Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and the church acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together, we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ’s mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2018 edition, p. 71]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2018 edition, p. 108]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, delegates will want to refer to the Bylaws of the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2018 edition, pp. 108–109]). A link to these bylaws is available in the orientation section of the General Synod Workbook.

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to this General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed &
Transforming, the General Synod’s 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod’s program agency. Referrals addressed to the GSC from previous General Synods are dealt with throughout this report.

Review of Regional Synod Minutes

The General Synod Office has received and read the 2018 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantics, and New York.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook. In response to a request from the floor, the president agreed that the report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education would be presented prior to the General Synod Council’s report regarding its commission review process.

EC 19-1
To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook. (ADOPTED)

General Synod Offering

The General Synod received offerings at the opening worship on Thursday, June 6, and the closing worship on Tuesday, June 11. The offerings were designated by General Synod president James Nakakihara to support Cyclone Idai disaster relief in Mozambique.

The Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2018 edition, p. 105]). The general secretary reported on classes’ payments of General Synod assessments and reported that there were no delegates who would not be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the Book of Church Order

The General Synod of 2018 adopted and referred to the classes for approval three amendments to the Book of Church Order. The amendments are recorded in the 2018 Minutes of the General Synod as noted. As of June 6, one classis had not reported votes to the Office of the General Synod on the questions of whether to approve the amendments. The votes of the other 45 classes, as reported in writing by the classes’ stated clerks, were as follows:
**Book of Church Order Amendments**

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**EC 19-2**
To declare Amendment 1 to be approved for incorporation into the 2019 *Book of Church Order*. (ADOPTED)

**EC 19-3**
To declare Amendment 2 to be approved for incorporation into the 2019 *Book of Church Order*. (ADOPTED)

**EC 19-4**
To declare Amendment 3 to be approved for incorporation into the 2019 *Book of Church Order*. (ADOPTED)

**Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer**

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

**EC 19-5**
To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

**General Synod Planning**

Responsibility for planning the agenda and schedule for the annual meeting of the General Synod is assigned to the General Synod Council (GSC) in its capacity as the General Synod Executive Committee. Planning for the annual meeting begins shortly after the conclusion of the current meeting and involves the General Synod officers, the general secretary, staff from the General Synod Office, and numerous others. At the fall meeting of the General Synod’s commissions and the GSC, moderators of the commissions, the moderator of the GSC, some GSC staff, the general secretary, and officers meet to consider anticipated business from all of these entities for the next year’s meeting. Initial plans
for the annual meeting are discussed at the fall meeting of the GSC. Prior to the start of
the General Synod meeting, the GSC reviews and approves the schedule and agenda.
This year, the General Synod Council approved a request from the Vision 2020 Team
to designate half of the General Synod’s schedule for non-business items, including a
significant amount of time for the Vision 2020 Team to engage the delegation with its work
over the past year and request feedback from the delegates that will shape its work as it
continues over the next year.

The selection of General Synod worship leadership and preachers is a prerogative of the
General Synod president. A worship planning team worked with the president and the
selected preacher to develop all of the worship liturgies for the synod.

In 2011, the General Synod moved away from providing a printed agenda and reports
except by special request. The equipment that supported the 2019 meeting was jointly
purchased in 2011 by the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America
(CRCNA) to support meetings of both denominations. Technology staff support was
present to assist delegates throughout the meeting. The transition to electronic reporting
has reduced synod’s expenses for paper and shipping and lessened the environmental
impact of the meeting.

Simultaneous translation and enhancements to support people with various disabilities
were provided based on the needs expressed by delegates and guests when they registered.
Hope College’s DeVos Fieldhouse, the Jack Miller Auditorium, and Dimnent Chapel
were equipped with hearing loops for people who have hearing disabilities. Videos that
were shown in the plenary space included captions for accessibility purposes. The synod
leadership and staff thank RCA Disability Concerns for its continued advocacy for these
enhancements. Thanks are also expressed to those delegates who volunteered to assist
people with disabilities.

General Synod Meeting Location

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2020 is Northwestern
College in Orange City, Iowa. The 2020 meeting of the General Synod will take place
June 11–16. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of
the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be
submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL
GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The General Synod Council (GSC) operates internally according to a not-for-profit
governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam
Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various
“ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives
regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended
in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives
of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, Transformed & Transforming.
Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the
work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC
has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through polices concerning
its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services
also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required
extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.

**RCA Salary Structure for Fiscal Year 2019 (October 2018–September 2019)**

The GSC policy (EL-8) pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market.”

The GSC compensation program allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the manager, employee, and Human Resources. As responsibilities change or when there is an open position, the job descriptions are updated and reevaluated to ensure that they are classified in the correct range. The program incorporates geographic differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions. Positions are benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors.

There are 14 salary ranges that span grades 10 to 23. Grade 10 represents the most entry level positions and Grade 23 represents highest level, held by the general secretary.

Staff are evaluated annually by their managers. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff who are accountable to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following tables represent the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2019. The ranges are utilized to establish beginning wages and annual salaries and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee.

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Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years. As BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2018 edition, p. 109) says, one of the GSC’s responsibilities is

To 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 of continuation shall not be assumed.

The proposed commission review process was presented to the GSC at its March 2017 meeting. After discussion and some adjustments to improve clarity, the GSC voted to adopt the process. GSC appointed a small group of GSC members to work on the surveys mentioned in the following second and third points and bring a proposal back to GSC. In October 2017, GSC received and adopted proposed survey questions for both surveys.

The first year cycle of the process began in spring 2018. The GSC’s review and recommendations regarding the first two commissions in the cycle, the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education and the Commission on Church Order follow.

The second year cycle of the process has begun for the Commission on Theology and the Commission for Women. Over the course of 2019–2020, the GSC will go through the review process with these two commissions to bring recommendations to General Synod 2020.

The Process

The following is the process adopted by the GSC in March 2017.

1. In order to encourage open channels of communication between the commissions and the GSC and to help the GSC support the commissions in their work, the GSC will send a representative to each commission’s winter meeting when there is a GSC member available and in close geographical proximity to the meeting place.

2. Each commission will be asked to fill out a two- or three-question survey each year for report to the GSC. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. The survey will be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod. Responses will be reviewed by the GSC at its fall meeting.

3. Every five years (on a rotating basis, two commissions per year), each member of a commission will be asked to complete a longer survey. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. This survey will also be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and the two commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod.

The rotating schedule for commission review will begin as follows:

- Year one: Christian Discipleship and Education, Church Order
- Year two: Theology, Women
4. At one of its meetings at General Synod, the GSC will assign three GSC members to each of the two commissions, and they will be given the compiled survey responses from that commission. Whenever possible, one of those assigned to the review team should be the GSC member who attended the commission’s last winter meeting. GSC members will also be asked to comment on that particular commission based on the work that the GSC knows the commission has done (based on General Synod reports, etc.) and reports from GSC members who have attended meetings of that commission. The three GSC members assigned to the commission will fill out the same survey that the commission members fill out.

5. The three GSC members will then meet with the commission being reviewed during the joint fall meeting of the GSC and the commissions.

6. The GSC members who meet with the commission will report back to the GSC either later in the fall meeting or at the spring meeting.

7. The GSC will decide whether to recommend to the General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of the commission (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g [2018 edition, p. 109]).

2018–2019 Review Cycle

The members of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE) and the Commission on Church Order (CCO) received a link via SurveyMonkey to the longer survey mentioned in point three of the process and were asked to complete the survey by June 1, 2018.

In June 2018, the GSC appointed three of its members to serve as a review committee for the CCDE and three for the CCO. These GSC members received commission members’ responses to the five-year review survey in August 2018. The review teams met with the commissions at the joint GSC and commissions meeting in October 2018, and a member of the review team attended the commission’s winter 2019 meeting.

Each review team reported back to GSC at its March 2019 meeting with recommendation regarding its assigned commission.

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

After considerable discussion of its 2018–2019 review of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education, the General Synod Council voted to recommend the following to the 2019 General Synod.

EC 19-6
To discontinue the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education by adopting the following changes to the Bylaws of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order, for recommendation to General Synod 2020 for final approval (deletions are struck):
Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5

Sec. 12. Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

a. Membership

The commission shall have seven members. At least three shall be persons with responsibility for discipleship and education in RCA churches and one shall be a member from the faculty of an RCA-affiliated institution. A knowledge of, and interest in, Christian education and discipleship shall be required of all members.

b. Responsibilities

1. The commission shall develop and advocate for strategies for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA.

2. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families.

3. The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship within RCA congregations.

4. The commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry.

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9

Sec. 14. Specific Commission Additional Appointments

The Commission for Women shall appoint one delegate who is a woman and not a member of the commission; the Commission on Race and Ethnicity shall appoint one delegate who is a racial/ethnic minority member and not a member of the commission; the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education shall appoint one delegate who is a young adult and not a member of the commission. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. This recommendation does not signify a reduced emphasis on Christian discipleship or education. Discipleship is one of the three priority areas of Transformed & Transforming—the RCA’s denomination-wide vision for ministry over the next several years. Each priority area includes an emphasis on next generation engagement.
2. Transformed & Transforming is a comprehensive initiative derived from years of extensive input from the entire denomination. More than 600 RCA congregations are currently engaged with this effort. This provides ongoing interaction with nearly two-thirds of all RCA congregations. In light of this, parallel efforts of a commission no longer seem necessary.

3. General Synod commissions typically serve as policy bodies and not program entities. In the past, commissions that essentially duplicated staffed program areas of the General Synod’s work were discontinued. Examples include the Chaplains Commission (1979) and the Commission on Evangelism and Church Growth (1985).

4. In its report to the 1985 General Synod, the Commission on Evangelism and Church Growth observed, “The commission believes that … there is a better way to provide for the implementation of policy and programs of evangelism. It has come to recognize that a task force on evangelism, under the supervision of the General Program Council, would be more effective in carrying out the work of evangelism than a General Synod commission on evangelism” (MGS 1985, p. 223). Similarly, the GSC concludes that the RCA’s extensive Transformed & Transforming staff is better equipped than any commission to pursue next generation engagement and discipleship.

5. In its report to the 2015 General Synod, the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education noted, “the CCDE believes its responsibilities as currently outlined in the BCO do not align well with the fifteen-year interconnected strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming” (MGS 2015, p.168). Although a revised list of CCDE responsibilities was adopted by the 2016 General Synod, their overlap with Transformed & Transforming program activities prompts the GSC to recommend discontinuation of this commission.

