collaboration with the Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare. In this phase of the project, the goal for the Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare is to recruit 60 people of faith in 30 regions who will make a commitment until February 1, 2021, to educate both institutions and individuals of faith in order to build public awareness about the use of drones in targeted killings and to more effectively advocate for a change in U.S. lethal drone policies. A National Project Committee, consisting of representatives of denominational bodies, faith groups, and religious organizations concerned about drone warfare, will provide leadership to this effort. A member of the Commission on Christian Action serves on the National Project Committee representing the Reformed Church in America. The efforts of the committee will culminate in a three-day training conference that will be held at Princeton Theological Seminary.

As stated in our report to the church in 2018, 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. We must also encourage our congregations to continue to contact their legislators on this important moral issue. There is information on the CCA table for anyone interested in learning more about the opportunity to attend the training conference at Princeton Theological Seminary.

For more resources, see the Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare’s website: www.interfaithdronenetwork.org.

**Just Peace**

The commission’s discussion on militarized drone warfare turned to the need to take a fresh look at the issue of just warfare. Questions requiring clarification for the commission are as follows: What is our church saying about just peace? What does the church want to say on this issue? Members of the commission agreed that there is a need to think differently about the humanity and morality of war, the collateral damage, and how the church speaks peace. The commission will continue to study, think, and engage in discourse about just peace and will present a report and recommendations to General Synod 2020.
Creation Care

The Commission on Christian Action is engaged in a fruitful collaboration with Earl James and the Creation Care initiative, through our ecumenical representative from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As a result of this collaboration, creation care will be one of the topics addressed in the CCA on the Road project, as well as in a “lunch and learn” forum at General Synod. Care of the creation is a critical moral issue facing the church today. A goal of the commission is to explore ways to generate a faithful response to creation care. This work will continue with a follow-up report and recommendations for General Synod 2020.

Opioid Crisis

There are more deaths, illnesses, and disabilities due to drug use in the United States than any other preventable health condition. In 2014, it was estimated that over 20 million adults were classified with substance dependence or abuse. It is also estimated that one in four Americans will at some time in their lives have an alcohol or drug problem. Unlike prevailing stereotypes, an addicted person can be anyone from anywhere.

The Commission on Christian Action has begun a conversation around what is typically called the opioid crisis. The opioid crisis, sometimes also known as the opioid epidemic, refers to the rapid increase in the use of prescription and non-prescription opioid drugs in the U.S. and Canada beginning in the late 1990s and continuing today.

The statistics are staggering:

- From 1999 to 2017, more than 700,000 people have died from drug overdoses.
- Around 68 percent of the more than 70,200 drug overdose deaths in 2017 involved an opioid.
- In 2017, the number of overdose deaths involving opioids (including prescription opioids and illegal opioids like heroin and illicitly manufactured fentanyl) was six times higher than in 1999.
- On average, 130 Americans die every day from opioid overdoses.1

The consequences of this crisis or epidemic are far-reaching. It has contributed to the unnecessary deaths of youth and has left children without parents. It has led to babies born with opioid-related medical conditions. It has led to lost productivity in work sites and has had financial impact on families and on state and local communities.

The aim of our conversation is to encourage congregations and classes to respond to this crisis in ways that are appropriate in their own contexts. Given the statistics above, it seems safe to assume that few congregations are unaffected by this epidemic. As a follow-up to this report, the commission will develop a handbook with helpful information, resources, and appropriate actions for pastors and church teams to cooperate with local organizations that are working toward harm reduction and a resolution to this crisis.

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Commission on Christian Action Reference Table

This year, the Commission on Christian Action has a table in the display area at General Synod displaying information about CCA on the Road, a conversation deck of cards related to creation care, a list of critical biblical justice issues the commission has presented to the church over the past ten years, and information about how to access the CCA landing page.

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

Children and Worship and Children’s Ministry

At the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education’s February 2019 meeting, members of the commission were informed that the RCA’s support of Children and Worship (C&W) is ending June 30, 2019. Contracts with the RCA coordinator and RCA trainers will not be renewed.

The commission is very disappointed to hear this sad news. In light of this change, the commission wants to highlight how Children and Worship transforms the lives of children and adults. The aim of C&W, as stated by Sonja Stewart (Reformed Worship, #12, pp. 25–29), “is to create an environment that enables children to encounter and worship God; to abide in God’s love as experienced in biblical stories, parables, and liturgical presentations; and to live as Christ’s ministers in the world.” Children and Worship became a ministry of the RCA under the leadership of Kenneth Bradsell, who was, at the time, the RCA minister for education and faith development. Before Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman’s book, Young Children and Worship (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), was published, the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and Western Theological Seminary (WTS) had formed a partnership for training. Sonja Stewart developed the training program that was used in the RCA- and CRC-sponsored centers around the U.S. and Canada. This partnership continued until 1994.

In 1994, the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) became a partner with the RCA and the CRCNA for the oversight of the Children and Worship training program in the three denominations. Training and equipping events for leaders include introductions, basic trainings, enrichment events, and specialized trainings. In 1996, the RCA, at the request of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, sent Sonja Stewart and Rebecca Mead to South Africa, where they held two Children and Worship training events. The RCA provided materials for two complete Children and Worship centers to be left in South Africa for future training events.


In 1998, Willa Brown (at that time, RCA associate for children’s ministry) and Phyllis Palsma (a former Children and Worship trainer) attended the World Council of Churches Jubilee Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, and provided an introduction of C&W. In his president’s report to the 1999 General Synod, Fritz Kruithof proposed that the RCA “explore the possibility and potential for establishing a world outreach team for the Children and Worship ministry”; in response, a recommendation was passed. At the fall meeting of GSC that year, a proposal was accepted, and Children and Worship International, in partnership with RCA Global Mission, was created.
RCA missionaries Ruth De Haan and Jane Van Es participated in C&W training in 2000 and went to The Gambia, where they used the program in the Anglican Church, an RCA partner. When the De Haans and the Van Esses left The Gambia, Jane Van Es moved the materials to Kenya, the location of the Van Esses’ next missionary assignment.

Edna Pick, from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, participated in Sonja Stewart’s Children and Worship class at WTS and also participated in a training event led by RCA trainer Marcia Floding. After two years of fundraising and planning, Willa Brown and RCA C&W trainer Ellen Vellenga traveled to Paarl, South Africa, where they partnered with Edna Pick and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa to train leaders for the C&W program. Edna translated *Young Children and Worship* into Afrikaans and led many training events throughout South Africa.

Martha and Jaime Amaro and Midiam Ramos were trained by Sonja Stewart in a one-week personalized event in 2003 and then participated in a C&W training event led by Marcia Floding. Martha is an RCA missionary whose main work is to lead C&W introductions and training events in Mexico and to provide support for churches and seminaries using the C&W program. Martha translated *Young Children and Worship* into Spanish. The RCA contracted with Westminster John Knox Press to publish the Spanish and Afrikaans translations of *Young Children and Worship*. Hector Silva, a dean at one of the seminaries in Mexico, said, “What a blessing to have access to this class. This is going to be a perfect tool to recover our Reformed tradition.”

Following the death of founder Sonja Stewart in 2006, the training partnership joined with Journey at Western Theological Seminary to resume the annual International Children and Worship workshop. These annual events were held at WTS with trainers from each of the denominations. At each event, trainers and participants would always share stories from their Children and Worship centers. “I remember when Trenton, a visitor, walked out of the worship center and enthusiastically said to his parents, ‘Can we do that again next week?!?’”

“Nozomi Brownell, RCA missionary in Japan, received training from RCA trainer Marcia Floding in 2007. Nozomi was able to assist with the Japanese translation of *Young Children and Worship*. In a thank you note to the RCA, Masayoshi Nishimura (publisher in Japan), stated, 

> Considering the hardship that the current Japanese churches are facing, it was not an easy decision to publish such book as this at this time. However our company has determined to publish this book for the sake of the future of the Japanese churches and their children. We are greatly encouraged and inspired by your strong support for this project.

The head of Kyodan Publishing House, who is a WTS graduate, told Nathan (Nozomi’s spouse), “this Children and Worship group has a potential to have a major breakthrough among Japanese churches.” In their 2018 ministry review, the Brownells report that, in addition to the training center at Yokohama, another one has been established northeast of Tokyo in Saitama. Nozomi says,
We have been introducing C&W to the wider Japanese church and to various pre-Ks, kindergartens, and in other contexts for the past 10 years. Now we are in the second stage and we are raising up a team of worship leaders and trainers. They come from various places across the country. Presently, there are 16 certified C&W worship leaders in Japan. We see this investment in people as most important…

Mariko, who was one of the first certified C&W leaders in Japan, recently had an opportunity to lead worship at a children’s summer camp. She was able to hold two sessions with some 20 children each. On the last day of camp, the children wrote reflections about the camp. Several of them wrote that their favorite time during the camp was the Children and Worship time. She reports that one of the girls even wrote, “I loved the story so much that when I grow up, I want to become a Bible storyteller. I want to be just like Mariko!” What a compliment! This type of report gives us hope for the next generation. We must keep focusing on raising up Christians who will carry the light of Christ to the future.

This rich and ongoing experience for children is used around the world. Thus, the commission is disheartened over the loss of support (and RCA trainers) for Children and Worship in the United States (Children and Worship International is continuing within RCA Global Mission).

What it demonstrates is the RCA’s depletion of emphasis on the spiritual formation of children. The church has a biblical and theological mandate to care for children, each of whom is precious to God. At baptism the congregation is asked, “Do you promise to love, encourage, and support these brothers and sisters by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer, and service?” (Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America). Jesus encouraged his followers to welcome the children, feed his sheep, and care for the least of these. Education about the needs of children in our congregations and in the world is the foundation of our ministries with, by, and for children (Matthew 19:14, Deuteronomy 11:18-19).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada conducted a study that showed that 60 percent of congregations that had no Sunday school in 2006 also performed no baptisms. Furthermore, 36.8 percent of congregations without Sunday school and celebrating no baptisms were closed within 15 years. The Presbyterian Church in Canada concluded that congregations that did not reach children and their families with the good news of Jesus had difficulty maintaining ministry of any kind. Thus, having a ministry to children is one of the most effective ways of growing a community of faith.

In her book The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving (St. Martin’s Press, 2015), Lisa Miller provides research that shows that children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality are 40 percent less likely to use and abuse substances, 60 percent less likely to be depressed as teenagers, 80 percent less likely to have dangerous or unprotected sex, and more likely to have positive markers for thriving and high levels of academic success.

The National Council of Churches, in its policy statement “The Church and Children: Vision and Goals for the 21st Century,” states:

Habits developed in childhood will be present throughout their lives. Relationships in childhood affect one’s ability to trust and to hope. Experiences
of childhood shape a person’s attitude toward racism, intolerance, violence, and other challenges to a people striving for true justice and peace. A child’s faith grows as the child grows. Adults who model faith and provide opportunities for children to participate positively in a faith community influence children’s future involvement in worship, education, stewardship, and service to others. If we are to grow and nurture the church of the future, children must be primary participants.

John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner, writing in *Lifelong Faith* (Fall/Winter 2007, Lifelong Faith Associates, pp. 1–13), identify six best practices that congregations are using to provide more holistic and comprehensive faith formation for today’s children:

1. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multisensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.
2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.
3. Effective faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.
4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.
5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.
6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

Roberto and Pfiffner add, “It goes without saying that an essential practice for making the six best practices effective is that congregations dedicate significant resources—space, people, finances, programs—to a wide array of children’s faith formation activities.” To that end, the commission urges the RCA to dedicate itself to the same goal: commit substantial resources to the ongoing religious development of children.

**Directory of Christian Educators**

The commission is 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. Similar data on youth ministry leaders is already collected through the annual consistorial reports, and 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, the commission makes the following recommendation:

**DE 19-1**

To direct the General Synod Council to add a section to the annual Consistorial Report Form that will collect the same information for those who serve in the spiritual formation,
discipleship, and/or teaching ministries of the congregation as that which is currently collected for youth ministry leaders; 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. (ADOPTED)

The following is how the request would appear on the annual Consistorial Report Form.

The information below will not be shared with any entity outside the RCA. It will be used to provide support for discipleship and educational ministries in RCA congregations in keeping with the call articulated in Transformed & Transforming.

Primary Christian Education/Discipleship Contact

Please provide information for the person who is the primary contact for discipleship and/or education in your congregation. This person could be a paid staff member such as a Christian education director or pastor of discipleship, or he or she could be a volunteer if your congregation does not have Christian education or discipleship staff. If your congregation has more than one person in this role, please designate one as the primary contact.

Name ________________________________________________________________

Address _____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

☐ Christian Education Director     ☐ Pastor of Discipleship
☐ Senior Pastor                  ☐ Volunteer
☐ Other

Phone (__) ___________________________ ☐ home ☐ work ☐ cell

Email ______________________________

☐ We don’t currently have a Christian education/discipleship contact

RCA and Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America

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 Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America (CERCA)—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).

In February 2018, more than 30 CERCA members gathered at the annual Association
of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) event in Louisville, Kentucky. The RCA and CERCA have maintained an affiliate relationship with the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators since 1983. At the annual event, four RCA members provided presentations. Terry DeYoung 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 Fund. During CERCA’s annual meeting at the event, Jill Ver Steeg (at the time serving as the RCA director of transformational engagement, a member of APCE’s Coordinating Council, and an 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.

At the recent 2019 annual event, nine members from Mescalero Reformed Church attended. Attendees from Mescalero Reformed received scholarships and encouragement to attend last year; Mark Vellinga, Mescalero’s pastor, expressed appreciation for the conference and for the support received from the RCA. To share their enthusiasm and wisdom, they are considering offering a workshop at a future annual event. All CERCA participants are looking forward to 2021, when CERCA will celebrate its 40th anniversary while the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators celebrates its 50th in Chicago.

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

**DE 19-2**

To direct the General Synod Council to create a $10,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of $1,000 per year, in order to provide for professional and personal growth of those working in RCA education and discipleship ministries (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, etc.). RCA staff will make decisions on applications for funds in collaboration with the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education.

And further, to approve the $0.08 per member assessment to fund this initiative. (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
Bethany Popkes, moderator

The following motion was made and supported:

**DE 19-3**

That the RCA staff reconsider its decision regarding ending Children and Worship support and report its decision to the 2020 General Synod with reasons.

Reasons:
1. A thorough study of this ministry was not conducted prior to the decision.
2. The end of support of the C&W ministry is impacting thousands of lives worldwide. To do so without a thorough review seems unjustifiable.
A motion to table discussion of this motion after the report of the GSC on its review of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education was made and supported.

**VOTED:** To table discussion of the motion from the floor until the report of the GSC regarding commission reviews has been presented and acted upon.

Following the report of the GSC regarding commission reviews (and related vote to not adopt EC 19-6) a motion was made and supported to take the motion from the table.

**VOTED:** To take the motion from the table.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt the motion.

The final version of DE 19-3 as adopted reads as follows:

**DE 19-3**
That the RCA staff reconsider its decision regarding ending Children and Worship support and report its decision to the 2020 General Synod with reasons. (ADOPTED)
Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), per the Book of Church Order (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2018 edition, pp. 67–68]). 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 reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the Book of Church Order (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 (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2018 edition, p. 112]).

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 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 both their gifts and their time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. 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 of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can similarly be transforming the world 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 report of the commission 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 on the work and witness of the RCA. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in the 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” (https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us).

The WCC gathers its community from 345 churches in 110 countries representing over 500 million Christians worldwide. Member churches (or denominations) consist primarily of those from the historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox Church, including most of the world’s Orthodox churches; 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. Major parts of world Christianity, including churches from Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, however, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC but participates in various theological dialogues and cooperates 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. Eddy Alemán serves on the Central Committee, continuing the unbroken line of RCA general secretaries serving the WCC in this capacity.

The work of the WCC is not simply programmatic or related to formal initiatives. At times, it 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 both to 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 could be an excellent study resource for congregations.

Olav Fykse Tveit, an ordained pastor in the Church of Norway, is general secretary of the WCC. For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, go to 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 100 million people.

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 1,000 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). The RCA delegation to the council consisted of Lisa Vander Wal, Monica Schaap Pierce, and two young adult leaders: Carlos Corro and Stacey Duensing. During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation 20 years ago this year, which has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. Additionally, the council 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 WCRC is “called to communion and committed to justice.” Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC is always being transformed as it strives for the full and just participation of all. In its diversity, the WCRC seeks to be a living expression of “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As a global koinonia, the communion is marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. With all the partners God provides, the WCRC works for the transformation of the whole world, so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

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

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.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, go to www.wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence, drawing for the first time world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African-Instituted churches into a new place of relational, rather than structural, fellowship. Begun quietly
in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it 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.

In 2018, Casely Essamuah was installed as the newest secretary of the GCF. An ordained minister in the Methodist Church, Ghana, he describes himself as “evangelical and ecumenical.” Coming 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.

In February 2019, the GCF’s international committee, its governing board, met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Its chief purpose was to plan activities for the next three to five years, based on the ideas that emerged from the GCF’s Third Global Gathering (held in Bogota, Colombia, in April 2018, and attended by Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Lee DeYoung, and young adult delegate Stacey Duensing). The committee initiated plans for regional meetings and made it a priority to engage younger leaders and voices in these gatherings.

Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the GCF Committee and its Facilitation Group (the executive committee).

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

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 38 NCC member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include more than 40 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 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 and Christian Education, Faith Formation, and Leadership. The Commission thanks Norma Coleman-James and Monica Schaap Pierce for their ongoing service on these Convening Tables. This past year, Western Theological Seminary students Trey Tirpak and Laurel Pals also participated in the NCC’s Christian Unity Gathering through the seminarian program.

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 national organizations, such as Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. It is this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes 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” (www.christianchurchestogether.org/about-us).