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

**Commission on Church Order**

After consideration of its review of the Commission on Church Order, the General Synod Council voted to recommend the following to the 2019 General Synod.

**EC 19-7**

To approve the continuation of the Commission on Church Order; and further,

To commend the CCO for its very important work toward good order in the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

The commission is assigned a continuous stream of work to amend the BCO or to give advice to other commissions as requested. When the commission considers amendments, it is diligent in noting consequences and impact on other portions of the BCO. The commission does a lot of detailed work that would neither be possible on the floor of General Synod nor by other commissions without taking away from their primary tasks.

GSC would also like to urge General Synod, through its Commission on Nominations, to continue to work to add ethnic diversity to the membership of the CCO and to be intentional in its selection of new members in order to live into Transformed & Transforming’s vision of “cultivating diverse and healthy leaders.” The review committee noted that the
current constitution of the commission is two women and three men. There is reasonable diversity in age. However, all the members are white. The work of the commission is quite detailed, and the commission does need members with legal expertise as well as institutional knowledge. The review committee believes that these needs can be met while also increasing diversity.

**Request to Transfer Congregations from One Regional Synod to Another**

The GSC received a request from the Classis of Zeeland regarding two of its congregations that wish to transfer to the Classis of Greater Palisades. Because this transfer is across regional synod lines, it must be approved by the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2018 edition, p. 67]). Because the GSC requested that classes consider limiting their submission of overtures to the 2019 General Synod in order to leave space in the schedule to engage with the work of the Vision 2020 Team, the Classis of Zeeland requested that GSC bring the transfer request to General Synod on its behalf.

At its March 2019 meeting, GSC voted to grant the request of the Classis of Zeeland and bring the following recommendation to the General Synod for its approval. The Office of the General Synod has received confirmation from leadership of the two congregations, as well as both classes and both regional synods involved, that they consent to the transfer.

**EC 19-8**

To transfer Jusarang Church and Disciple Church of Atlanta, both in Suwanee, Georgia, with all their assets and liabilities, from the Classis of Zeeland, Regional Synod of the Great Lakes, to the Classis of Greater Palisades, Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The General Synod has responsibility and authority to transfer churches from one regional synod to another (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2018 edition, p. 67]).

2. The consistory of Jusarang and the leadership of Disciple Church have asked for the transfer, believing the new classis alignment will better position the congregations for a stronger future of intentional service and witness to the gospel in their metropolitan context.

3. The board of the Classis of Zeeland and the executive committee of the Classis of Greater Palisades have affirmed the request for transfer, as have the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes and the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics.

**Proposal Regarding New Method of Funding Denominational Work**

**COVENANT SHARES**

**A NEW WAY OF FUNDING MINISTRY**

Over the years, people from around the RCA—from church treasurers to General Synod delegates—have discussed the shortcomings of the current per-member assessment method of funding denominational work. In response to the limitations of this method, the General Synod Council named a committee to explore alternate funding methods. After much deliberation, the committee has developed an alternative to the per-member assessment method. This alternative method is covenant shares.
Covenant shares are based on income. In this funding method, each classis would contribute a flat percentage of the contributions received by each church within its bounds.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15 NIV).

Values

The committee identified four values to be reflected in a new funding method. It would need to be:

- **Biblical**, reflecting the Bible’s emphasis on cheerful, generous, regular giving, and specifically on tithing as a percentage of income. We are called to live in community together and to contribute to the community that we are a part of.
- **Equitable**, allowing each church to support denominational work in accordance with its means.
- **Simple**, reducing the risk of error and confusion by using a straightforward formula.
- **Congregationally supported**, backed by churches throughout the RCA and easy for them to implement.

The income-based covenant shares method meets all four criteria. The new terminology also emphasizes the covenantal nature of our work together. As part of a denomination, we commit to sharing in the funding of our mutual ministry.

Shortcomings of Per-Member Assessments

The emphasis on encouraging church membership has changed over time, and it varies from church to church across the denomination. Membership rolls are not always regularly updated, and the number of members often differs from the number of people in worship, meaning that a church might be over- or under-paying relative to its actual attendance. Moreover, a church’s membership is not necessarily indicative of its ability to pay assessments.

This causes inequity in the amount that churches contribute via assessments to the denomination’s shared work. Under the current method, assessments as a percentage of contributions received ranged from 0.14 percent to 28 percent in the year 2017. This wide spread indicates that under the per-member method, the amount of assessments a church pays may not necessarily be in accordance with its means.

Contributions: the Basis for Covenant Shares

The covenant shares model is based on contributions, consisting of any gift received by the church, except for new endowment gifts. (Endowment gifts are excluded because of state laws restricting spending from endowment gifts.) Contributions include any gift to a church that’s considered a charitable donation: contributions for general operations, missions, and benevolence funds; special designated funds; estate gifts; and capital campaign gifts. After much consideration, the committee believes using contributions as the basis is a simpler and more equitable basis than using total income. Grants will not be considered contributions for the purposes of covenant shares.
Covenant Shares Percentage Rate

The percentage would be calculated by dividing the denominational funding need by the total amount of contributions reported on the Consistory Report Form (CRF), line 21 of Part 1b (2018 CRF). In 2017, the percentage of contributions necessary to provide the same total income to the denomination, the Board of Benefits Services, and theological agencies with the per-member assessment was 2.67 percent. The ten-year average was 2.73 percent. Eventually, we hope that the percentage rate will stay the same year after year. However, it may fluctuate slightly in the first few years as we adjust to the new financial reporting on the CRF.

The Impact

At the 2.67 percent rate, 294 churches would pay more than they are currently, and 511 churches would pay less. The average increase per church would be $4,000, and the average decrease would be $2,300.

The new method would be implemented gradually so that a church or classis would not be burdened significantly in one year. The change from the current method to covenant shares would be limited to changing by no more than 10 percent, either up or down, over the prior year’s assessments.

Additionally, after the first year of implementation, the change from year to year will be limited by 10 percent over the previous year. The limitations are in place in order to lessen the burden on a church due to one-time gifts, such as capital campaign or estate gifts, pass-through contributions, special mission trip funding, or significant growth.

To estimate how this alternative method would affect your church or classis, you may use the calculator available on the RCA website: www.rca.org/covenantshares.

What Would Covenant Shares Fund?

Just like assessments, covenant shares would make possible the following:

- Transformed & Transforming initiatives
- The work of the General Synod
- Denominational ministry support services
- Theological education
- The Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) assistance fund

HOW EACH DOLLAR OF GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT IS USED

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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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What Do Churches and Classes Get for Paying Covenant Shares?

With your covenant shares, you participate in a covenant partnership with all those in the RCA, providing the means for the RCA to continue its mission to the world, to equip, support, and connect faith leaders and churches in the denomination. The denomination's primary purpose is to do what the individual church cannot do on its own.

As a member of the RCA, you and your church have direct access to resources for ministry leaders in areas of discipleship, leadership development, outreach, volunteering, mission trips, global mission, next generation engagement, women’s leadership, church multiplication, and education around disability concerns and advocacy. Beyond resources for ministry, being a member of the RCA provides resources for the administration and financial aspects of running a church. These benefits include the Board of Benefits Services’ management of the RCA retirement fund; loans and savings options offered by the RCA Church Growth Fund; the denominational support provided through the offices of the archives, finance, and legal counsel; use of the RCA website; and the office of ministry support services for help during transitions in leadership.

You’re also contributing to the training of pastors and providing for church governance at the broadest level.

The RCA has a historic and lasting presence in the U.S. and Canada as a group of churches that possess a Reformed Christian worldview and is committed to extending God’s mission to the world. Members of the RCA share in a rich heritage that demonstrates the gospel in action. Ideas are circulated and shared among a wide group of believers who share in common tradition. That rich, shared heritage has had an impact around the world; everyone who belongs to the denomination owns that heritage and keeps adding to it.

General Synod Initiatives

In order to avoid General Synod voting each time a General Synod initiative requires additional funding, the committee suggests adding a small percentage, such as 0.1 percent, to the initial percentage to fund General Synod initiatives. For example, if the RCA needs 2.7 percent to fund the GSC, the Board of Benefits Services assistance funds, and theological education, then the GSC would request that the covenant shares rate be set at 2.8 percent. The GSC would put that 0.1 percent in a separate fund held specifically for General Synod initiatives. The costs of such initiatives would still be estimated as they are proposed in order to ensure that the General Synod initiatives fund would sufficiently cover the estimated costs. Any unused portion of the initiative fund balance would carry forward year to year.

Canadian Dollars

In order to remain consistent with the current practice for collecting assessments in Canadian dollars, Canadian churches will pay covenant shares as a percentage of income in Canadian dollars, plus a rate of 50 percent of a 12-month average currency differential between the U.S. dollar and the Canadian dollar. The RCA treasurer will calculate the average exchange rate for the prior 12 months as of June 30 each year.

New Church Starts

Currently, the membership of newly organized churches is assessed on a graduated formula based on R-51, approved by the General Synod in 2010. The classis is assessed
for the membership of newly organized churches based on the following formula: newly organized churches will pay 20 percent of the full assessment amount the first year of organization, 40 percent in their second year, 60 percent in their third year, 80 percent in their fourth year, and 100 percent in subsequent years. Under the new covenant shares method, the committee recommends following the same formula.

**Feedback on the New Covenant Shares Method**

The alternate funding committee presented this new method at several classis meetings and developed a page on the RCA website sharing information about the new covenant shares method. The overall response to a percentage of income system has been positive. Ninety-three participants completed a survey related to the new funding plan. Sixty-nine percent of those participants said that they would prefer an income-based assessment method over the current per-member system.

**Process for Making This Change**

This proposal includes one essential change to the Book of Church Order in order to implement the new covenant shares method. This required change is located in the General Synod bylaws (Chapter 3 of the BCO); amending the bylaws requires approval at General Synod and confirmation at a subsequent General Synod.

There are several places in Chapters 1 and 2 of the BCO that refer to assessments, but based on the premise that covenant shares is an income-based form of assessments, the new method can still be adopted without yet making changes in the BCO to every one of those references. In addition, a change in the wording in the BCO section related to union churches is quite complicated due to how it relates to the funding method of the other denominations involved in the union church. The Commission on Church Order will look at these references and will bring recommendations for any related changes it considers necessary in the year 2020. Any proposed changes to Chapters 1 and 2 of the BCO would require classical approval.

**Regional Synods and Classes**

Finally, the committee recognizes that it is up to regional synods and classes to determine their own method for funding themselves. However, we encourage the regional synods and classes to implement the same contributions-based formula when they calculate covenant shares/assessments and to implement the same method for newly launched congregations.

**More Information**

A Frequently Asked Questions document as well as a calculator tool for estimating how the change from per-member assessments to covenant shares would affect your congregation is available at www.rca.org/covenantshares.

**Recommendations**

The GSC brings the following three recommendations to the General Synod for approval:

**EC 19-9**
To replace the current per-member General Synod assessment funding method with covenant shares, a funding method based on a percentage of income. Under this funding
method, each classis will contribute a flat percentage of the contributions received by each church within its bounds to support the work of the denomination.

The General Synod will annually approve the percentage rate that classes will be charged for the following calendar year. The basis of the percentage rate will be contributions as reported on the Consistorial Report Form as of December 31 of the previous year.

The GSC will calculate the amount due from each classis based on the total contributions received by each church within its bounds, multiplied by the General Synod–approved percentage rate. The change in the total dollar amount of a church’s covenant shares from year to year will be limited to no more than 10 percent, either up or down, over the previous year’s assessments or covenant shares.

This new method will be implemented following final approval by the General Synod of the proposed change to the General Synod bylaws in EC 19-11. (ADOPTED)

A motion was made and supported to refer EC 19-9 as follows:

To refer the covenant shares proposal to the General Synod Council to take more time with discussing the impact on each classis and to address the proposal again at the 2020 General Synod.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not refer EC 19-9.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt EC 19-9.

Review committee

EC 19-10
To instruct the General Synod Council to name a covenant shares review committee to evaluate any specific significant issues relating to the new method during the first three years under the new covenant shares method. The committee shall also re-evaluate all aspects of the new covenant shares method after three years of collections have taken place under the new method. This committee will report significant issues and make recommendations to the GSC as it deems necessary. The committee will not have any authority to approve requests for relief from paying covenant shares nor
will it have authority to adjust the methodology of covenant shares.

This committee shall have at least four (and not more than seven) members, one of whom shall be the General Synod treasurer. (ADOPTED)

*Change to the Book of Church Order*

Making the shift to a covenant shares method of funding our work together will require a change to the *Book of Church Order*. In order to implement the new method, a change to the section of the General Synod bylaws that defines assessments as specific dollar amounts is required. This change is recommended here. Some other sections of the *BCO* that mention assessments require further research by the Commission on Church Order (CCO). Based on the premise that covenant shares is an income-based form of assessments, the new method can still be adopted without yet making changes in the *BCO* to every reference to the word “assessments.” The CCO will look at these references and will bring any related recommendations it feels are appropriate in the year 2020.

**EC 19-11**

To adopt the following amendments 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 3**

*Sec. 6. Responsibilities*

The responsibilities of the council shall be:

c. To prepare a budget to sustain the established priorities, ministry, and mission of the Reformed Church in America and propose an assessment to the General Synod. Assessments shall be a specific percentage of income dollar amounts voted by the General Synod, payment of which shall be mandatory. (ADOPTED)
REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod, the General Synod Council (GSC), the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), and the Church Growth Fund (CGF). The Office of Finance strives to ensure financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods, as together we carefully manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

2018 Annual Audits

The 2018 financial statements of the GSC, BOBS’s Retirement Program and General Fund, and the CGF were audited by CapinCrouse, LLP, certified public accountants. All corporations received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The audited statements are available at www.rca.org/finance. The GSC’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity and the management comment letters from the auditors. The committee then reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. Financial highlights of each organization are presented below.

Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2018

General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC ended the year with an overall net surplus of $1.7 million, of which $1.4 million represents additions to management designated, donor restricted, and endowed funds. The remaining $300,000 was added to the operating reserve. The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—provided more than 50 percent of the funding to carry out the work of General Synod. Assessments provided 33 percent of income and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated and restricted funds, is presented in the following chart:
Fiscal Year 2018              Fiscal Year 2017
Contributions and Grants $10,598,357  52% $10,705,660  52%
Assessments $6,626,663  33% $6,756,055  33%
Other Income* $3,127,729  15% $3,219,719  15%
TOTAL INCOME $20,352,749 $20,681,434

*Includes investment earnings and fees for services provided to related entities.

These funds are spent on Transformed & Transforming, including Global Mission and Church Multiplication (70 percent); General Synod, commissions, and GSC (16 percent); and administration (14 percent).

Fiscal Year 2018              Fiscal Year 2017
Mission* $10,614,302  57% $10,120,727  56%
Leadership $1,950,796  10% $2,117,588  11%
Discipleship $460,764  3% $567,546  3%
Work of General Synod** $2,964,939  16% $2,803,085  16%
Ministry Support Services $2,657,072  14% $2,439,897  14%
TOTAL EXPENSES $18,647,873 $18,048,843

* Includes Global Mission and Church Multiplication as well as the Mission priority of Transformed & Transforming.
**Includes GSC, General Synod, and the general secretary’s office.

The source data for these charts are the audited financial statements, which can be viewed in full at www.rca.org/finance.

The budgets for the three priority areas of Transformed & Transforming include the following ministry priorities and initiatives:

- Discipleship and Next Generation Engagement
- Leadership
  - Leadership Development
  - Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches
  - Women’s Transformation and Leadership
• Mission
  o Local Missional Engagement
  o Advocacy
  o Volunteer Engagement
  o Disability Concerns
  o Global Mission
  o Church Multiplication

Work of General Synod includes costs related to the annual General Synod meeting, commissions, task forces, the Office of the General Secretary, the GSC, and Communication and Production Services, including *RCA Today* magazine.

Ministry support services includes costs relating to the general and administrative support needed to carry out Transformed & Transforming and the work of the General Synod. This includes human resources, data management, information technology, financial services, legal counsel, and fundraising.

Board of Benefits Services—Retirement Programs

As of September 30, 2018, the date of our most recent audit, $458 million was set aside for participants in the 403(b) and retirement plans. Participant and employer contributions to the plan in fiscal year 2018 were $10 million. BOBS staff continues to work with pastors, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with *Book of Church Order* Formulary No. 5 requirements, specifically the requirement to contribute 11 percent of eligible salary to the pastor’s retirement fund. As of September 30, 2018, it is estimated that $1.6 million was owed to the retirement accounts of RCA pastors by their local congregations. In fiscal year 2018, distributions to participants totaled $22 million. For additional information about the retirement plan, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services and the audited financial statements available at [www.rca.org/finance](http://www.rca.org/finance).

Board of Benefits Services—General Fund to Administer Retirement Programs

BOBS’s General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, and assistance and retiree chaplains programs for active and retired RCA ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially healthy, with $19 million in net assets as of September 30, 2018. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2018 with a net surplus of $1.6 million. Just over $1.2 million of that surplus was due to the increase in market value of funds held in the BOBS endowment fund.

Administration costs for the retirement plans are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the 403(b) and retirement plan accounts and totaled $950,000 in 2018. Effective January 1, 2018, the fee was reduced to 22 basis points (0.22 percent), a reduction of six basis points over the previous year. This was the fifth consecutive year of administrative fee reduction.

Support for the assistance programs came from a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, a portion of the administrative fees charged to retirement plan participants’ accounts, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance program expenses, including assistance grants and the retiree chaplains program, were $560,000 in 2018.

Church Growth Fund

The Church Growth Fund (CGF) makes affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related
agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return. In fiscal year 2018, the CGF continued its plan to grow and service more RCA congregations, reaching $79 million in total assets.

As of September 30, 2018, the CGF had $19 million in cash and short-term investments, and $61 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by $33 million in savings certificates and $45 million in net assets (capital). Net income was strong due to gains on investments; it totaled $800,000 after contributing $786,000 to the GSC to be used for grants to church plants, scholarships to fund youth mission experiences, and grants for church revitalization. Fiscal year 2018 was the first year the CGF operated under the new board policy of being able to contribute up to 50 percent of net operating income annually back to the denomination.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association. For additional information about the CGF, see the report of the Church Growth Fund and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.

Investments

The investments of the GSC, BOBS, and the CGF are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise.

Excess Operating Reserves

Since December 2017, the operating reserves of the GSC, BOBS, and the CGF are being managed by Telemus Capital, LLC, an investment firm based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. Telemus Capital, LLC, allows for the segregation of funds for each RCA corporation. The investments for each RCA entity may then be further segregated and managed under two separate fixed-income investment policies. The first policy is the secondary liquidity source after cash and savings for the RCA corporations and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays 1-5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The second policy is the third source of liquidity for the RCA corporations and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays Intermediate Government Corporate Bond Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Telemus Capital, LLC, is $29 million.

Endowment Funds

The GSC manages $18.7 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the GSC date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. Ninety percent of these investments are managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1–10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. These investments were in compliance with the investment policy as of December 31, 2018. The remaining 10 percent of these investments is invested in a passive index fund at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee.
In addition to the GSC and the CGF, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2018, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed $639,000 to the GSC, $23,000 to the CGF, and $242,000 to RCA-affiliated organizations. If you are interested in setting up an endowment, please contact the development office.

The Board of Benefits Services also manages an endowment fund valued at $12.5 million. Most of the BOBS endowment fund consists of a board-designated endowment funded by reserves from the BOBS Insurance Fund. Ninety percent of the BOBS endowment funds are also managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd., and follow the same investment policy and use the same benchmark as the GSC endowment fund. The remaining 10 percent of these investments is invested in a passive index fund at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee.

The endowment fund policies and investment manager performance are reviewed semi-annually by the RCA Investment Advisory Committee.

RCA Retirement Plans

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for BOBS’s retirement programs. Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant’s retirement age as well as 21 diversified mutual funds, with socially responsible options. As of December 31, 2018, 83 percent of RCA participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds.

Fidelity has made changes in the active investment strategy of its target-date retirement funds. These changes have had positive results, with Fidelity outperforming peer funds in the overall market. The Investment Advisory Committee meets twice a year and continues to monitor the performance and overall investment offering from Fidelity, thus meeting its fiduciary responsibility for the benefits of RCA ministers and lay staff invested in the RCA retirement program.