In 2018, Christian Churches Together held its convocation in Wichita, Kansas, at the Catholic Spiritual Life Center. With the theme “Let’s Talk about Life,” speakers and participants engaged in dialogue on the sacredness of life. Topics of discussion included abortion, poverty, healthcare, racism, sexism, and the ideological divides of our time. The RCA delegation consisted of Monica Schaap Pierce, who also serves on the Steering Committee of CCT, and three young adults: RCA ministers Carlos Corro and Stacey Duensing, and Western Theological Seminary student Anne Elzinga.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates laud the annual convocations 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. 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, including general secretary Eddy Alemán, 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.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula’s provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a newly revised guide in “The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament” document: www.rca.org/rca-basics/ecumenical-partners/formula-agreement. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories that are considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches. The commission would like to thank RCA staff Andy Bossardet and Molly Towne for their work on this updated guide.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

For more than 50 years, the Reformed Church in America has participated in an ongoing theological dialogue with other Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives. Recently, the Reformed–Roman Catholic consultation concluded its eighth round of dialogue. 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 RCA. The RCA was represented by Allan Janssen, Wes Granberg-Michaelson, and Monica Schaap Pierce. The dialogue focused on ecclesiology, and in particular, on the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, and 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 commission commends the report of the eighth round, titled The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World, to churches for study. The text can be found on the ecumenical page on the RCA website: www.rca.org/partners. The ninth round of dialogue will commence upon approval by partner denominations and will 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 in 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 or 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 practicing 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 longstanding and offer member pastors support on many levels and engage them together in mercy and justice projects. Historically, the Commission on Christian Unity has not engaged these local expressions. In the future, the commission might connect with these associations and councils to promote and enhance learning, to identify opportunities for wider impact, and to explore together how the denominational mandate for the commission can serve local Christian unity efforts, perhaps especially given the enormous “glo-cal” trends, needs, 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 RCA 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 RCA, we have allowed walls to be built up and have allowed 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 oneness that we have in Christ. For Christian unity—while universal in God’s promise—must begin at home.
Emerging Leaders’ Call to Unity

While some might argue that ecumenism is passé—that the work of this commission is no longer relevant or needed—we have discovered just how important our work is for all generations in the church, and especially so for the emerging leaders of today and tomorrow.

Through the intentional work of ecumenical associate Monica Schaap Pierce, the RCA has sent several of these emerging leaders to various ecumenical gatherings, including the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, and the Global Christian Forum. After each gathering, these emerging leaders submit written reports to the commission. They regularly express deep appreciation for the RCA’s strong commitment to the unity of the church. For these young leaders, there is deep resonance between their understanding of the gospel and their commitment to the work of Christian unity.

Western Theological Seminary students Anne Elzinga and Trey Tirpak have both participated in ecumenical gatherings as representatives of the RCA.

Anne Elzinga attended the Christian Churches Together convocation in Wichita, Kansas, in October 2018. For Anne, the work of Christian unity is vitally important: “We are meant to be in unity with one another because we are one body of Christ.” Anne sees denominational differences not as obstacles to overcome, but as “beautiful” and “unique” perspectives that help us grow in understanding of our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. She also believes that denominational partnerships are vital as we engage in Christian mission.

Trey Tirpak attended the National Council of Churches gathering in Baltimore, Maryland, in October 2018. Trey believes that the work of Christian unity is “the way forward in mission, both in evangelization and in the cultivation of shalom.” He adds that “ecumenical work is a significant life-giving and strategic practice that historical denominations that are in decline can do” to infuse life into their own ministry and strengthen their service and mission to the world.

Anne and Trey give voice to what many of our emerging leaders of today and tomorrow believe: Christian unity is vital to our Christian witness.

In light of what the commission has been learning from our emerging leaders, we have produced “The Christian Unity Project,” a video that conveys the perspectives of young people on issues of unity and disunity in the church. To share what we have learned, the commission makes the following recommendation:

**CU 19-1**

To commend the video “The Christian Unity Project” to regional synods, classes, and consistories, encouraging them to use this video as a stimulant for discussion as they seek to follow Christ’s call to unity and to listen to the perspectives of our emerging leaders of today and tomorrow about the importance of Christian unity. (ADOPTED)
Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to offer deep gratitude to Lisa Vander Wal, who is completing her second term. Lisa served as moderator for two years and has been and will continue to be a deeply involved and engaged leader with the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Finally, the commission expresses its profound appreciation for the excellent work of our ecumenical associate, Monica Schaap Pierce.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael Hardeman, moderator
Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship convened in person in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 18–20, 2018, in conjunction with the joint meetings of the General Synod commissions and General Synod Council (GSC), and on February 14–16, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The majority of the commission’s work over the past year has been focused on the 2018 Congregational Worship Survey.

Background and Methodology

In 2017, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA) contracted with the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship (CICW) and the affiliated Center for Social Research (CSR) to conduct a joint denomination-wide survey of congregational worship and liturgical practices. The Commission on Christian Worship and its CRCNA counterpart developed the survey with assistance from the CSR. Survey topics included worship statistics and demographics, characteristics of the worship service, congregational music, the sacraments, preaching of the Word, worship materials’ use of technology and art, the observance of special liturgical seasons and days, and specific denominational questions for churches in the RCA or CRCNA.

This survey was designed with two complementary purposes. The first was to collect specific statistical data on congregational worship practices. The second purpose was to stimulate reflection and conversation among those who took the survey. This commission encouraged 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. The hope was for the survey itself to foster conversation concerning worship practices and formation at the congregational level.

Overall Responses and Demographics

The worship survey was sent via email to churches throughout the United States and Canada with a personalized survey link from mid-September to the end of October 2018. Great effort was undertaken to offer this survey to every congregation in the denomination during this time. The commission was warned by the CSR that it would be unrealistic to think every congregation would complete such an in-depth and comprehensive survey. However, even if only a small percentage responded (which is often the case), it would still be possible to receive statistically significant data. The CICW and CSR were expecting a response of 5 percent. The RCA received a 20 percent response from congregations representing all eight synods. These congregations fully participated in the survey and provided data that proved to be more than sufficient to provide a clear statistical snapshot of the worship life and practice of the RCA. The survey data was compiled in Tableau Reader software.

Congregations from across North America participated in the survey. The survey was completed by small churches with worship attendance of less than 50 people and by churches who worship regularly with well over 250 people and/or in multiple services. Approximately 30 percent of the responses were from multiracial or predominantly non-white congregations, including congregations that minister in languages other than English. A breakdown of participating churches by regional synod can be seen in Table 1.
Initial Reflections on the 2018 Worship Survey Results

At the writing of this report, the commission is still sifting through the results and working on a more formalized executive summary of the 2018 worship survey. In the meantime, the commission offers the following reflections.

Overall, there were many things that encouraged the CICW in relation to Reformed worship practice. As this was a joint worship survey, the commission was able to compare data with our sister denomination (CRCNA) and discover that there is much unity in our worship practices. Worship is happening throughout the RCA and the CRCNA. RCA congregations offer at least one worship service opportunity in a typical week and 57 percent of these congregations have an average worship attendance from 0–99 people (Table 2 and Table 3).

In the worship life of the RCA, we continue to be united in our celebration of Word and sacrament. Thirty percent of RCA churches follow the Revised Common Lectionary for the Scripture readings each week (Table 4). Approximately 91 percent of churches utilize the denominational liturgy for baptism, and approximately 86 percent of churches utilize the denominational liturgy for the Lord’s Supper (Table 5 and Table 6). A breakdown of the use of the Lord’s Supper liturgy by synods can be seen in Table 7. The commission was also delighted to see an increase in the frequency of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Churches celebrating the Lord’s Supper at least once a month has increased from 40 percent in the 2004 worship survey to 60 percent in the 2018 survey (Table 8).

The survey results also indicated a high use of technology in worship (Table 9). As a commission, we hope to look into this and address best practices. We wondered about the dichotomy between being plugged in or unplugged in relation to spirituality. And we are currently pondering what it means to say, “Yes, but…” to technology in worship.

The commission was also encouraged by the practice of prayer in worship (Table 10) and the increased awareness of and accommodation to people with special needs in worship. Fifty-six percent of churches indicated they have alternative options available during the Lord’s Supper for those with gluten intolerance. Seventy-three percent of churches indicated that they meet the needs of persons with visual impairments and sound deficits. In addition, many members of the commission highlighted the celebration of the seasons of the church year as an increasing practice in RCA worship. For example, the observation of the season of Epiphany has grown from 44 percent of churches in 2004 to 56 percent in 2018. The observation of Ascension Sunday has also grown, from 28 percent in 2004 to 53 percent in 2018.

There were some results that raised concerns related to music in worship. The first is that the percentage of churches that indicated that they project music and lyrics (83 percent) is significantly higher than the percentages of churches that indicated the use of CCLI or another music license (74 percent). The commission hopes this was an oversight and would like to remind the RCA that church music is copyrighted and that licensing agencies provide for the appropriate legal use of music in worship. We also recommend that worship leaders take time to conduct a theological audit of the top songs sung in worship at their location.

The commission’s initial assessments of the worship survey indicate that worship is one area where we find commonality in our diversity. We pray, we sing, we hear God’s Word, and we respond. The Approach, Word, and Response liturgical form is enacted in varying ways across the RCA, but we are still united in the structure itself.
Next Steps

The commission is exploring options to help us further understand the breadth and depth of the data. There are still many things to unpack and learn from this data. It is our hope that churches, pastors, and worship leaders will communicate with this commission their questions, struggles, and joys in their worship practices. We want to hear what is happening in your church and how this commission can be of assistance.

In Appreciation

The commission gives thanks for the hard work of Laura K. Tarbous and Laura Luchies in disseminating the worship survey and collecting accurate ecclesiastical email addresses. The commission is also extremely grateful to Ron Rienstra for serving as the RCA liaison to CICW and CSR in regard to the worship survey.

Respectfully submitted,
Sarah Palsma, moderator

Table 1
Churches with a Completed Survey Response by Regional Synod

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synod</th>
<th>2018 # of congregations</th>
<th># of survey participants</th>
<th>% of synod</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantics</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-America</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far West</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Lakes</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartland</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>862</strong></td>
<td><strong>178</strong></td>
<td>% of RCA: 20.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
How many unique worship services does your congregation hold during a typical week?
Topic: Worship Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four or more</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
What is the average total attendance at this service?
Topic: Worship Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–99 people</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–249 people</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250–499 people</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–1,499 people</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,500+ people</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
How are the Scripture readings normally chosen?
Topic: Word: Reading and Preaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revised Common Lectionary</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected by the preacher each week</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next lesson in Scripture series</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Lectionary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governed by a topic</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5
Does your church use a denominational liturgy for baptism?
Topic: Baptisms and Professions of Faith

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but adapted</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, we develop our own</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, we do not use a baptismal form</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>178</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6
Does your church use a denominational liturgy for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper?
Topic: Lord’s Supper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but adapted</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, we develop our own</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, we do not use a form for the Lord’s Supper</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>178</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Does your church use a denominational liturgy for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper?
Topic: Lord’s Supper

*Responses broken out by regional synod (frequency [percent]*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes, but adapted</th>
<th>No, we develop our own</th>
<th>No, we do not use a form for the Lord’s Supper</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>16 (84%)</td>
<td>3 (16%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>5 (38%)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-America</td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
<td>5 (29%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantics</td>
<td>17 (55%)</td>
<td>12 (39%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>12 (67%)</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far West</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>6 (38%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Lakes</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
<td>19 (56%)</td>
<td>7 (21%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartland</td>
<td>9 (30%)</td>
<td>18 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8
How frequently is the Lord’s Supper celebrated?
Topic: Lord’s Supper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a quarter</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>178</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9
How reliant is your weekly worship on electronic technology?
Topic: Technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>178</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10
How often are the following types of prayer normally included in this worship service?
Topic: Public Prayer
(Frequency [Percentage])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prayer Type</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayers of the people</td>
<td>141 (79%)</td>
<td>19 (11%)</td>
<td>11 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (2.5%)</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer of response to the sermon</td>
<td>120 (67%)</td>
<td>26 (15%)</td>
<td>12 (7%)</td>
<td>10 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (2.5%)</td>
<td>5 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer of dedication/offering</td>
<td>110 (62%)</td>
<td>21 (12%)</td>
<td>20 (11%)</td>
<td>12 (7%)</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening prayer</td>
<td>103 (58%)</td>
<td>26 (15%)</td>
<td>22 (12%)</td>
<td>14 (8%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer for illumination</td>
<td>97 (54.5%)</td>
<td>27 (15%)</td>
<td>27 (15%)</td>
<td>14 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td>4 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer of confession</td>
<td>91 (51%)</td>
<td>24 (14%)</td>
<td>45 (25%)</td>
<td>10 (6%)</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer for healing</td>
<td>52 (29%)</td>
<td>27 (15%)</td>
<td>63 (35%)</td>
<td>21 (12%)</td>
<td>7 (4%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer of sending</td>
<td>47 (26%)</td>
<td>20 (11%)</td>
<td>42 (24%)</td>
<td>33 (19%)</td>
<td>22 (12%)</td>
<td>14 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer of lament</td>
<td>11 (6%)</td>
<td>7 (4%)</td>
<td>44 (25%)</td>
<td>69 (39%)</td>
<td>32 (18%)</td>
<td>15 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Report of the Commission on Church Order

Responsibilities; Meetings

The General Synod’s Commission on Church Order (CCO) is responsible for “making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the Book of Church Order” and for providing “advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the Book of Church Order” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b [2018 edition, pp. 112–113]). To fulfill those responsibilities, the CCO met October 18 through 20, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and January 30 through February 1, 2019, in the RCA’s regional office in New York, New York. Additional communication occurred by electronic means. In its service to the church, the CCO addressed the referrals from the 2018 General Synod, as well as work generated from advisory responses and from its own life as a commission.

REFERRALS FROM THE 2018 GENERAL SYNOD

The CCO received three referrals from the 2018 General Synod: CO 18-4, RF 18-3, and OV 18-14. The General Synod referred an additional matter to the Commission on History, the Commission on Theology, and the CCO for joint action (TE 18-1); the action of the Commission on Theology and CCO is included in this report. The Commission on History elected to work separately following a joint meeting of the commissions.

CO 18-4: Affiliation of a 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 provided an orderly way for local churches to affiliate with other denominations. At that time, the CCO noted examples of affiliated churches already in existence in the RCA, as well as other churches expressing interest in such a relationship. The commission did not, and does not, offer an opinion on the merits of affiliation. The 2017 General Synod voted not to adopt the proposed amendments (MGS 2017, R 17-46, p. 271).

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 [2018 edition, p. 14]). The CCO resubmitted the proposed amendments to the 2018 General Synod, employing the phrase “an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers” in lieu of “full communion” to provide greater clarity because the General Synod has such written agreements. The 2018 General Synod took the following action: “To refer CO 18-4 to the General Synod’s Commission on Church Order for further refinement and clarity” (MGS 2018, p. 263).

The CCO undertook additional revisions to provide greater structure and clarity to its proposal. Specifically, subparagraphs related to finances and representation were added. Accordingly, the commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 19-1
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):
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, including those regarding representation at higher assemblies. Any obligation of the consistory to pay assessments to the classis is not reduced by virtue of affiliation with another denomination, unless otherwise approved by its classis.

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. Ministers and elder delegates from an affiliating church shall have the privilege of the floor. The receiving classis may grant voting privileges and if granted, the delegates may participate in higher assemblies.

b. The number of elder delegates from an affiliating church shall be determined as provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3.

c. The affiliating church and the receiving classis may agree upon the method for calculating the affiliating church’s assessments.

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

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 amend CO 19-1 as follows (additions are underlined twice; deletions are stricken twice):

…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. Ministers and elder delegates from an affiliating church
shall have the privilege of the floor. The receiving classis may grant voting privileges and if granted, the delegates may participate in higher assemblies at the classis level but they may not participate in higher assemblies.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt the amendment to CO 19-1.

**VOTED:** To adopt CO 19-1 as amended.

The final version of CO 19-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**CO 19-1**

To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

**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, including those regarding representation at higher assemblies. Any obligation of the consistory to pay assessments to the classis is not reduced by virtue of affiliation with another denomination, unless otherwise approved by its classis.

**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. Ministers and elder delegates from an affiliating church shall have the privilege of the floor. The receiving classis may grant voting privileges at the classis level but they may not participate in higher assemblies.

b. The number of elder delegates from an affiliating church shall be determined as provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3.
c. The affiliating church and the receiving classis may agree upon the method for calculating the affiliating church’s assessments.

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

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

RF 18-3: Criteria to Guide General Synod Agents in Granting the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry

RF 18-3 involves proposed amendments to the BCO that would identify certain criteria to guide the agents of the General Synod in granting the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. The amendments were intended to be a part of BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11. The 2018 General Synod took the following action:

To refer RF 18-3 to the Commission on Church Order to determine, in consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (current body)/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (future body), the appropriate placement in the BCO and make the wording less ambiguous (MGS 2018, p. 89).

After consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFCC/PFOB), the commission began working on language responsive to this request. Upon returning to the PFCC/PFOB, that organization requested that a proposed amendment be presented at a later time, after further consultation between the commission and that organization. Noting the request from the Vision 2020 Team through the General Synod Council (GSC) to limit, if possible, the business before this synod, the commission agreed to continue refining these sections to be presented at a future General Synod.

OV 18-14: Roles of Classes and MFCA in Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Process

OV 18-14 was adopted by the 2018 General Synod in response to three overtures submitted by the Classis of Rockland-Westchester. The overtures appear to be intended to address questions regarding the respective roles of classes and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry. The 2018 General Synod’s action was as follows:

To direct Overtures 14, 15, and 16 to the Commission on Church Order with instructions that, in consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (present body)/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (proposed body), the commission review the overtures and if warranted, that the commission present possible amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2019 General Synod (MGS 2018, p. 132).

After consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board, the commission began working on language responsive to this request. Upon returning to the PFCC/PFOB, that organization requested that a proposed amendment be presented at a later time, after further consultation between the commission and that organization. Noting the request from the Vision 2020 Team through
the GSC to limit, if possible, the business before this synod, the commission agreed to continue refining these sections to be presented at a future General Synod.

**TE 18-1: Bounds**

The 2018 General Synod adopted the following recommendation made in the Report of the Professorate:

> 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 (*MGS 2018*, p. 322).

At the joint meeting of the commissions and the GSC in fall 2018, the three commissions met together for discussion and idea generation. Following this meeting, two members from the CCO and the Commission on Theology (COT) met together and generated a paper. The Commission on History (COH) elected to generate its own paper. The joint paper was reviewed at the CCO’s winter meeting, and revisions were made. Following this, the COT reviewed the paper as revised and approved it. Accordingly, the CCO, together with the General Synod’s COT, presents the following report and recommendations.

**Introduction**

As the congregations, classes, regional synods, and General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) seek to fulfill our common call to Christian ministry, the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*) provides a framework for the formation of new classes. While traditionally most classes in the RCA were formed with boundaries that are geographic in nature, the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology have been asked by the General Synod, in response to a request from the professorate, to offer an “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” (TE 18-1, *MGS 2018*, p. 322).