As a result of the Request for Proposal conducted in 2015, Fidelity Investments has partnered more closely with BOBS to offer additional services and guidance to better prepare our ministers for retirement. Personalized investment advisory services, referred to as Fidelity Personalized Planning and Advice (FPPA) are now available to participants in the RCA retirement program.

For the fourth year in a row, BOBS completed a reallocation project that allows eligible participants in the retirement program to reallocate funds from the RCA retirement plan to the 403(b) plan, resulting in greater flexibility at retirement.

Together as a denomination, we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute 11 percent of the eligible salaries of ministers of Word and sacrament to their retirement accounts each year. Currently, an estimated $1.6 million has not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2018. RCA ministers of Word and sacrament should review their quarterly statements to verify that 11 percent of their eligible salary is being contributed. Elder delegates to synod should ask questions in their local congregation to ensure that their congregation is providing this important benefit for their pastor(s).
Planned Giving Programs

The GSC manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling $1.4 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and recordkeeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

Church Growth Fund Investments

The CGF invests a portion of excess operating cash in three fixed-income accounts and one equity account. LaFleur & Godfrey Investment Management, Telemus Capital, LLC, and LVM Capital Management, Ltd., manage these funds. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

Socially Responsible Investments

All investment policy statements for each pool of investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, or the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol.

Retirement funds may be invested, at the discretion of the participant, in socially responsible funds screened for the above restrictions.

The GSC also invests a portion of excess operating cash with Oikocredit, one of the world’s largest sources of private funding to the microfinance sector.

2019 Budget Process and Assessment Proposal for GSC, BOBS Assistance Grants, and Theological Education

Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming

Delegates to the 2013 General Synod addressed the direction of the RCA as the final step in a three-year discernment process that had broad and significant input from across the denomination. A 15-year goal called Transformed & Transforming was adopted by those delegates. This year, synod delegates will again read and hear about progress that has been made and ways that individuals and congregations can connect with this communal goal.

In August 2013, the General Synod officers, regional synod leaders, and GSC staff, as well as several non-staff, gathered to define how to carry out Transformed & Transforming’s three priorities: Cultivating Transformation in Christ (discipleship), Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow (leadership), and Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission (mission). Ten projects were identified, along with specific goals, timelines, and potential staff and budget resources.

GSC staff focuses on equipping churches and church leaders in the three Transformed & Transforming priority areas—discipleship, leadership, and mission—so they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. Initiative plans for each priority and initiative leader were originally determined in 2013 and 2014 with the launch of Transformed & Transforming. These plans defined purpose statements; what will be accomplished over the course of the 15-year goal, including how much will be accomplished by certain points in time; 5-, 10-, and 15-year check-in points, along with
1-year and 90-day markers of progress; and definitions of the metrics to be used along the way.

Priority leaders developed 2019 budgets based on goals for measurable outcomes. These goals are primarily achieved by equipping churches and leaders through opportunities like connection events, learning communities, leadership communities, and leadership collaboratives. The 2019 budget includes funding for the initiatives from both current-year operating income and from campaign funds as they are available. For 2019, enough funds were raised by the beginning of the fiscal year to spend almost $200,000 from campaign funds. 2019 is the final year that campaign funds will be available to support Transformed & Transforming initiatives. We expect that the relationships developed with donors during the capital campaign will result in future gifts to the RCA Ministry Fund.

More than 600 congregations are engaged in Transformed & Transforming so far, nearly two-thirds of RCA congregations. The assessment amount provided this year enabled the GSC and staff to come alongside those congregations in many ways, including the following:

**Discipleship**

- 4 RCA pastors have been or are in the process of setting up a coaching relationship in the past 2 months.
- 15 guiding coalition members are being trained for coaching and facilitation of 3DM discipleship processes.
- 15 churches are engaged with 3DM discipleship with Jeff Allen.
- 4 classis leaders have agreed to hold discipleship training at their classis meetings in 2019.

**Next Generation Engagement**

- The Next Wave pilot gathering took place in October in Grand Rapids. Three additional gatherings have been scheduled for the spring in Michigan, New York, and Iowa.
- The first in-person summit of the Growing Young Cohort gathered in the DeWitt Ministry Center in January. This year-long process will continue through December.
- In partnership with Global Mission, Next Generation Engagement will send a pilot group of 3 churches to Cuba in the summer of 2019 to develop a student leadership model for their youth.
- In March, Next Wave was launched as an online resource for youth pastors, leaders, and volunteers to hear about upcoming opportunities.

**Leadership Development**

- 6 RCA congregations are participating in a leadership community that is meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from February 2018 through May 2019. Participating congregations are South Blendon Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Elevation Church in Wyoming, Comunidad Cristiana de Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, My Father’s House Church in Holland, Comunidad Cristiana Internacional in Wyoming, and Nepali-Speaking Community Church in Grand Rapids.
- 2 leadership collaboratives have launched: 1 in West Michigan, focused on leadership and preaching (launched in January 2018), and a second in the Classis of Queens, focused on developing elders and deacons (launched in May 2018).
Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches

- 140 congregations are engaging or have engaged Churches Learning Change.
- The first specialized transitional minister leadership collaborative has been completed and feedback from the first is being used to create an experience for a second.
- 13 congregations have used the Transformational Church Assessment Tool, and 2 more are in the queue.
- The first-call program now functions as a learning community, and the third round is now recruiting alongside the Albany Synod Fellowship Program.
- 1 leadership collaborative was launched in the Regional Synod of Mid-America by Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches guiding coalition member Chad Schuitema; 1 is forming in the Regional Synod of New York; 1 is being promoted in the Regional Synod of Canada; and a full learning community will be launched in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics by General Synod 2019.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership

- 1-year She is Called/Ella Es Llamada leadership collaboratives are taking place in Arizona, California, New York, Michigan, and Canada.
- More than 25 congregations have been represented in learning events in Iowa and Michigan.
- The She is Called campaign has experienced success, including a launch at the Hispanic Council’s Asamblea in August, ongoing video stories being captured, between 50 and 100 women joining training and storytelling connection events, and a pilot of a new shared leadership model experience in Africa last August.
- Building God’s Church Together provides resources for equipping leaders and congregations that include online resources, articles, websites, and more.

Local Missional Engagement

- Partnerships with New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Organic Outreach, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association are forming learning communities and collaboration.
- Delivery systems include attendance at the California Classis meeting in March, hosting a connection event in the Mohawk Valley with 4 churches for deeper missional engagement, and partnering with the Advocacy initiative to equip churches to respond to the separation of families at the U.S. border and to host a mass incarceration event.
- New methods of learning include partnering with the Discipleship initiative to host its first 4-week class on evangelism and international mission online in April 2019, as well as working with The Urban Ministry Institute, the Billy Graham Center, and other learning institutions to create new pathways for learning.

Global Mission

- Global Mission continues to engage churches in the impactful work happening in Brazil, Nicaragua, and South Africa, where they can relate with mission partners in deep and meaningful ways.
- RCA churches support 89 missionaries and 118 active projects around the world through RCA Global Mission.
- 5 new missionaries are currently fundraising for new mission endeavors.
Church Multiplication

- 16 new congregation plans were approved, representing 10 states and provinces, and others are in the process of being approved.
- 130 people participated in a Hispanic Planting Summit.

Volunteer Engagement

- 1,025 volunteers have been placed in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- 34 new churches were served through equipping processes or mission opportunities.
- As of February 2019, 6 Cultivate participants have been recruited and placed for the 2019–2020 service year.
- In the 2018 calendar year, the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund awarded 97 scholarships, amounting to $164,522 and benefiting 940 young people.

Advocacy

- Completed a 2-year learning community with Meredith Drive Reformed Church and The Bridge (RCA) in Iowa. The focus was on race/ethnicity, nationality, and generation, and the process ended with the hiring of a next generation church staff position.
- 2 connection events were held on how to assist congregations, families, and individuals to identify and develop their own Transformed & Transforming focuses.
- The Inward/Outward journey leadership collaborative is underway. 10 participants from 5 small, declining churches are learning ways for leaders to live into a vision on the vitality and importance of small churches.
- Many other events in Michigan, Iowa, and online have taken place, focusing on creation care and environmental stewardship.

Disability Concerns

- RCA and CRC collaborative efforts have led to a grant proposal to explore the potential of resiliency and adverse childhood experiences in the church’s youth ministry.
- February 2019 saw the completion of a year-long mental health learning community with 4 West Michigan churches in which they sought to improve the welcome and support of people living with mental health challenges. Another will begin later this year in Iowa.
- At least 90 churches have designated a church disability advocate. In addition, in September, a 3-day leadership conference took place that equipped 25 RCA disability advocates and 25 CRC disability advocates.

General Synod Council Operating Budget Process

The GSC operating budget is primarily funded by assessment income and contributions. Assessment income includes only the General Synod assessment and is 48 percent of all operating income. Contributions provided from donors and congregations for supporting missionaries and for the RCA Ministry Fund make up 35 percent of available financial resources. Other income includes services provided to BOBS and the CGF, registration
fees for Transformed & Transforming events, and investment and endowment earnings.

The 2019 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from assessments, contributions, investments, and other income. In 2018, General Synod approved a per-member assessment increase of $1.52 per member. The 2019 budgeted assessment revenue of $6.4 million is nearly the same as 2018 due to the increase in per-member assessment being offset by reported membership decline. With no significant change in revenue for 2019, expenses remained relatively similar to the previous year.

The 2019 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about $347,000 for costs related to move forward the initiatives of Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication. This includes a planned draw on reserves of $125,000 for the Vision 2020 Team.

In 2019, each dollar of the General Synod Council assessment is projected to be used in the following ways:

**HOW EACH DOLLAR OF GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT IS USED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Per Dollar</th>
<th>Per Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformed &amp; Transforming</td>
<td>$ 0.33</td>
<td>$ 17.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work of General Synod</td>
<td>$ 0.30</td>
<td>$ 16.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry Support Services</td>
<td>$ 0.22</td>
<td>$ 11.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological Education</td>
<td>$ 0.11</td>
<td>$ 6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOBS Assistance Fund</td>
<td>$ 0.04</td>
<td>$ 2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>$ 1.00</td>
<td>$ 54.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Budgeted income by type for fiscal year 2019 is displayed in the chart below. The GSC budget includes General Synod, Transformed & Transforming strategic priorities, Global Mission, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA).
Contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund are general unrestricted contributions to the RCA. For 2019, contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund are budgeted at $55,000 more than 2018. Global Mission expects to see an overall decrease in revenues of about $144,000, primarily due to retiring missionaries. With no significant change in revenue for 2019, expenses remained relatively similar to the previous year.

Budgeted operating expenses are shown by ministry and support areas below. Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 70 percent of the total budget. The remaining 30 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.

![2019 GSC Operating Budget](image)

In addition to the operating budget, generous gifts from donors and foundations will provide funding for specific, designated projects, including disaster relief, Global Mission projects, an initiative to address the financial health of pastors, and a joint leadership initiative with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Funds raised through the Called Campaign are available in addition to the operating budget and are being used to fulfill the three priorities of Transformed & Transforming.

Formulating the 2020 budget will begin in midsummer and will be based on assessment approvals made by 2019 General Synod delegates. The focus will continue to be on aligning staff, support services, and programs to fulfill the priorities of Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and Global Mission in impactful and measurable ways.

**2020 General Synod Assessment Amount**

The GSC is requesting no increase in assessments over the previous year. In doing so, we know that we will have less revenue from assessments due to declining membership. We will also have higher expenses due to cost of living increases for staff and rising health care costs. We plan to make up for the deficit by using reserves. For four years in a row, the GSC has added to its reserves. The GSC budgeted to spend into reserves in 2019; however, due to some staff restructuring, we expect that we will not use as much as anticipated.
A significant impact on the GSC’s revenue is declining membership. The Consistorial Report Forms for the year ending December 31, 2018, are not available at the date of this report. Reported membership has declined at an average of 2.0 percent per year over the past 10 years. The past three years, the average loss has been 3.1 percent per year. Therefore, we are assuming another year of declining membership, so we anticipate receiving less assessment income than the previous year.

The general secretary and the GSC staff realize the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations. We commit to careful stewardship of the funds that God has blessed us with.

**Board of Benefits Services’ Assistance Grant Assessment Request**

The Board of Benefits Services’ assistance program for active and retired participants, spouses, and dependents provides aid to retirees and active participants experiencing financial distress. Types of assistance for retirees may include hearing aids and other medical devices not covered by insurance or Medicare, medical insurance premium payments, funeral grants to the surviving spouse of an RCA minister of Word and sacrament, and sometimes modest contributions to living expenses. Retirement contributions are provided for certain disabled ministers of Word and sacrament. In 2016, General Synod approved an increase from $1.50 to $2.00 per member for assistance grants. Prior to 2016, the per-member assessment had not changed in more than 25 years. The remainder of the funds required to sustain this program are provided through annual gifts to BOBS, endowment income, and other income sources. BOBS requests that the assessment remain at $2.00 per member for 2019.

**Theological Education Assessment Request**

The Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFCC/PFOB) recommends keeping the theological assessment for 2020 at the same dollar amount as the amount approved in 2019, which is $6.12 per member. If membership statistics also remained flat, this would be a total of $829,000, but the PFCC/PFOB recognizes that due to membership loss, the total will likely be lower. Based on an estimated membership loss of 3 percent, a $6.12 per member assessment will result in an estimated total of $794,000.

Rationale for the proposal:

- Current student debt load as students enter seminary.
- The goal of increasing church plants will require more pastoral leaders.
- The cost of education in the face of inflation.
- This leaves MFCA where they are in fiscal year 2019.

The PFCC/PFOB is recommending that the 2020 theological education assessment be allocated in the following manner:

- An initial $75,000 given to the MFCA to cover expenses and to account for their lack of ability to raise funds compared to an educational institution.
- 75 percent of the remaining funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, NBTS, and MFCA).
- 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.
• 5 percent to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.

2020 Assessment Request

The chart below summarizes the General Synod assessment amounts for 2019 and the GSC proposed amount for 2020. The amounts are recommended by GSC; the specific allocation of the theological education assessment is a recommendation from the PFCC/PFOB.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Assessment</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>Proposed 2020</th>
<th>$Change</th>
<th>%Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Synod Council</td>
<td>$46.10</td>
<td>$46.10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOBS</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological education</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERCA fund (DE 19-2, p. 216)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$54.22</td>
<td>$54.30</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F 19-1
To approve the General Synod Council 2020 assessment of $46.10 per confessing member. (ADOPTED)

F 19-2
To approve the 2020 assessment of $2.00 per confessing member for the Board of Benefits Services to provide assistance funding for retired pastors who have a demonstrated need. (ADOPTED)

F 19-3
To approve the 2020 assessment of $6.12 per confessing member for theological education, to be allocated in the following manner:

• An initial $75,000 given to the MFCA to cover expenses and to account for their lack of ability to raise funds compared to an educational institution.
• 75 percent of the remaining funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, NBTS, and MFCA).
• 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.
• 5 percent to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents. (ADOPTED)
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENT

The development team’s vision statement reads:

Our purpose is to develop relationships that make the mission of the RCA known, inspiring financial partnerships that make the ministry of the RCA possible.

Imagine … Strong relationships with prospects, donors, and churches, where we know the answer is “yes” before we ask.

Imagine … Finances are no longer an obstacle for ministry.

Imagine … Every RCA staff member inspiring financial partnerships.

This statement defines our goals on behalf of the RCA.

The development team’s responsibility is to encourage churches and individuals to generously give of the financial resources God has entrusted to them to support the ministry and witness of the Reformed Church in America. We coordinate all GSC fundraising efforts, including, but not limited to, support for RCA Global Mission, Transformed & Transforming, and the Church Growth Fund. We strive to not only develop and strengthen relationships with donors, potential donors, church leaders, and others to inspire financial partnerships, but also to promote the mission and vision of the RCA.

Development team members raise financial support through outright gifts, bequests, life income plans, and grants. Gifts may be designated for a specific ministry area or left undesignated for the greatest need. Undesignated gifts are typically assigned to the RCA Ministry Fund, a fund that supports the operational budget and the work of Transformed & Transforming. The development team also assists with raising resources through Church Growth Fund savings certificates, Partner in Mission shares, estate planning, and special project funding or capital campaigns. Gifts to the RCA enable and empower ministry throughout the church, transforming lives both at home and around the world.

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God’s people. In fiscal year 2018, 52 percent of the RCA’s total income came from voluntary support. Only 33 percent was derived from assessments. Other income, such as investment earnings and fees paid for services rendered, accounted for the remaining 15 percent of the RCA’s total income in 2018.

The funding structure of the RCA relies heavily on gifts received from individual donors and from churches that give above and beyond assessments. And we are truly grateful for those who have chosen to invest in the ministry of the RCA. A copy of the 2018 Ministry Impact Report is available on the RCA website and will be available in hard copy at General Synod.

The development team represents the GSC throughout the RCA, but individual staff members primarily oversee these regions:
Amanda Bruehl (abruehl@rca.org): New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Amanda also coordinates the annual Ministry Fund appeal process.

Alex DeWaal (adewaal@rca.org): Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, Nebraska, and Oklahoma.

Larryl Humme (lhumme@rca.org): Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Ken Neevel (kneevel@rca.org): Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Washington, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Dann Stouten (dstouten@rca.org): Canada, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio.

Additionally, Scott Engelsman is responsible for defining missionary and mission project support needs, for the communication of those needs, and for guiding Global Mission fundraising. Michele Quick oversees development operations and donor research.

The RCA continues to partner with Barnabas Foundation for resources around estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift resource management. The easiest gift you can make is a gift through your estate plan. Consider tithing your estate to the ongoing work of the RCA. For information about how you can include the RCA in your estate plans, or how you can derive lifetime income from a planned gift that will benefit you during life and the RCA after death, please contact Michele Quick at mquick@rca.org.

The mission and ministry of the RCA can only happen with the generous support of people throughout the church. As was noted previously, only 33 percent of the RCA’s work is resourced through assessments. Please consider including a gift to the RCA in your regular giving. To give an outright gift in support of the RCA’s mission and ministry, please visit www.rca.org/give or contact a development team member directly.
REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

To the General Synod Council (GSC) of the Reformed Church in America, greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please receive the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2018.

Included in this report are the following:

- Annual Fall Gathering
- Mission Statement
- Connecting with GSC

Annual Fall Gathering

Our annual fall gathering was held October 5–6, 2018, at the Crowne Plaza Newark Airport Hotel in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Our gathering this year was purposeful and productive.

The Holy Spirit was hard at work as we gathered to do the work of the Lord on behalf of the AABC churches within our midst. The following are some of the highlights from that gathering.

The reelection of our chairperson along with our previously elected officers:

Chairperson: Jeffery A. Hough (Muskegon, Michigan)
Vice chairperson: Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew (Chicago, Illinois)
Secretary: Hellen Harvey (Oakland, California)
Immediate past chairperson: James Steward (New York, New York)

The AABC elected to include the regional conveners in the role of officers. This includes:

Regina Reid (Midwest Region)
Dwayne Jackson (Eastern Region)

During our Friday evening session, we were greeted by Eddy Alemán, RCA general secretary, who laid out his vision for the RCA, which included:

- Transformed & Transforming
- Jill Ver Steeg and the work she will do as the chief ministry officer
- Randy Weener and the work he will do as director of Church Multiplication
- Looking to plant 1,000 churches
- Renewed focus on global mission
- Looking to hire a coordinator for prayer
- Cultural training for staff
- Vision 2020 Team

We spoke with Eddy about concerns of the RCA’s future, considering all of the conversations around the possibility of a split and the impact it will have upon the AABC churches.

We also discussed with him the theological and practical effects on spiritual revitalization of people and communities by deeply decaying buildings used for worship and ministry. Together, we understood that 1) a theology of place for the kingdom of God is important, and 2) old church structures strongly “suck up” dollars, creativity, and resolve from meaningful revitalization (personal and community) to just dealing with further decay in buildings.
Eddy encouraged the council and its coordinator to follow up with the Church Growth Fund and others, which we have. However, we are concerned that those resources are insufficient to reverse the negative and restraining impacts decayed church buildings have on pastors’ and congregations’ abilities to revitalize people and communities.

Though this issue has been brought to GSC and General Synod previously, there have been no effective or sustainable results. Also, the strategy of moving the focus beyond the AABC to the denomination as a whole has not proven successful in solving this.

The AABC, therefore, recommends that GSC (not General Synod) convene a six-month task force that begins in April or May 2019 and focuses within the greater New York City area, where most of the AABC’s decaying church buildings are, to identify

1) a new strategy to raise additional funds for church-building repair and renovation, and
2) an equitable distribution system for those funds.