The task given to the commissions concerns both the larger question of whether classis boundaries must be understood geographically and the more specific question of the formation of “ethnic classes.” Both questions are fraught with challenges. Regional synods have already worked to form non-geographic classes, to the joy of some and the consternation of others. This prior experience with non-geographic classes may affect how the findings of these commissions are received. Additionally, the specific question of “ethnic classes” touches upon the present realities of race within the RCA as well as our call to strive “for a multicultural future freed from racism” (*Transformed & Transforming*). Racism is a wound that cuts through the history of North America, and the sin of apartheid, which began as a pastoral concession, is part of the history of the broader Reformed communion.

Additionally, because socio-economic pressures work to separate languages and races into different physical communities, having classes based only upon geographic proximity may actually impede a multicultural future. If we seek to foster the laudable goal of becoming more fully a multicultural church, we need to recognize that geographically tied classes may make it more difficult. As we address the possibility of classes gathering separately based upon ethnicity, we must be mindful of these realities and seek to move forward in faithfulness.
We have tried to respond to the charge given to us with an awareness of these challenges and sensitivity to the issues involved. In what follows, we will first consider the usage and meaning of the word “bounds” in the BCO before addressing the specific question of the formation of ethnic classes.

“Bounds” in the BCO

Though the words “bounds” (17 times) or “boundaries” (2 times) are used in the BCO in reference to three different levels of governance—boards of elders, classes, and regional synods—they are never specifically defined. The majority of these instances are some derivative of the phrase “within its bounds” without further context, and thus are not particularly helpful in providing a definition for what constitutes bounds, only that bounds exist. For example, in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2, the classis is given the responsibility to “exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds” (emphasis added). Similarly, in Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 1, the regional synod is given the responsibility to “exercise a general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the classes within its bounds” (emphasis added).

The BCO indicates that both the classes and the regional synods have bounds that are defined for them, either implicitly or explicitly, by the immediate superintending assembly. Regional synod bounds are “determined for it by the General Synod” (Chapter 1, Part III, Article 1, Section 1), and the General Synod “may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another” (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3). In fact, the General Synod took such action as recently as 2018 when it transferred City Classis from the Regional Synod of the Far West to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics and then transferred Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney, Illinois, from Chicago Classis in the Regional Synod of Mid-America to City Classis, newly in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics.

The regional synod has the responsibility of forming, combining, or disbanding classes, and it may “transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3). In exercising this responsibility, it should be noted that the BCO does not specify what factors the regional synod must consider regarding forming or re-forming classis boundaries within the regional synod’s own bounds; instead, it is left to the collective representative wisdom of the elder and minister delegates from the classes who constitute the regional synod. This is the particular context that prompted the professorate to request an interpretation of bounds.

In the report of the professorate that led to TE 18-1, it was noted that recent actions have “called into question the traditional meaning of ‘bounds’” (MGS 2018, p. 321). Historically, the local congregations of the RCA have usually banded together geographically, but this has not been the exclusive practice. While the BCO does not provide a specific definition of “bounds,” there seem to be two prevailing interpretations: bounds as geography and bounds as membership.

Bounds as Geography

A geographic definition of bounds is supported by the conviction that proximity aids the assembly in fulfilling its responsibilities of guidance and governance in the shared call to ministry and mission. From within the BCO, the strongest case for a geographic interpretation of bounds is a reference to “the classis’s own geographic area” regarding the planting of new churches:
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 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… (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6).

We can also point to a second link regarding the supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament:

A classis within the geographic area of service in which a minister serves in an RCA congregation or in a specialized ministry shall be the classis in which membership is held… (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1).

While both of these instances offer strong support for an implicitly understood geographic meaning of bounds, neither specifically does so to the exclusion of other forming considerations, be they linguistic, ethnic, or demographic boundaries. The RCA’s history includes multiple examples of classes formed for linguistic reasons, despite member congregations being geographically located among English-speaking classes. Classis Passaic was originally organized for Dutch immigrants and held its meetings in Dutch, and Classis Germania spanned Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota. However, it is important to note that these linguistic classes eventually united with other classes, so that for most of our history, geography has been the most significant factor in the composition of classes.

Neither of these references within the BCO specifically precludes the possibility of there being two classes with overlapping geographic areas. Note the BCO provision regarding supervision of ministers refers to “a classis within the geographic area” (emphasis added), leaving open the presumed possibility that two or more classes could in fact overlap, as has historically happened and presently is observed with the bounds of City Classis overlapping the bounds of several other classes, for instance. If two or more classes overlap boundaries, it logically follows that, while geography may be a consideration in those boundaries, it cannot exclusively be the definition.

**Bounds as Membership**

To this point, the analysis of bounds has focused on the assemblies of classis and regional synod. Though easily overlooked when articulating an interpretation of bounds, it is prudent to consider how the BCO uses “bounds” as it applies to a consistory in the context of the local church. The board of elders has a responsibility to “seek to impress upon members of the church who move from the bounds of its ministry the duty of obtaining a certificate of transfer to another church” (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2e [2018 edition, p. 21], emphasis added). While traditionally the bounds of a church’s ministry carried a sense of being a geographic parish, in many parts of the RCA, we have multiple RCA congregations within one geographic community, all caring for the same parish but doing so with different senses of fellowship and mission. It is not remotely the purview of this paper to address why individuals move from one church to another, but it seems this sense of “bounds” is different than a strictly geographic interpretation. Rather, the sense of “bounds” referenced here in the BCO has to do with membership.

Our order and theology understand membership in the local congregation to be about relationship embodied in belonging and accountability. The congregation, governed in
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part by the board of elders responsible for those within its bounds, “is a body of baptized Christians meeting regularly in a particular place of worship” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2018 edition, p. 11]; cf. Hebrews 10:25), and the elders are guided in their “supervision of the membership of the church” by the requirements of discipleship, care, making faithful use of the means of grace, and discipline (see Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5 [2018 edition, p. 20]; cf. Belgic Confession, Articles 28-29).

This look at the use of “bounds” within the BCO leads us to conclude that a geographic interpretation of bounds is not so much ingrained in our order as it is traditioned by our practice. Geography alone, in any age, but particularly in the twenty-first century, is an insufficient condition for the kind of covenantal relationship envisioned by Scripture and our order for the church’s assemblies. The call to community and fellowship for the sake of mission—a sense of membership, belonging, accountability, and purpose in the gospel—undergirds it all as the strongest interpretive lens for the meaning of bounds. To that end, we will turn our attention to reflecting on the purpose of classes and sharing our recommendations for receiving the full gifts of the body of Christ in the creation of classes.

The Purpose of Classes

While our history and the usage of “bounds” within the BCO do provide some guidance for us, they settle neither the issue of the nature and purpose of the classis nor the question of the formation of ethnic classes. In order to gain more clarity, we will look theologically at the purpose of classes and then explore a biblical framework for receiving the various gifts of the body of Christ.

Christ has called and given the church ministers, elders, and deacons who serve Christ by fulfilling their callings for the sake of the body of Christ and the kingdom of God. In response to the spread of the gospel, the church has structured itself in order to maintain unity and faithfulness. In the RCA, we have discerned the wisdom of gathering elders and ministers into larger assemblies—classis, regional synod, and General Synod. Like the General Synod and the various regional synods, classes are created and structured for the well-being of the church.

The main purposes of these bodies are guidance and governance, what the BCO often calls superintendence and church discipline. Under the responsibilities of the classis, the BCO includes considering “the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers” (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1 [2018 edition, p. 29]) as well as exercising “general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds” (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2018 edition, p. 29]). The task of governance given to the classis includes both general superintendence and the responsibility of discipline. The 2018 Commission on Theology paper, “The Nature of Office and Assembly,” summarized the teaching of the RCA on the higher assemblies by saying, “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” (MGS 2018, p. 312). This overall purpose and calling should guide the structuring and creation of classes.

The classis provides guidance, care, and discipline for all those under its care. The classis is the nearest of the higher assemblies to local congregations, being in closest relationship to the particular churches within its bounds. Because of its proximity to particular congregations, many forms of care and guidance are seen to be the responsibility of the
classis. Creating and disbanding congregations, approving the formation and termination of pastoral relationships (whether by call or by contract), and examining and ordaining theological students are the responsibility of the classis. Discipline for ministers, consistories, and congregations begins with the classis. The twin responsibilities of guidance and governance are placed in the hands of the classis as it relates to the ministers, consistories, and congregations within its bounds.

The size and shape of a classis, as well as its internal structures, should allow for proper oversight over ministers, theological students, commissioned pastors, and its congregations. The work of the classis should, like all of our church government, “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” (BCO, Preamble, p. 1). As it gathers those called and ordained to the offices of minister and elder, the classis works to maintain the unity, purity, and peace of the church so that the body of Christ can walk faithfully in Christ’s mission together.

The recent creation of “ethnic classes” (such as the Classis of the Americas) as well as other “non-geographic classes” (such as City Classis) has raised new questions about how best to structure ourselves as a church. Can congregations be gathered into a classis on a basis other than geographic proximity? As noted above, historically, we have usually, but not always, banded churches together into classes because they were closest to one another in physical space. But with new technology and new contextual challenges, can classes be organized differently? While there may be other reasons for forming a non-geographic classis (mission or ministry context), we will limit ourselves in this paper to the specific question of ethnicity and language. In short, can the reasons for gathering a particular set of churches into a classis be linguistic or ethnic?

Unity and Diversity in the Body of Christ

Whether we should form ethnic classes is rooted in how we understand the best way to encourage the various gifts of congregations for the sake of the whole church. If the gifts and voices of certain congregations are not being well-received in the current denominational structure, should these congregations separate out into their own classis? How do we acknowledge and receive all the diverse gifts of our congregations in a classis? What does unity look like within a diverse church?

In order to answer these larger questions, we will look first at the place of language at Pentecost in Acts 2 and then at Paul’s discussion of the members of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. When the Spirit is poured out on the church at Pentecost, there is a multiplication of languages. This group of Galileans begins to speak in the native tongues of “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9-11). This diversity of language was a gift of the Spirit and given so that the mighty acts of God might be proclaimed in the native language of all who heard. The multiplication of languages served to multiply the witness of the church. In a similar way, the variety of languages in the body of Christ today enables the church to speak of the mighty acts of God in the native languages of all people. This is why the church has often been at the forefront of language translation—consistently seeking to witness to Christ in the language of the people. Our linguistic diversity as a denomination may serve to multiply our mission and our witness. However, how can these diverse languages and cultures be held together in the unity of Christ? How do we best acknowledge and receive our different gifts within the body of Christ?
There is both unity and diversity within the body of Christ. This is not an accident but part of God’s design. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (vv. 4-6). These gifts were given by the Spirit and were given for the common good (v. 7). The diversity of spiritual gifts within the body of the church should not lead to division, nor to the prizing of one set of gifts above another. All members of the body are not the same; the church is not a body made up of only one part. God has arranged these parts of the body and united them in Christ through baptism. The world may prize strength and despise the weak, but the church is called to recognize the God-given dignity of those considered weak and least in the body and to bestow honor and respect upon these members. The diversity of the gifts given by the Spirit should not lead to dissension but to care for one another. If one suffers, all suffer. If one is honored, all receive honor.

What is true in the relationship between individual members of the body of Christ may also be true for congregations and classes. Each congregation has been given gifts by the Holy Spirit for the sake of the whole body of Christ. This diversity of gifts is part of God’s intention for the church’s life in the world. These gifts have been gathered together into the one body of Christ by the Spirit. This unity does not destroy this diversity of gifts, even as it overcomes the enmity and division that has resulted from the effects of sin. Even the new creation will not erase the diversity of gifts, but it will fully join us together in using these gifts to praise the name of the Lord. Not only did the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost lead to a multiplication of languages, but also in the new heavens and the new earth, there will be multiple peoples and languages praising God. In the vision given to John in Revelation 7, he sees a great, uncountable multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb, proclaiming the salvation of God. This multitude is said to be from every nation, tribe, people, and language. While they sing together, they sing in their own tongues. Similarly, we see at Pentecost that the Spirit unites the church even as its gifts multiply the languages in the church. There can be, in the church, both a unity of Spirit and a diverse gifting of the Spirit through a multitude of languages and tongues in the church.

This diversity of language is a well-documented fact in the history of the church. The Christian gospel has, from the very beginning, been translated into other languages (as noted by missiologist Lamin Sanneh). There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, but not one language for the church. Christ calls us to maintain the unity of the body, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and to offer our bodies as holy and pleasing sacrifices to God. This unity that we are given does not destroy the distinct gifts or languages of the members of the body, but it should allow us to receive and honor them to the glory of our one head, Jesus Christ.

In light of our growing multiethnic and multilingual present, we must recognize the various gifts our different congregations bring to the one body of Christ. We should recognize these gifts as coming from the Spirit of God and ask how best to structure our classes to receive these gifts for the sake of the body of Christ. How do we best receive the various gifts of the body so that due honor is given to the members while maintaining the unity, purity, and peace of the church that Christ calls us to? While we recognize that neither the Commission on Church Order nor the Commission on Theology can dictate to the regional synods how to form classes, is there any wisdom that can be offered to the regional synods as they work in creating, supervising, and maintaining classes?

From Scripture, we know that we are called to receive the gifts of the body of Christ in its diversity. We are not many bodies, but one body made up of eyes, hands, and feet. Does our current structure of classes allow these various gifts to be received? Do our non-Anglo
pastors and congregations sense they are equally welcome in a classis when they are by far the minority? Do language barriers keep particular voices from being heard and gifts from being received? Overall, we have to ask what will enable us as the body of Christ to receive the gifts of the whole body.

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. If the gifts of all the congregations within the RCA are not being received, then we may well need to consider other options. It is possible that allowing the formation of ethnic and linguistic classes could allow the gifts of certain congregations, who within the current classis structure do not sense they have an equal voice or place at the table, to be more faithfully and fully received. That being said, it is also possible that new classes structured around ethnicity and language could end up being a way for those voices to be marginalized; that is to say, a different structure that enables classes to gather together by ethnicity and/or language could end up being simply another way in which those voices are isolated and not heard by the larger church.

Whichever way our larger body decides to move forward, we will need to be intentional about our biblical call to receive the gifts of the entire body of Christ. If we maintain geographic classes in regions of growing diversity within the church, this will require greater attention and intention to receive the gifts of the whole body, not just the majority. If we create non-geographic classes, this will likewise require attention and intention in maintaining unity across classes so that the gifts of the whole body are received.

**Receiving Gifts: Wisdom for the Creation of Classes**

Based upon the use of “bounds” within the *BCO*, our own history in regard to classes, and a biblical theology of the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, we can offer at least four pieces of wisdom for the creation of classes:

1. *Classes should be created, maintained, and structured so that they can fulfill their primary calling—guidance and governance.* If a classis is too large, too small, or too disconnected, efforts should be made to promote the kind of relationships, shared work, and structure needed to provide accountability, mutual encouragement, shared mission, and care of those within its bounds. This wisdom applies not just as we think about new classes, but also as we consider current classes that are so large that it may limit the possibility of accountability and all voices being heard or classes so geographically spread out that they struggle to connect. The intentional use of newer communication technology creates new possibilities, but that may call for many classes to rethink their structure.

2. *As we continue the conversation around the creation of ethnic classes, we should do so with prayerful discernment and caution.* Although the *BCO* does not prohibit the formation of classes around other defining characteristics, it would be wise to pursue alternatives with caution. The ability to gather in the flesh “regularly in a particular place” for guidance and governance, and to bring together the full gifts of the body of Christ for the sake of the church’s witness in the world, should not be dismissed lightly. The challenges that come with the creation of classes organized around ethnicity and language, particularly in light of the history of the Reformed tradition with apartheid, need to be carefully and prayerfully considered. At the same time, we must consider the possibilities that such language-based classes may allow us to multiply our mission in the world.
3. The creation and structure of classes should seek to maintain the unity, purity, and peace of the church. While the creation of classes does gather various churches into a particular assembly and draws boundaries between one set of congregations and another, the purpose of classes should not be separation. As Paul warns, we should not seek to cut off the other members of the body of Christ out of love for our own gifts. The structures of the church should never work to suppress the gifts of the body, but only to guide them as they build up the body. Unity cannot come at the cost of purity or peace, nor vice versa. Church history includes both suppressive unity and bitter schism. We should guard ourselves so that we partake of neither of these as we form and maintain classes.

4. Classes should be created, maintained, and structured so that all the gifts of congregations can be fully received. In Corinth, Paul proclaimed that the presence of the many and varied gifts of the body of Christ should not lead to dissension, but to care for one another. When barriers of language and culture prevent the full participation of members, delegates, or congregations in their classes, this must be addressed. It is possible that this could be addressed through the creation of new “ethnic classes,” but it is also possible that the creation of such classes could result in new forms of marginalization. This would need to be carefully thought through before it is implemented.

Conclusion

Do classes need to be based solely on geography? No. Our history, polity, and theology all indicate that this does not necessarily need to be the case. The language of “bounds” in the BCO does, at times, point toward geography, but at other times, toward membership. Our own history as the RCA has included non-geographic, language-based classes for the sake of the health and mission of the church. Theologically, we are called to structure ourselves in such a way that the diverse gifts of all the church (including diverse languages) are received for the sake of the larger mission of the church. All of this points to the possibility of non-geographic classes. However, the formation of these classes should be done prayerfully, with the right spirit, and with the right ends in mind.

Language matters. Our own history, in the Classis of Germania and elsewhere, demonstrates that we recognize the significance of a shared language for more fully carrying out the shared mission of the church in all levels of the Reformed Church in America. If language mattered then for the mission of the church and helped shape our structure, why not now?

Accordingly, the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology present the following recommendation:

**CO 19-2**

To advise regional synods to be guided by the following policies in forming, combining, and disbanding of classes and the transfer of churches between classes:

1. Classes should be created, maintained, and structured so that they can fulfill their primary calling—guidance and governance.
2. Ethnic classes should be formed only after prayerful discernment and with caution.
3. The creation and structure of classes should seek to
maintain the unity, purity, and peace of the church.
4. Classes should be created, maintained, and structured so that all the gifts of congregations can be fully received. (ADOPTED)

COLLABORATION WITH TASK FORCES, AGENCIES, AND OTHER COMMISSIONS

Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board: Governing Document for Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (RF 18-1)

RF 18-1 was adopted by the 2018 General Synod for the purpose of constituting a Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB). The final paragraph of RF 18-1 states that “[t]he General Synod Council and the PFOB, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, shall work together to bring an official governing document for the PFOB to the General Synod 2019 for approval” (MGS 2018, pp. 86–87).