On the task force can be GSC representatives, AABC representatives, the AABC coordinator, and invited representatives of the Regional Synod of New York and the classes with churches in New York City.

We then asked Eddy, “How can the AABC come alongside of you to support you?” His response was:

• Show up
• Be present
• Pray for me

We agreed to this request and closed this conversation with prayer and the laying on of hands.

The fall gathering was once again attended by more than a dozen clergy. Clergy met together for a luncheon on Saturday. They shared stories and encouraged one another. While the clergy were meeting in one room, laypersons gathered in another room, sharing their stories. Each group expressed great appreciation for the gathering, acknowledged the need, and expressed the desire to continue to meet.

We reviewed and discussed the key areas of Transformed & Transforming, which are:

• Discipleship
• Leadership
• Mission

This led to a conversation on how we as a council and individual churches can live into them.

We received a presentation by Derrick Jones, supervisor of RCA mission in Africa, who gave us an overview of his work in Africa and how we may come alongside him to support the amazing way he is touching lives through his call. Looking ahead, we are examining the possibility of joining with him on a mission trip and supporting him financially with a Partnership in Mission (PIM) share funded through AABC congregations and church events.
Mission Statement

Following our conversation on how we as churches can effectively and proactively live into Transformed & Transforming, we introduced and adopted the following new mission statement:

The AABC celebrates God’s love by empowering, educating, and encouraging its members to partner with their communities and the RCA to develop ministries and policies for:

- Church growth
- Leadership development
- Social and racial justice
- Economic development

“What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

This statement captures the essence of who we are as people of God and how we will live into our call.

We all departed the fall gathering knowing we had been in the presence of the Holy Spirit. We had followed the leading of the Spirit and knew our meeting was not in vain. We were energized by our fellowship together and the unity of purpose that pervaded the gathering. Laypeople and clergy met together to be about their Father’s business. We left encouraged as we sought to capture our vision and fulfill our purpose. We prayed together, listened together, ate together, laughed together, praised together, and learned together; together we were uplifted by the Holy Spirit. Much had happened that could have caused this fall gathering to be unfruitful, but God showed himself faithful and brought us together, and we departed savoring the fruits of our labor. (In short, we were fulfilling our RCA mission statement: a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.)

Connecting with GSC

The General Synod bylaws in the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2018 edition, p. 107) state:

The General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.

In response to this, the AABC made the following recommendation at the March 2018 meeting of the GSC:

That GSC form a task force to meet (virtually, whenever possible) over a period of no more than 12 months in order to make recommendations to the GSC that promote more effective communication and relationships between the GSC and its racial/ethnic councils. The task force should include leaders from each council, including Native American representation, the three racial/ethnic coordinators, three to five GSC members, and at least two organizational
development experts who are not on GSC or a council. The task force should conclude its work and report back to GSC by February 28, 2019.

The GSC met by videoconference on April 16, 2018, engaged in initial discussion around this recommendation, and voted “To discuss the recommendation from the AABC and the broader topic of communication between the GSC and other bodies at the GSC’s October 2018 meeting” (GSC 18-21). Its reasons for engaging this discussion in October were that:

GSC recognizes the importance of the questions about communication raised by the AABC in its report, and questions about communication also seem to extend beyond the councils to other bodies such as the commissions. GSC feels the need to engage in a fuller discussion at its October meeting. Providing that General Synod 2018 approves the GSC’s recommendation of Eddy Alemán to serve as the RCA’s general secretary, he will be in place as general secretary by October, and GSC would like the general secretary to be part of this discussion.

To date, it appears no action has been taken. The executive committee of the AABC would like to formally request an update and response on the status of this recommendation from the moderator of GSC.

The AABC recommends that GSC reschedule and complete as quickly as possible its work on this 2018 recommendation.

In line with the letter of the BCO bylaw mentioned above, the AABC also wishes to lift up the following. We recognize the issue of sexual orientation to be an important one to the church. We are not commenting about that issue here. Rather, the AABC highlights many critically important issues facing our people, our communities, and our congregations that serve, attempting to be the hands and feet of Jesus himself in their ministry efforts. These issues include:

- Addictions to opioid, alcohol, and other substances
- Access to quality education
- Access to quality health care
- Food deserts in many of our communities
- Degradation to God’s environments and our physical and emotional health because of public waste management policies and intentional placements of refuse dumps
- The lack of awareness of what happens to our families in the near-term, the long-term, and generationally because of mass incarceration

We believe that we must address these issues and results with fruitful, God-honoring interventions. Though we have been somewhat quiet on these dynamics with the wider denomination, we must point out that these factors produce a trauma that traditional discipleship, leadership, and mission thinking and acting do not recognize or engage in a redemptive enough manner.

Therefore, the AABC recommends that the GSC direct the general secretary to form a year-long learning/acting process that

1) educates Transformed & Transforming staff about the trauma-producing dynamics that affect many under-resourced communities, churches, and people,
2) assesses the preparedness of our current discipleship, leadership, and
mission strategies to truly be redemptively transformative in these environments, and

3) incorporates, through adoption or development, discipleship, leadership, and mission strategies that can equip AABC and other congregations to be the hands and feet of Jesus in life conditions such as those raised above.

Clearly, this process must include selected Transformed & Transforming staff members, persons from various assemblies and congregations, AABC members and coordinator, and external-to-the-RCA experts who can assist our learning/acting processes.

Conclusion

The 2018 year was uplifting and eventful for the AABC. With the developing of our new mission statement and the finalizing of our revised bylaws, we have found renewed energy in following Christ into the mission field. We met together with the Holy Spirit at our fall gathering. As we move into 2019, we are determined to continue to be led by God’s Spirit.

We are grateful for the appointment of Earl James as our coordinator, and together, we are looking to accomplish great things. Those of us who attended Sankofa journeys in the past understand that a sánkófa bird is one that forges ahead while keeping an eye on what is behind. We as the AABC are on a journey that forges us ahead, propelled by our past.

Note: At its March 2019 meeting, the GSC directed the general secretary “to explore ways to pursue the intent of the recommendations found in the 2019 African American Black Council report and report back to GSC in June 2019” (GSC 19-18).
REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2018 edition, p. 107) states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.”

**Annual Consultation**

In 2018, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) had its 39th annual consultation from September 4 to 6 at Peace Reformed Church in Eagan, Minnesota. We were invited by Pastor Chan Sythavongsa and his Laotian congregation at Peace Reformed Church. The members of the Laotian congregation, which consists of first- and second-generation Laotian immigrants, graciously welcomed all participants of the annual consultation by serving food, providing local transportation, and participating in the worship service.

This year, CPAAM chose the theme of “Integrity” for the annual consultation. We chose the book *Integrity: the Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality* by Henry Cloud and selected some chapters and topics for the members to discuss. Translated copies of the book were sent to the participating Chinese and Korean members, and English copies were mailed to English-speaking members. Everyone was required to read at least some of the chapters before they arrived. To make this book-oriented discussion more effective, the CPAAM executive committee members had a three-day, two-night retreat in June. Small group discussions were divided into three groups: English group, Korean group, and Chinese/Taiwanese group. Overall, groups were deeply engaged with the topic of “integrity” at both personal and ministerial levels.

In this annual consultation, we provided interpreting services (with portable FM radio devices) for those who needed English-Korean interpretation. We did this in order to break the language barrier and to attract more Korean-language-speaking members to CPAAM.

At the closing worship service, we asked four women pastors and leaders to lead the Holy Communion as an appreciation of these women’s efforts and contributions to CPAAM as well as the RCA.

**Engage in Christ’s Kingdom Mission**

Our new general secretary, Eddy Alemán, was the keynote speaker at the consultation meeting. He discussed his role as the general secretary to cast vision and to implement the mission and ministry of the denomination. He also spoke about the work and goals of the Vision 2020 Team that was created to research and identify the various results of the three possible options for the future of the RCA: staying together, radical reconstituting and reorganization, or separating gracefully. Consultation participants were very glad to meet with Eddy Alemán, and they engaged in conversation through fellowship time during meals and through listening to his vision and ministry goals.

**Equip Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow**

In August 2018, we had our 33rd Jesus Retreat, which is the annual youth retreat of RCA churches in New York and New Jersey. About two months before the Jesus Retreat, we had a Servant Staff training retreat in May.
One hundred and twenty young people gathered at Spruce Lake Retreat in Pennsylvania and successfully completed the retreat. Most of the participants came from youth groups of Korean churches, and we still need to develop ways of inviting non-Korean and non-RCA youth groups in the New York and New Jersey areas.

**Cultivate Transformation in Christ**

At the January 2019 executive committee meeting in San Francisco, we had a Zoom conference call with Terry DeYoung, the RCA coordinator for Disability Concerns. He explained the general purpose of Disability Concerns in the RCA, including topics like how to meet the real needs of people with disabilities beyond offering accessibility ramps and bathrooms, how to solve the problem of being more inclusive with those people, and how to utilize the gifts and experiences of people with disabilities in the life of the church. Terry wanted to learn how disabilities are addressed in the Asian communities and churches.

After the Zoom call meeting, a discussion followed on how and when we could present these topics to our CPAAM members. We concluded that we need more time to know Terry and his ministry better, and then dialogue with him about how to present Disability Concerns in a way that will be understandable and relevant to Asian pastors’ experiences and expectations.

**Relationship with Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)**

In order to ensure that there is effective and productive communication between CORE and CPAAM, it was mutually decided and affirmed that a member of the CPAAM executive committee would be appointed to serve on CORE. CPAAM appreciates CORE’s purpose to make the RCA multiracial and free from racism, so we want to have the CPAAM voice heard at CORE meetings, and CPAAM needs to know how we can support and advocate initiatives from CORE.

**Conclusion**

Many different Asian countries are under the CPAAM umbrella. Our languages, traditions, histories, and cultures are very different. However, we have in common our calling from God. God called all of us to be together in Eagan, Minnesota, in 2018. We are all members of CPAAM because God called us to be there. Although we are different in many ways, we still ask the same questions. This year, regardless of our differences, we agreed that we all desire to grow into people, ministers, and leaders of integrity to carry out God’s kingdom work.

Respectfully submitted,
Members of the CPAAM executive committee:
Kyunghoon Suh (chairperson), Daniel Kim, Stephen Kim, Shi Yang Lin, Lynn Min, Grace Rohrer, and Gerri Yoshida
REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

The Book of Church Order states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2018 edition, p. 107). To that end, the Council for Hispanic Ministries shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents as well as advocate for the rights of our people, all while ensuring that we speak up and work together on positive strategies to resolve issues that separate us all as God’s people.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries held its 44th annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, on August 23–25, 2018. The focus for our assembly was “The Development and Health of Our Churches,” as well as continuing to work on our vision of seeing 50 Hispanic churches planted by 2022 and working with Church Multiplication and Hispanic Ministries to do so. We had a great meeting of worship, celebration, and fellowship.

The executive committee and the coordinator of Hispanic Ministries are presently working in several areas:

1. We continue with the training of church planters and are working with various RCA classes and regional synods. We have 23 church plants in progress in the U.S. and Canada, and we continue to lift them up in prayer, while also preparing for new plants in New York, Florida, and Georgia in 2019. Praise God for that! God is raising a great group of church planters, and many RCA churches, classes, and regional synods are embracing the vision and partnering with the council to plant all of these churches in many different cities in the U.S. and Canada.

2. In January, we met in New York with Hispanic pastors for two days to brainstorm goals to walk in the vision of the council, and these pastors now have a vision of planting five of the 50 Hispanic church plants. Pastor Osvaldo Hernandez will plant the first church, as he already has a group of 16 people gathering as a potential new congregation in the Bronx, New York.

3. The council is currently working with the Classis of Illiana-Florida in the Florida area. At the January gathering, there was great vision for Hispanic church planting. The Holy Spirit was present and helped Hispanic pastors and churches get on board with the RCA’s vision of planting 1,000 churches. In addition, African American pastors and leaders from Georgia who attended were inspired by the RCA and the Hispanic churches in the Florida area.

4. General secretary Eddy Alemán, Global Mission director JP Sundararajan, and coordinator for Hispanic Ministries Andres Serrano traveled to the Dominican Republic to connect with Brígido Cabrera and the executive committee of Iglesia Reformada Dominicana (IRD). The meeting was an uplifting of faith and a time of reconnection for IRD and the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary spoke about the vision and mission of the RCA and the commitment from both the RCA and IRD as part of the agreement previously set and signed by former general secretary Wes Granberg-Michaelson in 2009. This reconnection will bring about the training and development of leaders with a focus on Hispanic ministries, not just for the Dominican Republic, but for the U.S. as well.
5. The fourth annual RCA Hispanic Church Planting Summit took place in Orlando, Florida, on March 4–5, 2019. The meeting was a great success. This year, the summit helped to gather more than 130 leaders, the largest for this event to date. The group included church planters, parent church leaders, next generation Hispanic leaders, and classis and regional synod leaders. The focus was in looking toward the future and empowering emerging leaders under the theme of “Passing the Torch.”

6. We continue our support for the 34 Hispanic leaders who are going through the certificate program at Western Theological Seminary and are looking to start another cohort for the Hispanic leaders in the Florida area. The program prepares these leaders through their process of becoming commissioned pastors, with the credits being viable to continue and pursue an M.Div. at Western Theological Seminary, and eventually become fully ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

7. Fourteen Hispanic church planters are going through Church Multiplication Network’s training process for church planters. In April, another group of eight church planters began this process. Groups meet once a month to go through 12 modules that will equip them to be successful church planters in their communities.

Concluding Comments

We are thankful for the work the new general secretary (both in his current role and in his previous role as the director of strategic leadership development), the coordinator for leadership development, the office of Church Multiplication, the coordinator for Hispanic Ministries, and the General Synod Council have done for the Hispanic people of the Reformed Church in America and beyond. We know and understand that there is a long way to go to where we want to be, but we are going in the right direction. We believe that Transformed & Transforming is giving us focus for ministry effectiveness. With much love and many prayers, we submit this report to you and pray for God’s blessings and for the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be with us as we continue this journey of transformation to live and love like Jesus.

Respectfully submitted,
The executive committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind” (1 Corinthians 1:4-5).

Since its origins in 1628, the RCA has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Now, in the midst of Transformed & Transforming, we continue to share stories of how God is at work among us. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, utilizing longstanding communication channels alongside new ones.

Supporting Transformed & Transforming

Over the last year, GSC staff have worked to raise awareness of Transformed & Transforming, the denomination’s vision to engage in discipleship, leadership, and mission. Stories of transformation have taken the form of magazine and website features. They’ve also been tweets, Facebook posts, and video testimonies.

Transformed & Transforming initiatives were designed in response to needs expressed by churches and leaders. As those initiatives took shape, congregations and leaders were invited to take their next step in order to better fulfill God’s call for them. A plethora of learning and equipping opportunities are available. The RCA communication team has supported each initiative in sharing these opportunities and in developing related resources where needed.

Over the past year, communication staff have also worked to share a clear vision of what Transformed & Transforming is and the opportunities it holds for RCA congregations and members.

Coordinating Communication

Communication trends are always evolving, reflecting changes in our world, our homes, and our churches. GSC staff strategically provide communication tools that align with the needs of RCA members. To best serve the diversity in the RCA, communication happens both in print with RCA Today magazines and newsletters, and electronically through social media, email, the RCA website, other websites, and apps.

With the blessings of a denomination that includes people from many cultures and ethnicities, there is also the need and opportunity to communicate in a number of languages.

Communication efforts are coordinated across these various channels and languages to connect with RCA members most effectively and to meet their communication needs.

Changing Communication Meets the Needs of Leaders, Members, and Seekers

The RCA communication team manages an array of websites and social media interactions online. Thousands of people have interacted with the RCA on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vimeo in the last year.

Many people are accessing the RCA’s digital communications from smartphones and tablets rather than computers. Emails, social media content, and the RCA website are optimized for mobile use.
Video is growing in frequency as a communication tool, and beginning in 2018, all RCA-produced videos have been closed captioned for greater accessibility.

**Print Pieces Continue to Serve the Church**

While technology allows communication to take place in a number of ways, many people still desire print communication. Within the RCA, this medium includes the *RCA Today* magazine, which is produced three times a year for each RCA household. (For a free subscription, email updates@rca.org.) *RCA Today* continues to support Transformed & Transforming by communicating stories of church and individual discipleship, leadership development, and mission.

A readership survey of *RCA Today* readers was conducted in 2018, offering a better understanding of readers and their engagement with the magazine. Many respondents felt *RCA Today* is trustworthy and seek out *RCA Today* as a source of information. More than 40 percent of readers reported sharing or talking about a story with a friend. Survey results have shaped content choices and the formation of a new online platform, Faithward.org. Survey results also led to an effort to get new congregations signed up for the magazine and to more intentional thought about how to build trust with demographic groups whose current engagement with the magazine is limited.

The *RCA Today* magazine app was discontinued after the fall 2018 issue due to low reader engagement. With the winter issue, a new digital strategy unfolded with the launch of Faithward. The site, focused on moving faith forward, includes ideas for living out your faith, reflections on Scripture, and resources for your church. Faithward includes many stories and resources from *RCA Today*, as well as added content from a regular rotation of contributors from throughout the church.

A bulletin insert, called *RCA Today*, shares RCA ministry stories and increases connection with RCA mission work around the world. The *RCA Today* bulletin was redesigned in 2018.

**Translation Efforts Continue**

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2018 *Book of Church Order* in Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin, the *RCA Today* bulletin is produced in Spanish and Korean each month. A number of Transformed & Transforming resources have also been translated, including a multi-year leadership development curriculum. Resources for church multiplication, disability advocacy, and women’s leadership development have also been translated this year. The RCA’s annual Advent devotions were bilingual again in 2018, distributed in both English and Spanish. Devotions for the popular Jesse Tree resource on the RCA website are now available in Spanish. Several video projects were subtitled in Spanish, or recorded in Spanish, Portuguese, or Afrikaans and subtitled in English.

Over the past year, the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) have shared several translations of creeds and confessions. This momentum will continue as we look to bring RCA communications into the languages in which our members worship the Lord.

**Report on the Faith Alive Christian Resources Partnership**

The RCA continues to work with Faith Alive Christian Resources as a partner in distributing
resources. RCA staff meet with Faith Alive leadership to ensure the partnership is working well and supporting the resource needs of both the RCA and the CRCNA. Staff cooperation between Faith Alive and the RCA is strong. The RCA receives revenue from the Reformed Church Press materials sold through Faith Alive, and that revenue is then used to produce additional resources to support the RCA and other Reformed congregations throughout the United States and Canada.

Office of Historical Services

The Archives of the RCA serves as the memory of the Reformed Church through its collection of documents, videos, photographs, and electronic records. The stories of life and ministry from the past provide a strong foundation for faithful witness in the future. While the archivist gathers the records of our past and present ministry, the outlook is always looking forward to tomorrow—the stories of a past generation provide inspiration and encouragement for today as we grow into tomorrow. The office assists congregations, classes, regional synods, and staff with their historical and records needs.

Records Storage

Archival collections are housed in space leased from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and also in an underground storage facility in Grand Rapids—more than one-half mile of paper and other materials. The Archives receives records from disbanded and active congregations on a regular basis. This year, it is exploring the possibility of receiving electronic records online and is increasing its digital work with congregations and other agencies of the church.

The Archives is partnering in a major project to digitize the Amsterdam Correspondence—the correspondence of the domines with the Classis of Amsterdam. This collection of nearly 2,000 pages dating from the 1640s through 1800 will provide the basis for a new translation and publication of these documents. A continuing grant from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, along with gifts from several donors, has provided for more equipment and staffing to accomplish this task.

Historical Series

The archivist also serves as the production editor for the Historical Series and assists with the design, typesetting, and production of the books in that series as well as the Congregational History Series. A full list of the nearly 100 volumes can be found at www.rca.org/series. The Archives assists with the promotion and marketing of the publication and is exploring ways to publish the series as e-books as well as make individual chapters available.

Growth and Development of the Archives

The Archives’ Facebook page has an increasing following, and the use of social media and other online possibilities continues to be explored to disseminate more information about our history. A sampling of some materials can be found at rcaarchives.omeka.net. More useful information about our history and retention of records by congregations and assemblies can be found on the Archives’ web page, www.rca.org/archives. Archives staff have also enjoyed providing videos about the RCA and the Archives on an internet channel (soon to be moved to the Archives’ YouTube channel): www.vimeo.com/channels/RLGasero.
The archivist continues to speak and lead professionally through national and regional archival meetings and as a guest at gatherings such as the Dutch Cousins. He preached for them at their annual meeting in the historic structure of Old Mud Meeting House in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, one of our earliest western (at that time in the 1790s) extension efforts.