The commission invited Chad Pierce, representing the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFCC/PFOB), which had prepared a preliminary draft of bylaws for the PFOB, to its meeting in October 2018. Prior to the commission meeting, members of the Commission on Church Order reviewed the bylaws and provided their comments to the full commission. At this meeting, the comments were discussed with Chad Pierce. Chad then provided the comments (and results of the discussion) to the PFCC/PFOB at its next meeting, which occurred in early January 2019. At the commission’s January 2019 meeting, it discussed the final work-product of the PFCC/PFOB and highlighted items which differed from the original content of RF 18-1. The commission understands that the proposed PFOB bylaws will be presented to the 2019 General Synod by either the PFCC/PFOB or the General Synod Council (GSC).

Commission on Christian Unity: Communications regarding General Synod’s Creation and Funding of an Interreligious Coordinator

The commission received and responded to a communication from the Commission on Christian Unity regarding the decision of the General Synod Council (GSC) to “… delay the hiring of the coordinator of interreligious relations position (RF 18-4 and F 18-4) until after the 2019 General Synod has an opportunity to reconsider the action” (GSC Minutes, October 2018). The commission determined, to the extent this was a request to provide an advisory response to a request for interpretation of the BCO, that the BCO permits the GSC and commissions to respond in nuanced ways to actions of the General Synod.

GSC Committee to Explore Alternate Funding Methods

The commission received and responded to a communication from RCA treasurer Jillisa Teitsma regarding what amendments to the BCO—if any—would be necessary if the General Synod adopts an alternative method for calculating assessments that is based upon income rather than membership. The moderator and treasurer exchanged emails regarding the sections that may need amendment, as well as possible amendments. As a part of this discussion, the commission also considered whether the responsibilities of classes should be amended to add levying assessments upon local churches and organizing churches. The commission agreed to suspend its discussion of this topic until the General Synod acts on the question of whether to adopt an alternative method for calculating assessments.
Commission on Nominations/GSC

A member of the Commission on Nominations attended the CCO’s fall 2018 meeting, a member of the GSC attended the CCO’s meeting in January/February 2019, and the commission met with three GSC members during a meal at the fall joint gathering of the GSC and commissions. The stated purposes of these visits requested by the Commission on Nominations and the GSC were to provide these bodies an opportunity to learn more about the work of the CCO, encourage coordination of the work of the commissions and GSC, discuss preferred gifts and expertise of possible new commission members (in the case of the Commission on Nominations), and enable the GSC members to gather information so the GSC can fulfill its responsibility “[t]o review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that the necessity for continuation shall not be assumed” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g, [2018 edition, p. 109]). The commission appreciates the interest in its work and desires—in all of its work—to be of service to the church.

Fall Joint Gathering of GSC and Commissions

The Commission on Church Order appreciates opportunities to gather and interact with other commissions at the fall joint gathering. It believes that the church is best served when the business is done in good order and pursuant to the BCO. The fall joint gathering is an opportunity for discussions to happen both formally and informally and for collective wisdom to be shared. The CCO welcomes communication from anyone regarding possible improvements to the BCO. The church’s order exists to serve the church. The order must be malleable enough to empower the church to carry out its mission and ministry, while still providing crucial structure and reflection of our theology and history. The order should not be a repository of good ideas, nor a process manual, but must provide, with the other components of the Constitution, structure and support to the church.

REQUESTS FOR INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER; AMENDMENTS TO THE BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER INITIATED BY THE CCO OR RESULTING FROM COMMUNICATIONS FROM OTHERS

“Transferring” Ministers to “Non-Formula of Agreement” Denominations

The commission received a communication asking it to consider the current practice of many classes of “transferring” a Minister of Word and Sacrament in one way or another to another denomination that is not a party to A Formula of Agreement: the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament (or a similar agreement, such as the one between the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America). The commission did so, and concluded that such a process must be described in terms of “demission” rather than “transfer.” Accordingly, the commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 19-3
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 13a (2018 edition, p. 56) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

a. A person who has been ordained to the office of minister may voluntarily relinquish the office by demission, but only after application to, and with the consent of, the
classis of which the person minister is a member. The classis, having fulfilled its pastoral responsibility insofar as feasible, may declare the person to have demitted the office of minister and, if so declared, shall remove the name of the member from the roll of classis and, if requested, transfer the person to the membership and care of a local church. A request from a minister to transfer to another denomination is an application for demission, which, following the classis’s consent, shall be deemed effective upon reception by the other denomination. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-3.

General Synod Responsibilities regarding Regional Synods

The commission received a communication noting that, while the BCO empowers classes to “form, dissolve, and disband churches, and shall form or dissolve combinations of two or more churches” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 4 [2018 edition, p. 29]) and similarly empowers regional synods to “form, dissolve, or disband classes” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 [2018 edition, p. 63]), there is no similar provision in the description of the General Synod’s responsibilities regarding regional synods. The BCO simply says that “[t]he General Synod shall form regional synods. It may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2018 edition, p. 67]). The commission believes that the responsibilities of the General Synod regarding regional synods should be similar to the responsibilities of regional synods regarding classes and classes regarding churches. Accordingly, the commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 19-4
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 (2018 edition, p. 67) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 3. The General Synod shall form, combine, or disband regional synods. It may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-4.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt CO 19-4.
The commission received a communication questioning the accuracy of the parenthetical explanation that appears at the beginning of Formulary No. 3 (BCO, 2018 edition, pp. 132–133). The phrase “at the time of ordination or installation” in the parenthetical seems to make the declaration exclusively for situations when the minister in question is being either ordained or called and installed as a senior or associate minister. Those are not the only circumstances under which the declaration is made. Accordingly, the commission presents the following recommendation:

**CO 19-5**

To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Formulary No. 3 (2018 edition, pp. 132–133) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

(This Declaration shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis at the time of ordination or installation reception into the classis. The newly ordained or installed received Minister of Word and Sacrament shall then sign a book containing the declaration, which shall be maintained as a permanent record of the classis.)

(ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-5.

**Other References to a “Book” Containing Declarations**

While working on Formulary No. 3, the commission became aware that many classes do not have a “book” that contains declarations. It proposed removing the reference in Formulary 3, but then recognized that there are other, similar references throughout the BCO. The commission believes the references should be uniform.

Accordingly, the commission presents the following recommendation:

**CO 19-6**

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

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15 (2018 edition, p. 56)

Sec. 12. The classis shall keep a record book permanent record in which the declarations for licensed candidates, commissioned pastors, and ministers are clearly written. Those who are received on examination or on certificate shall subscribe to the proper declaration in the presence of the classis.

Formulary No. 1 (2018 edition, p. 131)

(This Declaration shall be made orally by the candidate in the
The candidate shall then sign a book containing the declaration, which shall be maintained as a permanent record of the classis.

Formulary No. 7 (2018 edition, p. 136)

(This declaration shall be made in the presence of the Christian community at the time of installation. It shall be made orally by the person being installed. The newly installed professor shall sign a book containing the declaration, which shall be maintained as a permanent record of the General Synod.)

Formulary No. 16 (2018 edition, p. 143)

(This declaration shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis at the beginning of each commissioning approved by the classis. The newly commissioned pastor shall then sign a book containing the declaration, which shall be maintained as a permanent record of the classis.)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-6.

Formulary No. 9

In response to comments from one of its members, the commission agreed that Formulary No. 9 (BCO, 2018 edition, p. 138) should be revised to add a “receipt” section to be completed by the stated clerk of the classis to which a minister is transferred. The commission also agreed that references to “dismission” in the certificate and in the BCO instead should be to “transfer.” Accordingly, the commission presents the following two recommendations:

CO 19-7
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Formulary No. 9 (2018 edition, p. 138) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

9. Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament

Dismission of a Minister

To the Classis of __________________________:
From the Classis of __________________________:

This is to certify that the Rev. __________________________ is a member in good and regular standing of the Classis of __________________________, and is now requesting dismission/transfer to the Classis of __________________________, to whose Christian fellowship and care this minister/she is
hereby affectionately commended.

When received by the Classis of ________________,
this minister's the Rev. ________________________'s relation
to this classis shall cease.

Last served as delegate to regional synod ___________
(year)
Last served as delegate to General Synod ___________
(year)
Year of ordination ___________________ (year)

__________________________, Stated Clerk
Classis of ________________________ (date)

Receipt of a Minister

To the Classis of ________________:
From the Classis of ________________:

This is to certify that the Rev. ________________ was received
to unite with the Classis of ________________ and signed
the Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament on
__________________.

__________________________, Stated Clerk
(ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-7.

CO 19-8
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 9 (2018 edition, p. 55) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 9. A minister who moves from the bounds of one classis into another shall request a Certificate of Dismission Transfer (Formulary No. 9) from the classis where membership is held. The Certificate of Dismission shall be presented prior to the approval of the minister for reception into the new classis. That classis shall notify the sending classis when a minister is received. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-8.

Formulary No. 15

The commission considered a suggestion for revisions to BCO Formulary No. 15, including whether the term “member church” is appropriate, as this term is not defined in
the *BCO*, and whether the formulary should be revised to cover “organizing churches.” As a result of those discussions, the commission presents the following recommendation:

**CO 19-9**

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 (2018 edition, p. 11) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

... similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

For purposes of Formulary No. 15, a member church is an organizing church, a local church, or a collegiate church.

(ADOPTED)

*The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-9.*

**Transfers of Licensed Candidates from One Classis to Another**

The commission discussed the process by which licensed candidates are transferred from one classis to another. It determined that the process should mirror that of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, both the language and the appropriateness of a formulary. Accordingly, it agreed to present to the 2019 General Synod the following two recommendations:

**CO 19-10**

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 6 (2018 edition, p. 50) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 6. A licensed candidate who seeks ordination in a classis other than the classis with jurisdiction over the candidate’s church shall request a Certificate of Transfer (Formulary No. 17) certificate of dismission as a licensed candidate to that classis. The transfer certificate shall be granted if the candidate is in good standing. When the candidate is received under care by signing the Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the new classis shall notify the sending classis.

*The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-10.*

A motion was made and supported to amend CO 19-10 as follows (additions are underlined twice; deletions are stricken twice):

...The transfer certificate shall be granted if the candidate is in good standing. When the candidate is received under care by signing the Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the new receiving classis shall notify the sending classis.

**VOTED:** To amend CO 19-10.
VOTED: To adopt CO 19-10 as amended.

The final version of CO 19-10 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

CO 19-10
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 6 (2018 edition, p. 50) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 6. A licensed candidate who seeks ordination in a classis other than the classis with jurisdiction over the candidate’s church shall request a Certificate of Transfer (Formulary No. 17) as a certificate of dismission as a licensed candidate to that classis. The transfer certificate shall be granted if the candidate is in good standing. When the candidate is received under care by signing the Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the receiving classis shall notify the sending classis. (ADOPTED)

CO 19-11
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

17. Certificate of Transfer for a Licensed Candidate
Dismission of a Licensed Candidate

To the Classis of [Classis Name]:
From the Classis of [Classis Name]:

This certifies that [Full Name] is a licensed candidate in the Classis of [Classis Name]. [Name] is now requesting a transfer to the care of the Classis of [Classis Name], to whose Christian fellowship and care this licensed candidate is affectionately commended.

When received by the Classis of [Classis Name], [Name]’s relationship to this classis shall cease.

The date that [Full Name] read and signed the Declaration for Licensed Candidate is [Date].

[ Clerk Name], Stated Clerk
[date certificate is issued]

Receipt of a Licensed Candidate

This is to certify that [Full Name] was received under the care of the Classis of [Name] on [Date], when [Name] read and signed the Declaration for Licensed Candidates.
The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 19-11.

Supervisors of Consistories

An amendment to BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 3 (2018 edition, p. 34) was declared effective by the 2018 General Synod. Subsequently the commission received a communication asking whether a further revision to the amended BCO provision should be proposed to more clearly state that “a minister” means “an RCA minister.” The commission discussed the concern raised and concluded that no clarification is necessary.

Supersession of Consistories—Periodic Status Reports

The commission received a communication suggesting that amendments to the BCO be proposed to provide for periodic reviews and renewals of the supersession of a consistory. The commission concluded that any revision responsive to the suggestion would not enhance the supersession process, and therefore, the commission took no further action.

Classis Votes on Constitutional Amendments

The commission received a communication regarding potential implications of a BCO amendment that was adopted by the 2018 General Synod. The stated purpose of the amendment is to clarify that only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted may vote on the question of whether to approve the amendment. At the time of the communication, the amendment was before the classes for their vote on the question of whether to approve it. For this reason, and because the overture that served as the basis for the concern was referred to the Vision 2020 Team, the commission concluded that it would be premature to consider the questions raised in the communication and therefore took no action.

EDITORIAL REVISIONS

The following non-substantive, editorial corrections to the BCO will be made in the 2019 edition:

1. BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 3d (p. 38 of the 2018 edition) will be edited to delete the phrase “identified in the notice to show cause.”

2. BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4d (p. 42 of the 2018 edition) will be edited to eliminate the word “and” from the final section of that sentence. According to research done by staff to the commission, the text was originally adopted by the 1974 General Synod and then, following the requisite classis votes, approved by the 1975 General Synod. (See MGS 1974, R-2, p. 190, and MGS 1975, R-2, p. 100.) The “and” that this editorial correction eliminates first appears in the 1984 edition of the BCO as a part of substantial revisions to the entire BCO to make its language gender neutral.

3. BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 8 (p. 46 of the 2018 edition) will be edited to replace the word “it” at the beginning of the third line with the words “the classis.”
4. Edits will be made throughout the *BCO* to capitalize (where necessary) the words “Word” and “Sacrament” whenever they are used in the phrase “Minister of Word and Sacrament.”

5. Edits will be made to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 7 (p. 30 of the 2018 edition) and the title of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11 (p. 44 of the 2018 edition) to change “students of theology” to “candidates for ministry” to make the language consistent with the remainder of the *BCO*.

**POSSIBLE FUTURE ENDEAVORS**

In addition to the work it has readied for submission to the General Synod, the commission has several ongoing projects.

**Boards of Elders**

In response to experiences of and comments received by a member of the commission, the member proposed revisions to the “Responsibilities of the Board of Elders” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 5 [2018 edition, pp. 20–22]). The purposes of the proposed revisions were to clarify certain existing provisions and add others to address situations not presently covered by the article.

Work on this topic has commenced, but the commission has not yet reached a consensus regarding amendments (if any) to propose to the General Synod. If it does, it intends to submit them to the Commission on Theology for its review and comment before presenting them to the General Synod for adoption.

**Judicial Bodies**

In 2007, the commission brought to General Synod a recommendation that proposed significant changes to the *BCO* in how judicial business would be conducted in the RCA. Generally, that proposal stated that in most assemblies, when functioning as a judicatory, that work of the judicatory would be facilitated by a new judicial body of that assembly called a Commission on Judicial Business. The 2007 General Synod approved the recommendation, and a majority of the classes voted to approve proposed *BCO* amendments, but the amendments failed to receive the necessary approval by two-thirds of the classes. The commission informed the 2009 General Synod that it had been working and would continue to work on a similar proposal but one that only involved the judicatories on the level of the regional synods and the General Synod. It informed the 2010 General Synod that, while it continues to believe that there are merits for the proposed amendments, it would postpone proposing any amendments due to other business that would likely be before the church. That status report remains essentially unchanged—the only difference is the business before the church that the commission does not want to interfere with. The commission has shared this idea with the Vision 2020 Team in hopes that it may be useful to that team’s work. Consequently, the commission will continue to keep this subject on its agenda for future consideration.

**ELECTION OF MODERATOR AND SECRETARY; APPOINTMENT OF DELEGATE TO 2019 GENERAL SYNOD**

The commission elected Philip De Koster to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2019. Additionally, the commission appointed Philip DeKoster to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2019 General Synod.
COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

The commission thanks Larry Schuyler for his service on this commission and therefore to the General Synod. The commission greatly appreciated his wisdom and experience resulting from his many years of service to the church, most recently as Holland Classis leader. He has completed six years of service on the commission and is rotating off its membership at the end of June.

Respectfully submitted,
Philip DeKoster, moderator
COMMISSIONS

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 2003 General Synod 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). The Book of Church Order (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5 [2018 edition, pp. 113–114]) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the RCA,” to “inform the RCA 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 RCA’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is our 53rd report to 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 commenced

- 1 year ago, when we installed our general secretary, Eddy Alemán, who is one of the first Latinos to lead a historic Protestant denomination in the United States,
- 21 years ago, when we installed the first woman professor of theology,
- 26 years ago, when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president,
- 31 years ago, when we ordained the first woman of color,
- 41 years ago, when we expanded our polity’s definition of “persons,”
- 51 years ago, when we renewed our liturgies (and continue to do so today),
- 101 years ago, when Ida Scudder opened Vellore Woman’s Medical College,
- 136 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,”
- 171 years ago, when a group of immigrant churches in western Michigan formed a classis,
- 206 years ago, when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since,
- 245 years ago, when the Church in America wrote to the Classis of Amsterdam requesting a professor of theology, recommending the appointment of Dr. John Henry Livingston, their last student from America,
- 375 years ago, when dominie (pastor) Johannes Megapolensis, while serving as a missionary to the Mohawk and in the spirit of ecumenism, graciously befriended and assisted the French missionary to the Hurons, Father Isaac Jogues, who had been taken by the Mohawk,
- 391 years ago, when dominie Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America, a multi-ethnic, multilingual congregation open to everyone,

and countless other transformations have occurred 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 18–20, 2018 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council), and in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on January 28, 2019, as well as communicating regularly via email.

Chronicles of Transformation

The following books, all in production, have been approved to be added to the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 51st year.

- Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Essays in Honor of Allan J. Janssen, edited by Matthew van Maastricht
- Before the Face of God: Essays in Honor of Dr. Tom Boogaart, edited by Dustyn Keepers

Both of the above festschriften were available at this synod, and free copies were given to all delegates as a gift from New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Western Theological Seminary, and the Historical Series. This practice was instituted by the series in 2014 to honor every General Synod professor who retires after serving ten years or more.

- Hope College at 150, edited by Jacob Nyenhuis
- Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York, by Francis Sypher
- Constitutional Theology (revised edition), by Allan Janssen
- The Mission of Horace Underwood, by James Jinhong Kim
- 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 the Global Grace Café at Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, by Elizabeth Estes, and a story about John Otte, medical missionary to China, by Linda Walvoord DeVelder.

The commission, working with the RCA Archives and GSC Communication and Production Services, continues publishing the series under Reformed Church Press, which allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has been serving as general editor since July 1, 2018. Andrew Klumpp, currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University and a member of the commission, serves as associate general editor. As of June 2018, Donald J. Bruggink serves as general editor emeritus. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church in Altamont, New York, and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the Congregational History Series.
Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with 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 year marks 41 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 archival collection 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, Russell Gasero and the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management; with over 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October 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 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 three years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, 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 acknowledges 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, 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.

**Being Informed by Past Transformations**

General Synod 2018 adopted 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” (∗MGS 2018, p. 322). The three commissions met jointly on Thursday, October 18, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and entered conversation. The Commission on History deemed it appropriate to offer a paper to the synod and the church.

In addition, General Synod 2018 voted to fund a new position of coordinator of interreligious relations from reserves rather than through assessment. Because concerns were voiced about the level of assessment and the rate at which the assessment increases, the commission has included a paper, with recommendation, chronicling the history of funding for General Synod.

An overture was brought forth during last year’s General Synod that our churches “seek reconciliation with Anabaptist churches” (∗MGS 2018, pp. 148–189). The Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended that General Synod deny the overture primarily because delegates needed more information to help clarify the relationship between the RCA and the Anabaptists. The commission offers a paper, with recommendation, to the synod and the church.

**A LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE TERM “BOUNDS,” PARTICULARLY PERTAINING TO CLASSES**

The 2018 General Synod, in approving a recommendation from the professorate, voted,

> 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.

This request, of course, does not arise from a vacuum, but from the very real experiences not only of the Classis of the City, the first true non-geographic classis in the RCA, but even more significantly, to the creation of the Classis of the Americas, a classis that understands its bounds to be based primarily upon ethnicity.\(^1\) Certainly this is not the only time that classes based on ethnicity have been proposed, but it is the first time that it has been effected. Indeed, as we seek to lean into our future as a multiracial and multiethnic church communion, these are deep questions with which we must wrestle. These are theological questions and they are, truly, existential questions.

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\(^1\) *Minutes of General Synod (MGS) 2018*, p. 322.

\(^2\) *MGS 2018*, p. 321.
Each of the commissions looks with a different focus. There is what can be done and what ought to be done. The Commissions on Church Order and Theology have this as their charge. The Commission on History is called to chronicle and analyze the history of the use of the term “bounds” and the ways in which classes have been understood. It is to this end that the commission offers this paper.

Spiritual Geography in the Bible

Already in the beginning of the biblical narrative, we are able to gain a sense of the importance of place. Genesis tells us that God planted a garden, and the waters that watered the garden branched out into four rivers that gave life to the world that they knew. The narratives, particularly in the Old Testament, are replete with geographic references. God called Abram when he resided in Haran. Abram was told by God to walk the length and breadth of the land that God had promised to him and his descendants. The people of God were enslaved in Egypt (and Egypt was also the place to which the holy family fled Herod’s sword). Throughout the entire biblical narrative, there is the importance of the land and the Temple. These were not only locations on a map, places to perform rites or space on which to live. These were deeply imbedded into the spirituality of the ancient people. Even in the exile, we can see an intentionality of place, even (or perhaps especially) when it is hard to understand. “[S]eek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,” we read in Jeremiah, “and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7). Even in exile, there is an importance of place, of geography, of locality.

The Reformed Church in the Netherlands

The Netherlands Reformed Church was formed, interestingly enough, not in the Netherlands but in Germany. It was in Emden that, in 1571, the first Dutch Reformed synod was convened, and this synod marks the beginning of a national Reformed church for the Dutch people. This synod was convened outside of the Lowlands precisely because the Reformed were persecuted and had to be underground. A synod could not be convened on Dutch soil, and so the East Frisian port city of Emden, across the Dollard Bay from the Province of Groningen, was chosen for this synod.

It was at this synod that all the various underground Reformed churches were to form themselves into classes, as described in the Acts of the Synod of Emden. These classes were geographical. Part of this was practicality: there were Dutch Reformed exile communities in both Germany and England, as well as the fact that proximity was important to be able to do the needed work of a classis in the time. This would be the framework from which the Dutch Reformed would structure the church.

Nearly 50 years later, another national synod was convened, this one in the Dutch city of Dordrecht, and, among other things, this synod prepared a new church order, of which our Book of Church Order is a direct descendant.

The Dutch Reformed Come to the Americas

Not quite ten years later, the Dutch West India Company sent the first Dutch Reformed minister to the North American colonies. Immediately upon his arrival, he ordained an elder and a deacon, forming a complete consistory so that a church could be founded. For the first 154 years of the Reformed Church’s existence in North America, there

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3 Arts. 10-12.
were no classes, as it was an extension of the Classis of Amsterdam. This was a difficult arrangement, partly because of the distance and difficulty of communication, partly because ministers needed to be educated and licensed in the Netherlands, but also because the Classis of Amsterdam lived a very different contextual reality than the churches in North America. The drive for independence from the Classis of Amsterdam wasn’t solely about the education of ministers; it was largely about a church trying to find itself in a very different reality from the Netherlands. By the time what was to become the Reformed Church in America was made independent, New Netherland had been New York and New Jersey—and parts of Pennsylvania and Delaware—for a hundred years, the primary language spoken was English, as they lived not under the flag of the Dutch Republic but the Union Jack of Great Britain. Part of the deep and painful division in the years leading up to the Plan of Union was the growing autonomy of the colonial Reformed churches, and eventually the church split into two camps: those who advocated subordination to the Classis of Amsterdam and those who advocated for independence. While there were concessions made by both parties in the Plan of Union, it effected the independence of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America, which could now govern itself within its own contextual reality.

Neighboring, District, and Bounds

This Church Order of Dort of 1619 does not speak of bounds, but it speaks of the classis as being “composed of neighbouring churches.” Additionally, the particular synods are composed of “four or more neighbouring Classes.” The word “neighbouring,” here, gives a clear implication of geography, that is, a classis is composed of churches that are close to one another, neighbors to one another, churches that share a similar contextual existence, churches that have been planted near one another.

After the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the Reformed Church eventually adopted and published its Constitution. The Synod adopted the Church Order of Dort of 1619, but also appended the Explanatory Articles, which sought to help apply the Dortian order to the new context. Article XXXVIII of the Explanatory Articles defines the classis as “all the Ministers, with each an Elder, and one Elder from every vacant congregation within a particular district.”

The term “bounds” is, itself, somewhat peculiar. While it would be nice if the church order clearly defined the terms that it uses, this is not the case here. From the minutes of the General Synod in the years surrounding its introduction into the order, one can see many uses of the term “bounds” in various contexts. We may tend to think of “bounds” primarily in the context of classes or regional synods, but the use of the term “bounds” was quite liberal in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, local churches had bounds, classes had bounds, particular synods had bounds, and the general synod had bounds as well.

Some instances more clearly refer, at least in the background, to geography. Indeed, in referring to the North Carolina Classis of the German Reformed Church in 1855, the minutes of the General Synod report: “its bounds extend one hundred and forty miles in one direction …” This gives the impression that bounds has to do with a geographic existence, that is, its bounds expand over a geographic area which is served by churches, rather than churches which compose the bounds. Furthermore, in other contexts, “… the Classis within whose bounds it is located.” Again, the use of “located” gives a sense of geographic locality, as

4 Church Order of Dort, 1619, Art. XLI, emphasis added.
5 Ibid. Art. XLVII, emphasis added.
6 Emphasis added.
7 MGS 1855, p. 535.
8 MGS 1846, p. 89.
if an academy could be located within the geographic area that is overseen by the classis.

**Long Island Appeal**

Of note, however, is a complaint by the Classis of Long Island against the Particular Synod of New York to the General Synod of 1830. The Bushwick church was transferred by the Particular Synod of New York from the Classis of Long Island to the South Classis of New York. The record shows that there was some displeasure on the part of the Bushwick church, and they requested the particular synod to transfer them, which was done. The Classis of Long Island complained and argued that,

... prejudices, preference, like or dislike, were never designed as a rule for the guidance of Particular Synod, in the organization or enlargement of these courts. But on the contrary, it is found in all such cases that no other rule has been recognized than geographical contiguity ... ⁹

The classis, in the complaint, goes on to cite the aforementioned articles from Dort and the Explanatory Articles and the words “neighboring” and “district.” Similarly, the argument given was that the action of the particular synod violated the understanding of bounds. “Providence seems to have fixed their natural bounds, and to have drawn a broad watery line [the East River] between them and the churches in the city.” ¹⁰

In the complaint, the classis also looked beyond.

If the ecclesiastical relations of one, two, or three congregations can be changed at pleasure, or upon some fancied grievance, upon the same principle the relation of all the churches, throughout our whole connexion, may be immediately broken up, and our Classes become nothing more than mere voluntary associations. Every tie which now binds the Church in harmony together, and gives weight to her authority, will be completely severed; and every thing like order will soon come to an end. ¹¹

We do not know the substance of the synod’s deliberation, nor can we know the exact reasons that the synod voted to sustain the complaint. However, it was presumably not disconnected from the classical argument in this case. While this one case does not constitute binding precedent (indeed, binding precedent is not something that exists in the RCA), it does provide an example of a strong assertion of the geography of classical bounds, and this case is worth considering when we speak of bounds.

**Classes of Pleasant Prairie and Germania**

There are two peculiar classes that are worth noting and briefly discussing, because they have bearing on the issues of bounds and ethnicity. The Classis of Germania is often cited as an example of an affinity, or even a non-geographic, classis in the history of the RCA. This analysis is not exactly wrong, but not quite right, either.

There is a strong German Reformed component to the RCA as well. Many of these Germans came from East Friesland—whose principal city is Emden—and two vestiges of this heritage are the Classes of Pleasant Prairie and Germania. The former still exists, the latter has since been disbanded. Neither truly non-geographic, nor necessarily affinity, they were linguistically-bound classes, at least in origin.

⁹ *MGS 1830*, p. 272.
With the influx of German Reformed churches and the growing need for pastors for these churches, a German-language classis was formed: the Classis of Pleasant Prairie. This is not entirely without precedent. The Netherlands was a land of two languages: Dutch and Walloon (French). The early church orders allowed for separate consistories, classes, and particular synods for Dutch- and Walloon-speaking people. However, it also recommended that in cities where there are Dutch and Walloon churches the ministers and elders gather monthly to maintain unity and assist one another.\(^\text{12}\)

The Classis of Pleasant Prairie was formed in 1892 with several churches in Illinois and Iowa. The existing churches came from the Classis of Wisconsin and Iowa, and others were started after the establishment of the classis. While Pleasant Prairie was not strictly geographic, it was also not non-geographic, as all of these churches were in a similar geographic region. It was not so much an ethnic classis; it was a linguistic classis. That is, it was not a classis for ethnic Germans; it was a classis for German-speaking people. The differences seem small, but they are not insignificant.

The Classis of Germania came into existence in 1915 and was formed with 17 churches, all from the Classis of Pleasant Prairie. By this time, Pleasant Prairie was some 39 churches, covering an area of over 700 miles.\(^\text{13}\) The churches in the Classis of Germania were German-speaking congregations in the Iowa-Minnesota-South Dakota juncture. Like Pleasant Prairie, it was not truly non-geographic, because they were in the same geographic area; it was not necessarily an ethnic classis, but it was a linguistic one.

These two classes also had different life cycles. Pleasant Prairie remains a classis to this day, though they no longer speak German, nor do they necessarily identify as German. As the people, and the congregations, became more Americanized, they blended in with those in the region, the majority of whom descended from northern Europeans. While its origin was as a linguistically-bound classis, it did not remain one. The Classis of Germania no longer exists: its name was changed to the Classis of North Central in 1964, and it was dissolved by the Particular Synod of the West in 1969, its churches distributed among neighboring classes.

**Conclusion**

To be sure, there are many considerations and many angles from which to seek to understand the meaning of bounds, both what has been, what can be, and what ought to be. Historically speaking, the understanding of “bounds” has always included a geographic component. Some of this may be convenience, particularly without modern technologies that aid in communication. However, as the complaint of the Classis of Long Island displays, it is not simply a matter of convenience. There is also a sense of place as a theological concept, a type of spiritual geography.

The professorate identified two presenting concerns; namely, non-geographic classes based on some affinity and classes that are defined by race or ethnicity but where the churches are also geographically proximate.

Historically speaking, both of these are new developments for the RCA. Ethnic classes are not something that the denomination has embraced, though linguistic bounds are

\(^{12}\) For example, Church Order of Dort, 1619, Art. LI & LII.

something that reach to our earliest roots.

Ultimately, the question that we will have to face is this: Do we learn to live with each other because God has planted us together, or do we gather based on a particular affinity?

**HISTORY OF FUNDING FOR GENERAL SYNOD**

The General Synod of 2018 voted “[t]o direct the general secretary to authorize and fund” the new position of coordinator of interreligious relations. Further, this position is to be funded from reserves rather than through an assessment. In this discussion, several concerns were voiced about the level of assessment and the rate at which the assessment increases. Your commission thinks it beneficial to briefly chronicle the history of funding for the General Synod.

The purpose of this short paper is largely two-fold: to understand the variety of ways the General Synod and the denominational program has been funded and to understand the origin of assessments and the development thereof. Our current assessment process is a way that we have funded the denominational program, but it is certainly not the only way. And our assessment process was not so much a process that was designed but one that developed relatively organically.

**Colonial Funding Practices**

The traditional approach to funding the church in the Netherlands was that the support of the clergy was raised from the property that had belonged to the Catholic church with local government supplements. This practice transferred to New Amsterdam, as salaries were paid by the Dutch West India Company. When the English took over in 1664, they decreed that each parish should pay for the support of the minister, which was a difficult idea for the Dutch settlers to accept. Johannes Megapolensis, in a letter to the Classis of Amsterdam in 1669, remarked that,

> On Sundays we have many hearers. People crowd into the church, and apparently like the sermon; but most of the listeners are not inclined to contribute to the support and salary of the preacher. They seem to desire, that we should live upon air and not upon produce.

The early American practice of raising funds for the local church developed through the rental or sale of pews. This annual payment provided for the support of the minister and for the construction of the church building. Offerings were occasionally taken for the care of the poor in the community, but generally, these offerings were not the rule.

**Independence and New Responsibilities**

With independence from the Classis of Amsterdam, two main areas of fundraising arose: mission work and the professorate. With the growth and the projected growth of the new republic, new churches were needed in these new settlements and communities. As a result, the General Synod made the first denominational appeal for funds in 1788, when it requested the classes to make voluntary collections from their churches for the purposes of church extension. "With these moneys ministers were

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14 *MGS 2018*, p. 97.
17 *MGS 1788*, p. 181.
sent out on horseback tours, thro [sic] central and western New York and Canada.\textsuperscript{18}

The General Synod continued to ask for funds through voluntary collections taken at the churches on particular Sundays throughout the year.

The Professorial Fund was established to attempt to raise sufficient funds for the theological professorate. Despite the good intentions, such a fund was never sufficient, nor was it able to adequately support the professorate, often causing hardship to the professors and embarrassment to the synod.\textsuperscript{19} Money was raised by subscriptions, though these were often not sufficient or went unpaid. As the General Synod was not yet incorporated, the funds were held by the trustees of Queens College. In 1815, the General Synod determined to hold its own money for the professorate and the establishment of the Permanent Fund, which was merged with the Professorial Fund in 1828.\textsuperscript{20}

Collection for denominational funds was increased in 1812 when the General Synod “enjoined” churches to make collections for theological education, one half of which was to support the professor, and the other half of which was to fund the procuring of a library and support students who lacked the necessary financial means to pay for their education.\textsuperscript{21} Congregations were encouraged to contribute to the Professorial Fund, although without universal success. The concern about this from the synod can be seen in the order for classes to publish the names of churches that had not contributed to the Professorial Fund.\textsuperscript{22} This continued through the 1820s as synod recommended other mission efforts for collections but had no power to force contributions. As early as 1830, the General Synod suggested a per-communicant-member offering of 25 cents for the support of the theological seminary.\textsuperscript{23}

Development of the Assessment Process

In 1818, the General Synod established a Contingent Fund to defray costs of the General Synod itself, such as, “the expenses of the stated and permanent Clerks, the expenses of stationery, the doorkeeper, &c. while the Synod is in session, and the expenses incurred by the Committees of Synod in the discharge of the duties of their commissions...” This Contingent Fund would repay money that was borrowed from the Missionary Fund to cover these expenses and to pay for these expenses in the future.\textsuperscript{24} This fund would be supplied by the “proceeds of the copy right [sic] of the Constitution” and “the profits arising from printing the minutes of Synod...” Additionally, the requests made to the churches for the support of mission work would also include financial support of the Contingent Fund,\textsuperscript{25} though later they would unlink these appeals.\textsuperscript{26}

The fund did not receive overwhelming support, and the Minutes of General Synod are peppered with encouragements to classes to increase support for this fund. Despite this, though, this fund was able to meet the expenses that required payment from it. However,
through the 1840s, the General Synod was having difficulty supporting the professorate and in meeting the costs of running the synod (e.g., printing minutes, office supplies, etc.), and in 1847, it was noted that the synod had to resort to loans in order to meet its obligations.\(^{27}\) In order to discharge the debt as well as support the expenses of the synod, it was proposed in 1848 to “assign each Classis a sum proportionate to the number and ability of its churches, to be paid by them ... to the Treasurer of the General Synod.”\(^{28}\) Here is the first time that we see an assigning of a proportionate sum to classes.

By 1850, the matter became quite serious, and the issue of the synodal debt was again brought to the fore, reporting that the debt reported in the previous year still existed. The Board of Direction reported that although a request for a collection was made, as was the custom, it had been “almost entirely overlooked by the churches.” Again the board recalled the plan to proportionally distribute the financial burden among the classes.\(^{29}\) The report of the professorate also addressed the dire financial straits.

The debt of the Synod, it is noticed with regret, has not been paid, and this must become a more painful matter under the ordinary action of Synod. It is easy to vote in our annual sessions the payment of moneys, but if our plans for securing the necessary sums in the hands of the Treasurer are not carried out faithfully, it is plain our difficulties must increase...The debt is one of the whole church, and it is equitable and just that it should be parcelled among all sections, to be provided for according to their ability.\(^{30}\)

The General Synod voted to carry out the plan that was proposed in 1848 in order to eliminate the debt and provide sufficient funds for the General Synod.

*Resolved*, That a Committee, consisting of one from each Classis here represented, be appointed to assess upon each Classis a sum proportionate to the number and ability of the churches, and sufficient to meet the existing debt and the contingent expenses of the Synod.\(^{31}\)

In addition to this, the ministers and congregations were urged to take up collections to support the work of the mission boards, the education board, and the Sabbath School union. It was clear that this assessment was not to eliminate the usual manner of collections and subscriptions for the support of the mission of the broader church.

Beginning in 1857, the shortfalls in synodal revenue were assessed among the classes. This was met with payments, refusals to pay, and complaints.\(^{32}\) In 1862, it was reported that the income was still insufficient to meet the financial obligations of the synod, primarily the salaries of the professorate and the contingent expenses of the synod. The classes were not contributing, and the synod noted the difficulties with determining a just distribution between the classes. To this end, the General Synod decided to assess the particular synods and allow the particular synods to determine the distribution. There were three particular synods at the time: Albany, New York, and Chicago. The Particular Synod of Chicago was not assessed, and the financial burden that they owed was divided between the Eastern synods, with New York bearing two-thirds of it and Albany bearing one-third.\(^{33}\)

\(^{27}\) *MGS 1847*, pp. 116–117.
\(^{28}\) *MGS 1848*, p. 277.
\(^{29}\) *MGS 1850*, p. 22.
\(^{30}\) *MGS 1850*, p. 91.
\(^{31}\) *MGS 1850*, p. 105.
\(^{32}\) *MGS 1864*, p. 474.
\(^{33}\) *MGS 1862*, pp. 189–190.
The process became more solidified in 1868, when an addition was made to the responsibilities of the Board of Direction so that they would, each year, propose financial measures as they deem necessary for the expenses of the church. It was in this year that the assessment began to look much closer to what we experience today.

These expenses are connected with the existence of the Synod. The Synod exists for the defence of ecclesiastical rights...The poorest farmer in the distant West is as certain of obtaining a candid hearing as the wealthiest Elder from the metropolis. Should not the farmer in return for this equal protection pay a full share of the trifling expense which arises from the existence of the judicatory. [sic] Two cents a member will secure the necessary amount.

And with this, there were two significant changes. The first is that the treasurer of the General Synod would assess classes rather than particular synods; and the second is that the number of communicant members would serve as the basis for this assessment.

It should also be noted that during this time, the General Synod had relatively few expenses. The delegates paid for their own travel expenses and requested reimbursement from their classes. An exception was the delegates from the Midwest, for whom the General Synod covered travel expenses. But apart from the expenses of the synod itself and the support of the professors, there were few program expenses that the General Synod itself generated.

**Move Toward United Program and Funding Strategy**

Over time, the denominational program grew. The program, however, was overseen by a federation of quasi-independent boards that raised their own funds and were not assessed. Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a drive for efficiency to enhance effectiveness. All the boards, together, reported to the General Synod requesting there to be a, more or less, unified denominational program; together, more can be done in the service of Christ. But this united approach was not just in terms of the program itself, but also in terms of funding the denominational program.

The Progress Campaign, as it was called, was to end after five years but was eventually continued by the General Synod as the Progress Council.

The Progress Council was discontinued after a new campaign was begun, and the synod felt that having a single campaign before the church was more beneficial. This also meant that the boards were often competing for resources. In order to avoid this, in 1946, the General Synod adopted a united appeal approach, that the boards would work together to raise funds—the United Advance. One might be able to see the United Advance as the next step from the Progress Council. What can be seen here, as well, is not only a desire for a more unified system of funding, but also a more structured and unified denominational program, a way to bring together and coordinate the program of the denomination. “The United Advance was the most comprehensive evangelism and stewardship program ever to be undertaken by the Reformed Church in America.”

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34 *MGS 1868*, p. 411.  
35 *MGS 1868*, p. 413.  
36 *MGS 1918*, pp. 535–541.  
37 *MGS 1932*, p. 187.  
38 *MGS 1937*, p. 129.  
40 Hoff, p. 83.
The United Advance presented its final report in 1949, noting that while it did not quite meet its goal, it was very successful. One of the recommendations was to consider a more permanent united approach to the denominational program. To this end, a committee was established and instructed to report back the following year.\(^{41}\) In 1950, the committee affirmed the importance of, among others, a “clearly defined, coordinated program.”\(^{42}\) To this end, the Stewardship Council was created to help with the coordination of the denominational program by gathering, among others, representatives from the several boards.\(^{43}\) This continued through the 1950s during a time of growth and expansion of services to local churches.

Finally, in 1968, the consolidation of the denominational program was completed when three boards merged with the Stewardship Council to create the General Program Council (GPC).\(^{44}\)

**Funding Church and Program**

As we have already mentioned, assessments were not the first denomination-wide fundraising efforts. The Reformed Church has had a long history of raising money for many purposes, particularly benevolent purposes. The raising of funds for benevolent purposes began to be more organized when, in 1867, the General Synod ordered the formation of a committee “to devise and report to General Synod ... some scheme for securing, if possible, generous and systematic contributions from all our Churches to all our Benevolent Boards.”\(^{45}\) The committee reported back the following year and recommended, among other things, that “it is the duty of every settled minister, and of every consistory where there is no settled minister, to see to it that the collections ordered by Synod are regularly taken up in the Churches under their care.”\(^{46}\) Additionally, a question was added to the annual constitutional inquiry to inquire into whether or not collections were taken for the boards of the General Synod. And so it is not only that churches themselves ought to support benevolent causes on their own, but that they are to join with other Reformed churches in unity of purpose and action for benevolent purposes, as well. Indeed, the denomination was urged to support denominational benevolent causes first.\(^{47}\)

Benevolent funds were gathered either in collections or in the form of what we might today call askings. The General Synod doesn’t tax for them, but expects churches to give generously, just as it asks people to do the same. While there has been some difficulty with a strict line between benevolence and administration,\(^{48}\) there has been a distinction between those things which are to be assessed, and those things which are to be solicited via special offerings or other forms of giving.

For most of the history of assessments, the General Synod assessed for church purposes, not program purposes. That is, the General Synod assessed classes for costs of the synod functioning as an assembly of the church. This meant that costs such as the stated clerk, commissions, contributions to ecumenical organizations, and the like were assessed,

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\(^{41}\) *MGS* 1949, pp. 181–191.
\(^{42}\) *MGS* 1950, p. 182.
\(^{43}\) *MGS* 1952, p. 156.
\(^{44}\) *MGS* 1968, p. 141.
\(^{45}\) *MGS* 1867, p. 286.
\(^{46}\) *MGS* 1868, p. 504.
\(^{47}\) *MGS* 1936, pp. 548–549.
\(^{48}\) *MGS* 1968, p. 179.
because these were part of the General Synod as an assembly of the church. Much of the program, however, was undertaken by a federation of quasi-independent boards. These boards were subsidiary corporations of the General Synod, and they had their own staff and their own budgets and ran their own programs. The various assemblies of the church, then, could decide what programs to support and how.

At the same time that the denominational program was consolidating, the General Synod, in responding to calls throughout the church, sought to determine what were benevolent funds and what were operational funds—benevolent contributions being voluntary and operational funds being assessed. The problem that the synod noted, however, was that there is not a clear demarcation between benevolent and operational, since benevolent programs require operational support.\(^\text{49}\) In the State of Religion report in 1972, the president of General Synod called for a consultation that would, among other things, find a way to provide financial strength to the denominational program and to maintain the balance between assessment and benevolence.\(^\text{50}\) In 1973, definitions were offered for assessment, asking, and offering: Administrative costs (synodical staff salaries, travel and meeting expenses, office expenses, etc.) are assessed whereas denominational “programs of ministry and mission” are non-assessed, “including the costs of implementing such programs.” The funding of staff services was determined by the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) and the GPC for their respective costs.\(^\text{51}\)

**Increasing Assessments and Growing**

Through the 1980s and 1990s, assessments increased as did the complaints, proposals of alternate strategies, and attempts to curb assessment increases. Between 1980 and 1994, there were no less than 27 overtures expressing concern over assessment increases—and several of these were sent by more than one classis. Following up on a referral from 1980 to consider additional funding strategies in addition to assessments (instead of assessing for program), the General Synod of 1981 established a program called “support share.” Support share was an attempt to encourage churches to give based upon income rather than membership. When it was first introduced, it was recommended to give three percent of income for congregational purposes which would be divided between Christian discipleship, church planting, and development. This was not an assessment, but rather, was an encouragement to the churches for their support.\(^\text{52}\)

This was also a time in which the GPC was seeking to address funding problems and was running a deficit. The deficit led to a number of staff positions being eliminated from the budget, and it was noted that the GPC would require a ten percent increase in funds over the next year in order to eliminate further deficits, and support shares were again urged to the churches.\(^\text{53}\) The following year, the deficit was reversed and support shares did not make another appearance. However, in 1987, the General Synod voted to establish an assessment to maintain the staffing of the GPC.\(^\text{54}\) The following year, there were 11 overtures from a number of classes asking to rescind the assessment program, to consider alternatives to assessments, and to ask the General Synod to account for how assessment dollars are spent. The synod denied nearly all the overtures, but it did call for the GSEC to prepare a study on the strain of assessments on financially struggling churches.\(^\text{55}\)

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\(^{49}\) *MGS 1968*, pp. 179–180; *MGS 1972*, p. 91.

\(^{50}\) *MGS 1972*, p. 279.

\(^{51}\) *MGS 1973*, p. 124.

\(^{52}\) *MGS 1981*, pp. 254–255.


\(^{54}\) *MGS 1987*, p. 265.

\(^{55}\) *MGS 1988*, pp. 345–353.
The reasons provided against assessments presented in the overtures during the 1980s fall into a few general arguments. The primary concern was for the traditional means of voluntary giving for benevolences. Assessments violated that tradition. Seen as a form of taxation, in fact a “regressive” tax, it was natural that human beings would rebel against being told what they must do. Such mandatory giving restricts congregational control and weakens the levels of accountability.\footnote{MGS 1980, p. 225.}

Related to this “traditional” argument was the argument that “forced” giving weakens us, while voluntary giving, cheerfully done, leads to a spiritual enthusiasm. A per capita tax makes for spiritual discomfort. Such a situation may cause giving not to be the result of a cheerful heart.

Finally, the third argument related to the power and control over the classes and congregations held by General Synod. Assessments would continue to grow as more “worthy” programs were added that were in financial trouble. Such a situation would mean that synod would have complete control over classes and congregations as congregations lost the freedom to contribute based on the merit and value of individual programs.\footnote{MGS 1988, pp. 345–353.}

Each of these overtures was denied by the General Synod. Regularly arguments were presented that indicated the importance of the program for the church and the necessity for funding it. The overtures gradually shifted from an opposition to assessments to that of controlling the increase of assessments and providing assistance for economically troubled churches. As the RCA entered the 1990s and began to assess for \textit{The Church Herald}, and especially to send it to every household and fund it through assessments,\footnote{MGS 1992, p. 198–199.} the concern was not so much against assessments as it was for the rate of increase of assessments.

### Conclusion

The General Synod had funding structures, plans, and strategies that adapted organically to the needs of the denomination. The General Synod has a long history of assessing the

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{MGS 1980}, p. 225.
  \item \textit{MGS 1988}, pp. 345–353.
  \item \textit{MGS 1992}, p. 198–199.
\end{itemize}
narrower assemblies (synods and classes) for operational costs, though benevolence and program costs have long been supported by voluntary contributions. It is only recently that the General Synod has begun assessing for program purposes. It is because of the assessing for program purposes, and not simply operational purposes, that there has been such a significant increase in assessments. But, the General Synod began assessing for program because the churches and classes did not adequately fund the program aspects of the church that were, in appearances at least, desired by the church.

H 19-1
To commend the paper “History of Funding for the General Synod,” to the executive committees or equivalent bodies in all regional synods and classes and to all consistories; and further,

To instruct all General Synod Council members, the general secretary, the treasurer, and any other staff whom the general secretary deems appropriate to read this paper and schedule time for discussion no later than October 2019. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. The issue of funding and the stewardship of the church is a central concern to our Christian witness and discipleship—note the large number of times our Lord addresses the issue of money in the Gospels.

2. This is clearly a long-standing problem in the RCA. Together we have become ill, and only together can we truly be made well.

ANABAPTIST AND REFORMED RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the preface to its 1793 Constitution, the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America recognized that the harsh language within our confessions could cause other Christians to take offense. It states:

In publishing the Articles of Faith, the Church determined to abide by the words adopted in the Synod of Dordrecht … in consequence of which, the terms alluded to could not be avoided. But she openly and candidly declares that she by no means thereby intended to refer to any denomination of Christians at present known, and would be grieved at giving offence, or unnecessarily hurting the feelings of any person.59

This disclaimer refers to the strong denunciations of some other Christian groups within our confessions, specifically the Anabaptists in the Belgic Confession. Articles 18, 34, and 36 of the Belgic Confession condemn Anabaptists by name, rejecting and, at times, mischaracterizing their views of the incarnation, baptism, and the church’s relationship to civil governments.

Today, 226 years after the publication of this original disclaimer and 458 years after the Belgic Confession was penned, the Reformed tradition’s understanding of these key theological tenets still differs from the Anabaptists; however, the use of terms including “heresy,” “condemn,” and “reject” no longer reflect the spirit of ecumenical partnership

that now exists between our traditions. Because our confessions are “historical and faithful witnesses” to our faith, we cannot simply revise our confessions, omitting difficult passages. Instead, the church must appreciate what they signified at the time and wrestle with how we might reconcile ourselves to groups that are condemned within them today. This paper attempts to address these themes, offering a brief overview of relations between Reformed and Anabaptist Christians in both sixteenth-century and modern-day contexts. Key to this study are the following questions: Who are the Anabaptists? What is their legacy? Why is reconciliation important? How might Reformed Christians relate to them today?

**Who are the Anabaptists?**

Anabaptist—which means “rebaptizer”—is a pejorative label that was given to Anabaptists by their disapproving Catholic and Protestant neighbors during the Reformation era. As historians have noted, there are several problems with this title. For one, Anabaptists do not believe in re-baptizing, but in adult baptism; for them, infant baptism is not a legitimate baptism since it is not explicitly commanded in Scripture. Second, the title suggests that baptism was the most important issue for the Anabaptists. In fact, baptism was an incidental doctrine. What was most important for the Anabaptist movement was their doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) and accompanying theology of discipleship, both of which focused on what it meant to be a community that lived in active obedience to the Scriptures. Third, the name seems to suggest that theirs was a unified movement. In actuality, several Anabaptist movements emerged almost simultaneously and independently in Switzerland, different parts of Germany, Austria, Moravia, and the Netherlands. While there were significant differences of theology and practice among the movements that developed in these locations, some core beliefs can be identified among the Anabaptist groups. These include pacifism, separation of church and government, voluntary church membership, separation from worldly corruption, and church discipline.

The pursuit of peace is one of the central tenets of the Anabaptist tradition. This manifests most obviously through Anabaptists’ rejection of violence in any form and the high premium they place on peace. Anabaptists adopted the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, a mantra meaning Christians should base their beliefs solely on the words contained in Scripture. Unlike other Protestant traditions springing up during this era, Anabaptists interpreted Scripture to place a clear prohibition on violence and to elevate the pursuit of peace. The Anabaptist tradition, therefore, traditionally avoids war and violence and even in the face of persecution tends to choose non-violent resistance. This pursuit of peace extends to the Anabaptist belief in seeking harmony and unity with other Christians and within their own communion as well. Peaceful coexistence with other Christians became a key belief of the Anabaptist tradition, particularly in the centuries following its establishment in the sixteenth century. This hallmark of the tradition remains with the Anabaptists today, offering an example of how to pursue peace in even the most divisive times.

Anabaptists also have a distinctive interpretation of the relationship between the church and state, being pioneers in arguing for a strict separation between the church and the state.

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They made this argument on the basis of their belief that state meddling in the church represents a significant threat to the purity of the church. Conversely, they feared that when the church got involved in politics, it would inevitably lead to external influences on the life of the church. Any engagement between the church and the state had the potential to taint the witness of the church. They took this possibility extremely seriously. For centuries, Anabaptists held this position, often placing themselves in peril due to persecution from governments controlled by Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, and Catholic traditions. Even today, most Anabaptists strenuously guard against any entanglement with politics in an effort to protect the integrity of their faith. In the name of preserving the purity of the gospel, most Anabaptists do not run for elected office or attend political rallies.

What Is the History of Reformed–Anabaptist Engagement?

A common misconception concerning the religious history of the sixteenth century is that there was a single European reformation, which began with Martin Luther and continued through his successors, branching off into other evangelical (later called Protestant) churches, beginning with the reforms of Huldrych Zwingli. Today, scholars of the Early Modern period largely agree that there was not one but multiple reformations, some of which began before Luther, such as Wycliffe’s reforms in England, and at least two others that began in the sixteenth century but are not considered part of the Protestant Reformation. These are the Catholic and Radical reformations. The magisterial (Protestant) reformers, including John Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli, understood their own theological situation in opposition to both of these other parties. On the one hand, they set out to reform the Roman Catholic Church to more faithfully reflect the apostolic church that Christ founded. On the other hand, they sought to distance themselves from the Anabaptists of their time, who they perceived as “radical” in their sacramental theology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and practices. In 1539, Calvin protested in his letter to Cardinal Sadoleto, “Two parties militate against us; they are as different as they possibly can be. Because what does the party of the Pope have in common with the Anabaptists?” Despite the diverse beliefs of the Reformation movements that emerged during this era, Catholics and nearly all Protestant groups agreed in their condemnation of Anabaptist theology and viewed it as a threat to the delicate social order in a season of tremendous instability.

The rejection of the Anabaptists extended far beyond denunciations within Reformed confessions. Rather, the violent persecution brought upon the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century was often at the behest of Reformed Christians, particularly those living in Zurich under the direction of Zwingli. Among the many Anabaptists who were persecuted was Felix Manz, a former student of Zwingli, who was sentenced to death by drowning in the Limmat River on the orders of the Zurich city council. Making a mockery of his convictions on adult baptism, the city council ordered Manz’s hands tied behind his back and executed him by plunging him into the icy river. A Hutterite chronicle from 1542 details several other inhumane acts against Anabaptists, including the burning of Wolfgang Ullmann in Waltzra, Switzerland, and the beheading of ten men and drowning of their wives in Swabia, Germany. The chronicle recounts that the persecution of Anabaptists in the area finally reached the point that over twenty men, widows, pregnant wives, and maidens were cast miserably into dark towers, sentenced never again to see either sun or moon as long as they lived, to end their days on bread and water, and thus in the dark towers to remains [sic.] together, the living and the dead, until none.

64 McGrath, 129.
remained alive… There was issued a stern mandate at the instigation of Zwingli that if any more people in the canton of Zurich should be rebaptized, they should immediately, without further trial, hearing, or sentence, be cast into the water and drowned.65

These types of persecutions continued until the end of the eighteenth century.66

Movement toward Reformed–Anabaptist Cooperation

In the last century, great strides have been made toward healing the divisions that were created in the sixteenth century between the Reformed and Catholic churches. For example, the RCA has participated in a national dialogue between Reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church for the last five decades. Through this dialogue, participating churches continue to move toward reconciliation as they now formally recognize each other’s baptisms and acknowledge each other’s churches as those in which the body of Christ is truly present. But while significant attention has been given to repairing the rift between Catholics and Reformed Christians, there has been no formal process in place for seeking reconciliation with our Anabaptist brothers and sisters.

Today, three major groups of Anabaptists trace their lineage to their sixteenth-century predecessors: the Mennonites, the Amish, and the Hutterites. Related groups emerged in later centuries that bear a similar theology and practice, such as the Bruderhof communities and the Schwarzenau Brethren (or German Baptist Brethren). While some Anabaptist views have become more “mainstream”—it has been suggested that a diffuse Neo-Anabaptist movement is emerging in the U.S., represented by theologians and church leaders such as Stanley Hauerwas, Ron Sider, and Brian McLaren, whose core beliefs include pacifism and social justice—traditional Anabaptists (Mennonites, Amish, and the Hutterites) are still marginalized in American Christianity. Much of this is due to a lack of understanding and familiarity with Anabaptist beliefs and practices. But such intolerance also demonstrates the tenacious hold that the Reformation perspective still has on the Reformed imagination. For centuries, our churches have defined their identity in their opposition to other churches. Like the reformers, Reformed Christians today continue to identify themselves in negative disassociation from “radical” groups like the Anabaptists.

While there has been a noticeable absence of attempts to formally pursue reconciliation in the U.S., important initiatives have been taken at the international level to heal historic wounds. In 1983, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches hosted a Day of Encounter, celebrating a decade-long dialogue with the Baptist World Alliance. Alongside Baptist and Reformed delegates, Mennonites were invited as well. The service ended in a common celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The hopes for reconciliation that were sparked at the conference were fanned into a more robust flame through an international dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference. These moments of communion remind us of the bonds we already share with Anabaptists through ecumenical bodies such as Christian Churches Together, the National Council of Churches, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

In 2004, the Church of Zurich also took a powerful step toward rapprochement, hosting


a conference titled “The Reformation and the Anabaptists—Steps to Reconciliation.” Mennonite and Reformed Christians worshiped together in a service of reconciliation that included the confession of sins against Anabaptists and a petition for healing and unity. But the major contribution of the occasion was the presentation of a tablet that commemorated the execution of Felix Manz and other Anabaptists and was dedicated on the site of Manz’s death.

During the 2004 event, Reformed Christians in Zurich declared that, “It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition, and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.”

The clarion call of the Zurich Christians is one that goes out to the RCA to consider as well: It is time to underscore our common heritage in Christ, to learn from each other, and to strengthen our witness through our pursuit of unity. As stated at the beginning of this paper, there were indeed many reformation during the sixteenth century. That said, the many sixteenth-century reforms shared a common goal—to more faithfully reflect Christ’s intentions for the church. According to 1 Corinthians 12, the church that Christ calls us to and into which we are baptized—as infants or as adults—is one body in Christ. There is “no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

The acknowledgment that the RCA is only one part of the larger body of Christ, which also contains the Anabaptists, frees us to learn from our Anabaptist brothers and sisters, to hear and honor their stories of persecution, to listen to their views on pacifism, to glean from their robust theology of discipleship, and to be shaped by their rich sense of community. They teach us compelling lessons about the pursuit of peace, wariness about comingling between the church and politics, and the virtues of a robust theology of discipleship.

What Might Future Reconciliation Look Like?

What might reconciliation between Anabaptist and Reformed Christians look like in our own context, initiated by our own communion, and at this time? This history reveals a need to lament that we have not lived into Christ’s prayer for unity, to acknowledge the fracture between our two communions, and to repent of our role in forming this division. If we begin with repentance, might we ask Anabaptists what reconciliation should look like, being responsive to the aggrieved party, allowing Anabaptists to inform us about how we might begin the process of reconciliation?

In light of this history and the need for lamenting, repenting, and seeking reconciliation, the commission offers the following recommendation:

\[H\,19-2\]
To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to explore possibilities for repentance and reconciliation, being particularly attentive to the ways in which our ecumenical partners have pursued rapprochement with Anabaptists, and report back to General Synod 2021.

(ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,

Steven D. Pierce, moderator

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Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Office of the General Synod received one judicial matter approximately two weeks before the 2018 session of the General Synod and three judicial matters after the 2018 session of the General Synod. The matter received before the 2018 session of the General Synod was a complaint (the “City Classis Complaint”) filed by The City Classis (“City Classis”) against the Regional Synod of the Far West (“RSFW”). Of the three matters received after the 2018 session of the General Synod, one was an appeal by Elder Thomas Kaiser from a decision by the Regional Synod of New York (the “Kaiser Appeal”), another was an appeal by Rev. William Henkel and Elder Elva Robinson from a decision by the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (the “Henkel and Robinson Appeal”), and the third was an appeal by Phil and Diane Forner from a decision by the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (the “Forner Appeal”).

Each matter was referred to the Commission on Judicial Business (“CJB”) for review, recommendation, and report to the 2019 General Synod. The Forner Appeal was filed on April 8, 2019. There is insufficient time for the CJB to complete its work on it prior to the 2019 General Synod meeting. Accordingly, the CJB intends to complete its work on the Forner Appeal in time for a written report (and recommendation, if applicable) to be submitted to the 2020 General Synod.

As discussed more fully below, proceedings regarding the City Classis Complaint were suspended and later dismissed as a result of action taken by the 2018 General Synod.

In the Kaiser Appeal and the Henkel and Robinson Appeal, after receiving them, the CJB requested and received from the clerk of the lower judicatory “the original record of all the proceedings in the case, including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case” (RCA Book of Church Order [BCO], Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 [2018 edition, p. 94]). Thereafter, the CJB met by conference call on Thursday, September 6, 2018. Commission member Kendra Van Houten (representing the Regional Synod of New York) did not participate in any discussions of the Kaiser Appeal. Commission member Paul Janssen (representing the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics) did not participate in any discussions of the Henkel and Robinson Appeal.

For reasons stated in this report, no hearings were conducted on either the Kaiser Appeal or the Henkel and Robinson Appeal.

Complaint by the City Classis against the Regional Synod of the Far West

A complaint was filed by City Classis against RSFW on May 29, 2018, and forwarded to all members of the commission. Shortly thereafter, a communication was sent by the commission to the clerk of the RSFW asking him to send to the commission “the original record of all the proceedings pertaining to the complaint” as required under BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 3.

Meanwhile, at the 2018 General Synod, the following item of new business was presented to and received by the General Synod and then referred to the Committee of Reference for further referral or disposition as appropriate:

The City Classis requests the General Synod to transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants, and all ministers and candidates under care from the Regional Synod of the Far West to the Regional Synod of
the Mid-Atlantics by a date suitable to all parties but no later than December 31, 2018 (MGS 2018, p. 15).

Reasons given for submission of the foregoing as new business are available in MGS 2018, p. 16.

The new business was accepted by the Committee of Reference and referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business. Thereafter, acting upon advice provided by its Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business, the 2018 General Synod acted:

To transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants, and all ministers and candidates under care of City Classis from the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic (RSMAt) by a date suitable to all parties but no later than September 30, 2018 (MGS 2018, OV 18-26, p. 154).

On June 16, 2018, City Classis requested that the commission suspend all proceedings on its complaint against RSFW and that the complaint be dismissed following completion of the transfer of City Classis to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic (“RSM-At”). The commission granted the request of City Classis to suspend all proceedings, and therefore took no additional action regarding the complaint.

On October 1, 2018, the commission received a copy of letter from RSM-At to City Classis officially welcoming it into the RSM-At, and on October 2, 2018, the commission received a communication from the stated clerk of City Classis confirming that the classis had been transferred to and received by RSM-At and requesting that the classis’s complaint against RSFW be dismissed. Consequently, on October 9, 2018, the commission sent a communication to City Classis and RSFW formally informing them that, in accordance with City Classis’s request, the complaint was dismissed.

Appeal by Elder Thomas Kaiser from Action by the Regional Synod of New York

The appeal by Thomas Kaiser (“Kaiser”) was received by the Office of the General Secretary on July 3, 2018. The appeal is essentially a continuation of a matter reported on by the CJB to the 2018 General Synod (MGS 2018, pp. 293–294). In that matter, the CJB determined that “[t]here has been no formal judgment with respect to the behavior or misbehavior of [the appellant] by any judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. There being no formal judgment, necessarily there can be no other decision than to dismiss the appeal of [the appellant], and such was the action of this commission” (MGS 2018, p. 293).

Meanwhile, having been informed of the CJB’s dismissal of the appeal without a hearing, a complaint against the Classis of Orange (“Orange Classis”) was filed by Kaiser with the Regional Synod of New York (“RSNY”). On May 24, 2018, the stated clerk of the RSNY notified Kaiser and the stated clerk of Orange Classis that at its meeting on May 5, 2018, the RSNY decided to adopt the recommendation of the RSNY’s Judicial Business Committee. That recommendation was quoted in the RSNY clerk’s May 24 letter as follows: “The Regional Synod of New York confirms the actions of the Reverend Classis of Orange at its Stated Session on February 23, 2017.” It is from this action that Kaiser appealed.

As noted in the introduction to this report, the CJB obtained and reviewed “the original record of all the proceedings in the case, including the notice of intent, the evidence,
the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case” and discussed it during its September 6, 2018, conference call. More particularly, the commission determined that written notice of intent to appeal was filed with an officer or the clerk of the judicatory which took the action in question not later than 20 days after the appellant received notice of the action taken; the appeal and the reasons therefor were filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory within 20 days after the filing of the notice of intent; the clerk of the lower judicatory filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory, within 20 days after the filing of the notice of intent, the original record of all the proceedings in the case (including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case); and the case and its attendant papers are in order (BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Sections 1-4 [2018 edition, p. 94]).

Following a discussion of the 77-page appeal and reasons therefor and the 143-page record of the case, the CJB concluded that the appeal was frivolous (in part because serious and substantial questions exist regarding what remedy—if any—the appellant seeks from the General Synod) and clearly without merit (because the appeal and reasons therefor include a number of allegations but offers no substantial support for them). Consequently, and in accordance with BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2018 edition, p. 95), the commission voted to dismiss the appeal without a hearing. The commission informed the appellant in writing of the dismissal. Thereafter, the appellant asked the commission to reconsider its action. The commission declined to do so.

Appeal by Rev. William Henkel and Elder Elva Robinson from Action by the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics

The appeal by Rev. William Henkel (“Henkel”) and Elder Elva Robinson (“Robinson”) was received by the Office of the General Secretary on June 18, 2018. As in the Kaiser appeal, the CJB obtained and reviewed “the original record of all the proceedings in the case, including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case” and discussed it during its September 6, 2018, conference call. The CJB determined that the appeal and reasons therefor from Henkel and Robinson and the record of the case from the stated clerk of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (“RSM-At”) contain no evidence that the appellants filed a notice of intent to appeal with the RSM-At as required by BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 1 (2018 edition, p. 94). The commission also determined that the June 28, 2018, transmittal letter for the record of the case from the stated clerk for the RSM-At specifically states that “a ‘Notice of Intent to Appeal’ was not submitted to me, nor the Regional Synod office … ”

BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 1 (2018 edition, p. 94) provides that “[w]ritten notice of intent to appeal shall be filed with an officer or with the clerk of the judicatory which took the action in question. This filing shall be completed not later than twenty days after having received official notification of the action taken. In default of this requirement, the appeal shall not be heard.” Consequently, the commission took no action regarding the appeal filed by Henkel and Robinson.

Respectfully submitted,
Russell Paarlberg, 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 Karla Camacho (secretary), Rick DeBruyne (moderator), June Denny, Rafael Garcia (vice moderator), Kelvin Spooner, and Kyunghoon Suh. Unfortunately, the commission had to function this year with two vacancies, one African American and one Asian. The commission is hoping to get up to full strength this year. Alina Coipel serves as the GSC staff member to the commission.

The commission met via video/phone conference on July 18, 2018; September 12, 2018; October 3, 2018; and February 23, 2019. It also met October 18–20, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and January 30–31, 2019, in Phoenix, Arizona.

CORE thanks Betty Shuster, a member of GSC, for attending our winter meeting.

CORE and Transformed & Transforming

CORE’s area of responsibility is the Reformed Church in America (RCA) commitment to “a multicultural future freed from racism.” This commitment was initiated as part of Our Call, the denominational strategic goal from 2003 to 2013, and integrated into Transformed & Transforming, the denomination’s strategic goal for 2013 to 2028. It is clearly stated in the opening paragraph of the Transformed & Transforming document (emphasis added):

Being led by the Holy Spirit, serving with each other, embracing our diverse world and striving for a multicultural future freed from racism, and working with all the partners that God provides, as we move toward a fifth century of mission and ministry, the Reformed Church in America commits to focus its efforts for the next fifteen years on the following three interconnected strategic priorities …

The RCA commitment to “a multicultural future freed from racism” is also implicit in the bullet points of each of the three strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming:

1) Cultivating Transformation in Christ
   • Loving all people.

2) Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow
   • Cultivating diverse and healthy leaders within the total membership of the body of Christ, so that churches can thrive.

3) Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission
   • Contextualizing ministry and church in new and expanded ways.
   • Serving as agents of renewal through putting our faith in action.
   • Promoting justice, compassion, and reconciliation.
   • Equipping existing churches to move outward in ministry.
   • Embracing our mission to the world and sharing the good news of the gospel with everyone.
   • Multiplying missional communities and new churches that put the love of Christ into action.
Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2018 edition, p. 115):

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

One of CORE’s official responsibilities is to monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

CORE affirms the direction and progress that has been made in the RCA toward being a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. The commission is encouraged that

- the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuing existence in North America is the first to have selected a Hispanic general secretary who was raised in Nicaragua, immigrated to Canada, and is now a citizen of the United States.
- diversity, intersectionality, and cross-sectionality are core values in selecting Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders and their guiding coalitions.
- there’s intention about raising more diverse racial-ethnic and multicultural leaders and starting and strengthening racial-ethnic and multicultural churches.
- the RCA has racial-ethnic councils and a Commission on Race and Ethnicity that work with and advocate for a multiracial future freed from racism.

Having said that, CORE has concerns:

1. CORE is charged to monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives. However, currently there are no written objectives. CORE has been asking for these for at least the last three years. Thankfully, the commission has been in conversation with our general secretary, and he is willing to work on this. In keeping with the request of the Vision 2020 Team and in light of conversations with the general secretary, CORE is not making a formal recommendation on this but strongly suggests that staff and the General Synod Council (GSC) work together on formulating objectives, share them with CORE as soon as possible, and share them with the church at next year’s General Synod.
2. Further, CORE was surprised to discover that GSC has not had an ends policy on the RCA’s commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism since 2013. Although the 2013 General Synod affirmed that the emphasis on a multicultural future freed from racism needed to be continued and included in Transformed & Transforming, GSC has not formulated an ends policy, nor
asked the general secretary for a reporting on this important commitment of the church. Again, in conversation with the general secretary, he agreed to look into this and is willing to work with GSC to develop an ends policy. In light of that and the Vision 2020 Team request, CORE is not making a formal recommendation but strongly suggests that the general secretary and GSC move this forward.

3. While charged with monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives, CORE is severely limited in its ability to do so by budget and expertise. In terms of the deeper dynamics of race and racism, the commissioners have experience but little expertise in this field, and there is no room in the budget to get a consultant or any help with this. Even if the commission were able to engage someone with expertise in racism and data-driven evaluation, there is no room in the budget to develop and implement such a process. In essence, the commission has been given a very important task but few resources to accomplish it. This concern has been raised with staff on more than one occasion.

4. CORE is concerned that there is neither a specific initiative nor a staff coordinator for the RCA’s commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism. The argument has been made that this is embedded in each of the three strategic priorities and in each initiative. The commission understands this and that diversity, intersectionality, and cross-sectional are core values within Transformed & Transforming. However, the same has been said for youth, women, and disability concerns. Yet there are identified initiatives and dedicated staff for these and none for a multiracial future freed from racism. The commission recently became aware—and was surprised to find—that the original Transformed & Transforming staffing structure contained a coordinator of multiracial initiatives, but the position was eliminated. The commission is exploring why and what that means in terms of the denomination’s actual commitment to pressing forward toward a multiracial future freed from racism.

5. CORE is concerned that the strides made at the denominational level are not being matched in the other assemblies. CORE intends to explore how the Transformed & Transforming initiatives and delivery systems might be engaged to help with this.

Collaboration and Communication between CORE and the Racial-Ethnic Councils

CORE and the three racial-ethnic councils are working together toward a more collaborative relationship. In the RCA structure, CORE relates and reports to General Synod. The racial-ethnic councils relate and report to the General Synod Council. There is no formal relationship between the commission and the councils. Both, however, often deal with the same or similar issues. While there is a commissioner on CORE named by each of the racial-ethnic councils, there has been little connection or communication between them. In order to begin improving that situation, the general secretary invited the moderator of CORE and the racial-ethnic council presidents and staff coordinators to meet with him in Phoenix on Monday, January 21, 2019. It was a mutually beneficial meeting. Ten action items were identified and are being worked on. CORE is also looking for other ways it can be proactive and build on this good beginning.

Native American/Indian Ministries (NAIM)

CORE is concerned for RCA Native American/Indian Ministries. Internally, the commission has made a commitment that there should be at least one commissioner on CORE who is Native American or First Nation, is actively involved in NAIM, and has
the ability to act as a liaison between the ministries and the commission. For the last three years, NAIM has invited CORE to send a commissioner to its annual gathering. For the last two years, the moderator and his wife have participated. This has been extremely helpful to build a relationship and for CORE to learn about and understand better our Native American and First Nations members and their churches.

CORE is aware of and monitoring a concern raised by NAIM that decisions are being made about their future without them being engaged in the process. Due to scheduling issues, the general secretary has not been able to have a face-to-face meeting with them, but he is planning a video conference meeting to engage their concerns. That should have occurred by the time of this report’s publication.

**African American Black Council**

At the 2017 General Synod, the African American Black Council (AABC) presented an excellent report on racism that contained nine recommendations to the GSC, four of which the AABC asked the GSC to bring to the General Synod on its behalf (*2017 Minutes of the General Synod*, pp. 64–71). It reflected very serious thought and work.

At its meeting on June 8, 2017, the GSC received the AABC report and affirmed the council’s work around antiracism and the importance of that work, but decided not to bring the recommendations to the 2017 General Synod. GSC decided instead to appoint a small task force of GSC members to work directly with the AABC over the next year to more fully develop these recommendations and bring them to General Synod 2018. The *2018 Minutes of the General Synod*, however, reflect nothing on this. In conversation with the GSC moderator and general secretary, CORE has learned that this matter had been delegated and a report was to be forthcoming at the March GSC meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting will occur after this report is due for publication. CORE is disappointed that this has not been attended to more closely by GSC and will continue to monitor its progress.

**Five-Fold Test**

The Five-Fold Test was developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church. It has been instrumental in that denomination’s efforts to become more multiracial and to eliminate racism. The 2014 General Synod tasked CORE with monitoring pilot efforts to implement the test in the RCA for five years, through the 2019 General Synod. Due to inertia in exploring the use of the test in the RCA, the 2018 General Synod approved terminating that effort.

The assessment money raised for piloting the Five-Fold Test was set aside in 2018, and CORE was tasked with coming up with ways to use the money for the purpose of furthering the use of the Five-Fold Test in the RCA. CORE continues to explore this. Providentially, Kelvin Spooner’s brother, Harold, is with the Evangelical Christian Church and has been involved in the development of the Five-Fold Test. CORE is planning to use some of the available funds to consult with Harold. Women’s Transformation and Leadership has also expressed interest in using the Five-Fold Test and collaborating with CORE on further developing and implementing this tool.

**Consistorial Report Form Questions**

At CORE’s request, the following questions were added to the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) in 2017: “How does your congregation 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 and multicultural?" CORE received the responses from the 2017 CRF on October 17. The commission is working to collate them by similarity and analyze them in terms of the RCA commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism.

Conclusion

In many ways, the work of CORE has been difficult these past two years. The commission is functioning at less than full strength and with limited resources. The current conversation on human sexuality is foremost in everyone’s mind, resulting in other things, including race and ethnicity, not getting the attention they might otherwise. The elimination of the multiracial initiatives staff position from Transformed & Transforming, the lack of responsiveness to and elimination of the Five-Fold Task Force, the lack of a 2018 report from GSC on the 2017 recommendations from the AABC, and changes being made that impact the life of Native American/Indian Ministries without involving them in decisions about their destiny are disappointing, and it is hard not to question the will of the church in the whole matter of race and ethnicity.

As noted early in this report, there are encouraging signs. Eddy Alemán has been installed as general secretary. Church Multiplication has specific goals to plant more racial-ethnic and multiethnic churches. Kelvin Spooner has been a great addition to the commission. Kelvin’s brother’s connection with the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Five-Fold Test is providential. The meeting with the general secretary and the racial-ethnic council presidents and staff coordinators was fantastic and fruitful. Integrating intersectionality and cross-sectionality into Transformed & Transforming is promising. Many of the responses from the 2017 Consistorial Report Forms are refreshingly honest. They reveal a desire on the part of many congregations to effectively reach and reflect their neighborhoods. The interest Women’s Transformation and Leadership has in the Five-Fold Test may open an avenue for greater use. CORE can only hope and pray that these things lead toward becoming a Revelation 7:9 church.

The commission thanks Kyunghoon Suh for his service and looks forward to continuing our work together as he completes his term on the commission and takes up his responsibility as the newly appointed president of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM). The commission also thanks Alina Coipel for her ongoing service as our staff person. Alina is invaluable to CORE. She goes far above and beyond her assigned responsibilities. Her commitment clearly comes out of her passion for the work of CORE and her desire to see the RCA become fully multiracial, multiethnic, and freed from racism. Thank you, Kyunghoon and Alina.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyn, moderator
Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations convened in person October 18–19, 2018, and January 14–15, 2019, and teleconferenced on February 12, March 5, April 2, and April 30, 2019. Two final electronic votes were held through email, ending on May 20 and May 21–22, respectively.

Throughout the year, members of the commission actively sought qualified candidates, solicited completed profile forms, 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) [2018 edition, p. 116]).

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, and when possible, seeks to involve young adult members of the RCA (so 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 for ensuring 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. Profile forms are available from staff to the Commission on Nominations, Laura Tarbous (908-812-7897 or ltarbous@rca.org), or on the RCA website at www.rca.org/profile.

Nominations

Nominees identified by the Commission on Nominations are as follows (* indicates a final term; # indicates an official nomination from the assembly, institution, or agency listed):

**GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL**

*Rev. Pedro Agudelo (Council for Hispanic Ministries)#
*Bruce Deckinga (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)#
*Rev. Jamie Dykstra
*Rev. Albert Plat (Regional Synod of Canada)#
*Margaret Ritchie
*Rev. Leigh Van Kempen
COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Class of 2022
*Rev. Scott DeLeeuw
Rev. Edward Lungu
*Robin Suydam

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION
Class of 2020
Rebecca Koerselman
Class of 2021
Yvonne Williams
Class of 2022
Rev. William Flavin
Rev. Troy Nanninga

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Class of 2021
Rev. Carlos Corro
Class of 2022
Rev. Stacey Duensing
*Rev. Sun Jong Ju

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Class of 2022
*Rev. Robert Fretz
*Rev. Dennis TeBeest
Rev. Lisa Tice

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Class of 2022
Rev. Howard Moths

COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Class of 2022
*Rev. Lynn Japinga
Rev. David Zomer

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Class of 2022
Erin Parker (Regional Synod of Albany)#
Rev. John Sauer (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)#
*Thomas Terpstra (Regional Synod of the Far West)#

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Class of 2022
*Rev. Greg Alderman (Regional Synod of the Far West)#
*Rebecca Hudak (Regional Synod of Albany)#
Rev. Judith Nelson (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)#
Jael Serrano (Council for Hispanic Ministries)#
COMMISSIONS

COMMISSION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY
Class of 2020
Rev. Young Na
Class of 2021
Vacancy (Council for Hispanic Ministries)
Class of 2022
Rev. Stephen Kim (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries)#
Jo Prout

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
Class of 2022
Rev. James Brownson
*Rev. David Komline
*Rev. Stephen Shaffer
Lauralyn Vasquez

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Class of 2022
Josey Beird
*Rev. Dwayne Jackson
Rev. Debra Rensink

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES
Class of 2022
Joseph Laswell

As is provided for in its bylaws, BOBS has reduced its membership from 12 to 11 for the 2019–2020 year.

CHURCH GROWTH FUND BOARD
Class of 2022
*Larry Koops
Ronald Rukambe

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY
Class of 2022
Norma Coleman-James
*Rev. Robert Johnson (GSC appointee)
Willie Si
Nancy Van Heerde
Rev. Cathleen Wolff

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2022
Valerie Arthur
William Levering
Rev. Abigail Norton-Levering (Regional Synod of Albany)
Rev. Amy Nyland
Rev. Wilfredo Rodriguez
WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2021
Evan Vermeer (Regional Synod of the Heartland)
Class of 2022
Rebecca Anderson (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)
Kate Bolt
*Kermit Campbell
Chris Crawford
Sandra DeYoung (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics)
*Rev. Gail Ebersole
Alberto Salazar (Regional Synod of Canada)
Carol Van Andel
Rev. Lisa Vander Wal (Regional Synod of Albany)

CENTRAL COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Rev. Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell
Rev. John Schmidt
Steve Sikkink

*Central College amended its bylaws in 2018. It no longer maintains a static class rotation for its three General Synod–appointed members, and their service is reviewed on an annual basis.

HOPE COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2023
Matthew Wixson

*Hope College amended its bylaws in 2019. The requirement regarding General Synod–appointed members has been revised and now states that they shall be 25 percent of its total board membership, and, of those, half must be ordained ministers.

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
This year, there are no trustees to be appointed by the General Synod for Northwestern College.

PASTORAL FORMATION OVERSIGHT BOARD
Class of 2020
Rev. Gregory Dunlap (NBTS Theological Agent designee)
Rev. Daniel Gillett
Rev. Chad Pierce
Class of 2021
Jeff Ludington
Rev. Kyle Small (WTS Theological Agent designee)
Rev. Cora Taitt
Class of 2022
Norma Coleman-James (MFCA Theological Agent designee)
Rev. Eun Jae (Dan) Joo
*Eric Moreno (GSC designee)
Carol Mutch (Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team [CPAT] designee)

N 19-1
To elect the above-named nominees to the General Synod commissions, agencies, and the boards of directors or trustees of RCA-related educational institutions as indicated.
(ADOPTED)
A motion was made and supported to amend the slate of nominees incorporated by reference in N 19-1 as follows:

1. To grant a second three-year term on the MFCA board to Bradley Lewis and Vladimir Diaz-Ochoa.
2. To remove the remaining five names proposed for the MFCA board from the slate of nominees to be voted on by the General Synod.
3. To instruct the Commission on Nominations to meet after the General Synod to nominate three of the five candidates to the MFCA Board for consideration by the GSC for interim appointments to the remaining three vacancies on the board until the next meeting of the General Synod.
4. To instruct the GSC to appoint those three candidates on an interim basis until the next meeting of the General Synod.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not cease debate.

Debate regarding the proposed amendment to N 19-1 resumed.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment to the slate of nominees incorporated by reference in N 19-1.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt N 19-1.

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**N 19-2**

To elect Carl Boersma as moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2019–2020 term. (ADOPTED)

The membership of Israel Camacho, Lee DeYoung, and Thomas Paarlberg on the Commission on Nominations is concluding on June 30, 2019. The Commission on Nominations wishes to thank them for their service. We are grateful for their prayers, insight, and contribution to the commission’s 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 Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 18–19, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and January 11–12, 2019, in Chicago, Illinois.

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 tasks this year were those assigned by General Synod 2018; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding the Interpretation of the Word “Bounds”

From General Synod 2018, TE-1 requested the Commission on Church Order (CCO), the Commission on History (COH), and the COT “to offer [their] interpretation of the word ‘bounds’ in the Book of Church Order (BCO), defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod” (MGS 2018, p. 322). In October 2018, the COT met with members of the CCO and the COH, and a small task force was formed to draft an interpretation. The COH chose to offer its own paper, a historical chronicle and interpretation of the use of the term “bounds,” which can be found in their report.

The COT and the CCO thus drafted an interpretation of the term “bounds” regarding the formation and work of classes. The conclusions of the COT and CCO are that non-geographical classes are not prohibited in the BCO and that there may be warrant for the creation of ethnic/linguistic classes. However, such decisions should be made with great caution since the creation of non-geographic classes carries potential divisions and difficulties that are counter to the purpose of classes. The full paper with recommendations can be found in the report of the CCO.

Referral Regarding the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality”

General Synod 2018, after a time of debate and discussion, approved OV 18-21: “To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry” (MGS 2018, p. 148).

In response to General Synod 2018’s directive, and in its desire to serve the church well, the COT reviewed the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” and presents the following paper.

OF CATECHISMS AND TEACHING TOOLS: THE RESPONSE OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY TO THE “GREAT LAKES CATECHISM ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY”

The purpose of Christian catechisms is to teach the Christian faith to believers. As Thomas Torrance notes in the introduction to The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church, catechisms “aim to give a comprehensive exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the context of the whole Counsel of God and the whole life of the people of God.” They take serious and complicated theological ideas and disseminate them in language that is easily applicable and relevant to a believer’s life. Though many resources could be used to catechize, the RCA historically has emphasized the Heidelberg Catechism in particular.
Beginning as a local teaching tool for the young with input from several authors, over time, the Heidelberg Catechism gained near universal embrace in Reformed communities for teaching the gospel truths in a beautiful and simple way. The RCA throughout its history has not endorsed any other catechism because none has reached the theological helpfulness or brilliance of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the RCA, a catechism is not just a mere teaching aid, it is an essential tool of understanding the truth found in Scripture.

General Synod 2018 instructed the COT to offer a response to the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” (referred to in this document as GLC). This catechism, written by Branson Parler, seeks to be a relevant teaching resource to churches and families concerning the tumultuous waters of human sexuality and marriage. There is much to commend in this resource.

First, the commission commends the author for taking the time and energy to create a substantive document. Considerable effort was put into producing this teaching resource and the commission is thankful for a minister and a classis taking the issues addressed so seriously. Second, the resource is simply written and easily accessible. This is of primary importance if a resource is to be pastorally helpful; it must be understandable, and the GLC achieves this goal. The GLC also is to be commended for its efforts to offer a holistic approach to sexuality and marriage. It seeks to give biblical answers to the realities of homosexuality, marriage, singleness, the universality of sin, and the hope found in Christ. It is not just reactive to the controversies of the day but seeks to build a positive biblical view of marriage. Finally, the GLC seeks to answer questions that countless believers in the RCA are asking. Many will experience this straightforward resource as a breath of fresh air. This commission is thankful for the author’s work on these important issues.

For all there is to commend, this commission sees significant limitations with this document as presented to the RCA.

First, the document, at times, embraces theological language that is contentious, perhaps unintentionally so. Here, the commission is not referring to the conservative ethical stance of the document. Instead, the GLC seems built upon some theological assumptions that might not be easily embraced by the entire denomination. A clear example is the use of the term “creation order” in Question 1. Historically, the appeal to creation orders has been a way of setting up an authority independent of Scripture, so that the church no longer needs to return to Scripture as the primary source of God’s revelation. Given the reality of sin and its devastating effects on creation and human reason, it seems hard to imagine that we could ever ascertain the purposes of God in sexuality or marriage by seeking them in the “creation order” outside of the witness of Scripture. Further, appeals to “creation order” have been used to support things such as apartheid and misogyny. In appealing to a “creation order,” the commission believes that this document distracts from its goal of “bearing witness to the kingdom of God.”

Second, in many cases, the verses offered in support of various “answers” within the document do not seem relevant. An example can be found in the answer for Question 10. In one section of the answer, the author asserts that marriage is a means of sanctification. He then provides eight supporting Scriptures in footnote 17. None of the biblical texts provided explicitly or implicitly gives any support to the assertion that marriage is a vehicle of sanctification, except perhaps one, 1 Corinthians 7:4-5. These proof texts do not “prove” the answer provided. The commission does not have problems with proof texts per se, although ideally the use of Scripture would rise above mere proof texting. Scripture ought to support, deepen, and illumine the answers given in this document, helping the reader relate the questions and answers to the more important realities of the redemptive
purposes of God through Christ in the world. The commission believes that the author desires to be faithful to the Scriptures. Faithfulness (and pastoral helpfulness) requires a carefully engaged reading and use of Scripture. Even if one agrees with the ethical and relational assertions of this document, the Scriptures given do not always bear the weight of the answers offered.

Third, the theological anthropology of the document is underdeveloped and in need of refinement. The GLC is clear concerning its views of sexual ethics and the purpose of marriage, but it is quite opaque on the meaning of gender itself. At the foundation of sexuality is the human body—male and female. A teaching tool on sexuality ought to place the body into the story of God and redemption. The absence of such material is a serious deficiency of the document.

Finally, and most basically, the commission does not believe that this document rises to the standards of being a “catechism.” It is narrowly focused on one particular area. It does not seek to present “a comprehensive exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Following careful and extended deliberation, the Commission on Theology strongly suggests removing the name “catechism,” so as not to give it the weight that word implies. While the document might therefore helpfully be called a teaching tool, it is not a catechism.

The commission therefore recommends that the General Synod adopt the following recommendation:

TH 19-1
To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism”; and further,

To change the name of the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” to the “Great Lakes Teaching Tool on Marriage and Sexuality” in all future denominational references.

The following motion was made and supported:

To refer TH 19-1 to the Commission on Theology, instructing the commission to engage with the author of the Great Lakes Catechism for report back to General Synod 2020.

VOTED: To not adopt the motion.

A motion was made and supported to amend TH 19-1 as follows (deletions are stricken):

To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism; and further,

To change the name of the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” to the “Great Lakes Teaching Tool on Marriage and Sexuality” in all future denominational references.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

VOTED: To adopt TH 19-1 as amended.
The final version of TH 19-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**TH 19-1**  
To decline to receive the “Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality” as a “catechism.” (ADOPTED)

**Ongoing Work**

The COT engaged the items assigned to it as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and January meetings, the commission continued examining the roles and training available for commissioned pastors. The COT hopes to serve as a support and a resource for those involved in training commissioned pastors and other leaders in the church. The COT also continued discussing the presence and nature of theological statements and positions presented 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, specifically the General Synod, and brings glory to the Triune God.

**Acknowledgments**

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Jaeseung Cha, associate professor of foundational and constructive theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Tony Chapman, an elder from Fremont, California, for their six years of faithful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the commission 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
Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women is committed to the work of advocacy in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Honoring the gifts of women strengthens the church and invites the full participation of all 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 toward systemic changes in the church for the full inclusion of women, and to collaborate and celebrate with other RCA bodies on issues concerning women.

There were several topics that the Commission for Women discussed at our meetings this year. Of prime importance was collaborating with Women’s Transformation and Leadership in developing resources for the church regarding the #WeAreSpeaking movement, toward the goal of designating an RCA-wide #WeAreSpeaking Sunday. We also looked at ways we can collaborate with other commissions and RCA entities regarding issues of women’s mental health, sexual violence, and women affected by incarceration.

Members of our commission expressed concern about the wording in the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*) regarding membership on Commission for Women. Currently, the *BCO* states that the commission has eight members, including “at least two men.” When researching this matter, we found that the wording regarding membership was changed in 2004 to remove marital qualifications for commission membership, but we could find no reason for the inclusion of the words “at least” two men. We value all voices in our work. In order to maintain gender diversity and prevent the possibility of the Commission for Women membership consisting of a male majority, we respectfully propose the following recommendation.

W 19-1
To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, for submission to the 2020 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5

*Sec. 10 Commission for Women*

a. Membership

The commission shall have eight members. All members shall share a strong desire to work for the full and complete participation of women in realizing the vision of a church and society inclusive of all gifts of all persons. At least two members shall be men. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of W 19-1.

A motion was made and supported to amend W 19-1 as follows (deletions are double struck):

W 19-1
To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, for submission to the 2020 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5

*Sec. 10 Commission for Women*

a. Membership

The commission shall have eight members. All members shall share a strong desire to work for the full and complete participation of women in realizing the vision of a church and society inclusive of all gifts of all persons. At least two members shall be men. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of W 19-1.

A motion was made and supported to amend W 19-1 as follows (deletions are double struck):
Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5
Sec. 10. Commission for Women

a. Membership

The commission shall have eight members. All members shall share a strong desire to work for the full and complete participation of women in realizing the vision of a church and society inclusive of all gifts of all persons. At least two members shall be men.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment to W 19-1.

VOTED: To adopt W 19-1.

We thank God for the opportunity to serve the RCA.

Respectfully submitted,
Susan Hetrick, for the Commission for Women