Researchers from around the world continue to use the records that we are preserving and making available. For more about the ongoing work of the Archives, see also the report of the Commission on History, demonstrating again that we have a goodly heritage.

RESOLUTION FOR STAFF

Upon the retirement of Kenneth Eriks as director of special projects for the RCA, the General Synod Council offers the following resolution:

**EC 19-12**

WHEREAS, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Eriks pastored local churches for more than 30 years, and then brought that experience and wisdom to the denomination when he joined staff as coordinator of revitalization; and

WHEREAS, Ken shifted responsibilities from revitalization to congregational mission to transformational engagement to special projects, ably demonstrating his flexibility and leadership; and

WHEREAS, during his 14 years on denominational staff, Ken championed renewal, raised up leaders, and worked tirelessly to expand opportunities for the denomination, pastors, and staff;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 213th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Holland, Michigan, offers thanks to God for Ken Eriks and his years of faithful service. (ADOPTED)
REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2018

Response to MGS 2018, RF 18-1, pp. 86–87, Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

REPORT OF THE PASTORAL FORMATION OVERSIGHT BOARD

The 2018 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America acted to constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board...to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future” (MGS 2018, RF 18-1, pp. 86–87).

As part of that same action, the 2018 General Synod described one of the purposes of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board as “serv[ing] the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs.”

Part of RF 18-1 included the directive that full bylaws for the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board would be developed and presented to the General Synod for approval in 2019, and so, the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), after consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council, makes the following recommendation to the 2019 General Synod:

RF 19-1
To adopt the following bylaws for the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), to be effective as of July 1, 2019:

BYLAWS
OF THE
PASTORAL FORMATION OVERSIGHT BOARD
OF THE
REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

I
NAME

The name of this agency shall be “Pastoral Formation Oversight Board of the Reformed Church in America” (PFOB).

II
PURPOSES

The PFOB exists to serve classes, candidates, and congregations in the formation of pastoral leadership for the church. The purpose of the PFOB is to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education and pastoral formation that will form pastoral leadership for the Reformed Church in America (RCA) that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and future, including:
A. Serving the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA (New Brunswick Theological Seminary [“NBTS”], Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America [“WTS”], and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency of the Reformed Church in America [“MFCA”]) as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs. NBTS, WTS, and the MFCA may be referred to individually as a “Theological Agent” and collectively as the “Theological Agents;” and

B. Serving the RCA by assisting classes through the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team (“CPAT”) in their work of sharing best practices, addressing common problems, and developing creative solutions for the formation of commissioned pastor candidates.

III
FUNCTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Coordinate the processes by which the Theological Agents implement the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry in partnership with the classes of the RCA and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the processes related to such implementation.

B. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among consistories and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.

C. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among consistories and classes in their discernment of the call of commissioned pastor candidates and in their care of candidates in the commissioning process.

D. Provide a forum for collaboration among the Theological Agents regarding ministerial formation and continuing education as they relate to RCA church order and the mission of the church.

E. Foster engagement with the ever-changing and increasingly diverse North American context and collaborate to form leaders capable of doing effective ministry in increasingly multicultural contexts.

F. Encourage collaboration among congregations and classes committed to forming pastoral leadership in partnership with the Theological Agents and the CPAT.
G. Coordinate regular review of the Standards for the Preparation for Ministry and propose needed revisions to the General Synod, in consultation with the General Synod professors.

H. Coordinate regular review of the ministry competencies listed in *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2b, and propose needed revisions to the General Synod, in consultation with the CPAT.

I. Assist the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America (GSC) in conducting a regular review of the overall assessment for theological education and any additional funding to be requested from the General Synod, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

The PFOB may also take such other actions as are consistent with its general purposes, not inconsistent with its governing documents (including without limitation these Bylaws, the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, and the Bylaws of the General Synod (RCA *Book of Church Order [BCO]* Chapter 3, Part I [page 105 et seq. of the 2018 edition]), and not inconsistent with any instruction specifically expressed to the PFOB through an action of the General Synod.

IV

RELATIONSHIP TO GENERAL SYNOD

A. The PFOB is an agency of the RCA and as such is subject to all provisions of the *BCO* applicable to agencies, including, without limitation, *BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 3 (page 71 of the 2018 edition) and *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 7 (page 120 of the 2018 edition).

B. The *BCO* is incorporated into these Bylaws by reference in its entirety. Any amendment to the *BCO* shall be applicable to the PFOB immediately upon the amendment’s effective date. If at any time any conflict or inconsistency exists between the *BCO* and these Bylaws, the *BCO* shall supersede.

C. The PFOB, as the governing board, shall have and fulfill fiduciary duties, including but not limited to the fiduciary duties of care and loyalty, and shall act in good faith with respect to all responsibilities assigned to the PFOB or the members of its governing board in these Bylaws or by the General Synod and any assets or resources that may be entrusted to the PFOB from time to time. By serving as such, members of the PFOB
agree that their personal interests shall at all times be subordinated to the best interest of the PFOB. Each member of the PFOB is prohibited from using his or her position as a member to advance any personal interest or the interest of any third party or constituency.

D. The PFOB shall make an annual report to the General Synod.

V
GOVERNANCE

A. The PFOB, as the governing board, shall have thirteen members and one ex-officio, non-voting member. Its membership shall, to the extent practicable, reflect the diversity of the RCA in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. At least two members shall be General Synod professors.

B. The members of the governing board of the PFOB shall be as follows:

1. The president of NBTS.
2. The president of WTS.
3. The executive director of the MFCA.
4. Three additional members, one designated by each of the Theological Agents (collectively, the “Theological Agent Designees”).
5. One member designated by the CPAT from among its current members (the “CPAT Designee”).
6. One member designated by the GSC from among its current members (the “GSC Designee”).
7. Five additional members, each of whom shall be a member of a classis, local church, or organizing church in the RCA (collectively, the “At Large Members”).
8. The general secretary of the General Synod, ex-officio and without vote.

C. The Theological Agent Designees, At Large Members, CPAT Designee, and GSC Designee shall be nominated by the General Synod’s Commission on Nominations and elected by the General Synod. The term of the GSC Designee shall be coterminous with her or his term on the GSC. The eligibility, and the length, number, commencement date, and calculation of the terms of the Theological Agent Designees, At Large Members, and CPAT Designee shall be as set forth in the BCO (including but not limited to BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4 [page 109 et seq. of the 2018 edition]). The term of the CPAT Designee shall not extend beyond his or her period of service on the CPAT. Vacancies in membership of Theological Agent Designees, At Large Members,
CPAT Designee, and GSC Designee shall be filled in the manner prescribed in the BCO.

D. One of the At Large Members shall be a commissioned pastor at the time of his or her election. If the commission of such member becomes invalid, his or her service as a member of the governing board shall cease immediately.

E. Any governing board member may be removed at any time upon the affirmative vote of at least two thirds of the voting members of the governing board, for reasonable cause as determined by the governing board as a part of such vote. Appeal of such action may be brought to the Commission on Judicial Business.

VI
OFFICERS

A. The PFOB shall have three elected officers—a moderator, a vice moderator, and a secretary. If and to the extent the work of the PFOB involves financial matters requiring the services of a treasurer, those services shall be provided by the General Synod treasurer, with the assistance of other GSC staff as determined by the General Synod treasurer. The general secretary of the General Synod, the presidents of NBTS and WTS, and the executive director of the MFCA, may not serve as an officer of the PFOB.

B. The elected officers shall be elected annually for one-year terms and shall be eligible to serve in any particular office for no more than two consecutive terms. Such elections shall occur during the annual meeting of the PFOB. The terms of office of the elected officers shall commence and conclude in the same manner as is set forth in the BCO for members of agencies and commissions. For purposes of determining a person’s eligibility to serve as an officer of the PFOB, any officer who serves more than half a term in such office shall be deemed to have served a full term.

C. The nomination and election of the moderator, vice moderator, and secretary shall be by written ballot, and shall be by only those members of the governing board actually present during the governing meeting, in person or electronically, at which the election occurs. The moderator shall be nominated and elected first, then the vice-moderator, and then the secretary. If more than half of the nominating ballots are cast in favor of one person, that person shall be deemed elected to the applicable office. Otherwise, all persons receiving nominations shall be eligible for election.
D. A majority of the total votes cast on the electing ballot shall be necessary for election. If there is no majority on the first electing ballot, another electing ballot shall be cast and the persons eligible for election by that ballot shall be limited to the two persons receiving the largest numbers of votes on the immediately preceding electing ballot. This process shall continue until such time as a single person receives a majority of the votes cast on the electing ballot.

E. In no event shall the term of office of an officer extend beyond his or her term as a member of the PFOB.

F. A vacancy in any office shall be filled at the next regular or special meeting of the PFOB through the same nomination and election process as applies to the regular elections of officers.

G. The duties of the officers shall be those ordinarily performed by individuals holding such offices.

1. The moderator shall call and preside at all regular and special meetings of the governing board and shall perform such other duties as are usually required of that officer, or as may be requested by the governing board. The moderator may vote on matters coming before the governing board for decision only when his or her vote will affect the outcome of the vote.

2. The vice-moderator shall act as moderator when the moderator is not able or available to serve.

3. The secretary shall keep a true and accurate record of all proceedings of the PFOB, shall ensure that a true and accurate record of all proceedings of any sub-committee of the governing board is kept, shall be responsible for the preparation of an annual report for the governing board to act upon and present to the General Synod, and shall perform such other duties as usually pertain to the office or as the governing board may direct.

VII
MEETINGS

A. The governing board shall hold at least one stated meeting during each annual meeting cycle of the RCA (an annual meeting cycle being from July 1 to June 30), and may hold additional meetings (regular or special) when necessary. If there is more than one stated meeting during any annual meeting cycle, then the annual meeting shall be the stated meeting immediately preceding the annual meeting of the General Synod.
B. The moderator of the PFOB may call special meetings whenever she or he determines that special business requires it, and shall call a special meeting upon the written request of any three members of the governing board.

C. Written notice of each regular and special meeting stating the nature of the business to be considered, together with an agenda, background information, and any proposed action, shall be given to each member of the governing board not less than ten days before each regular meeting and five days before each special meeting. The location and method of each regular or special meeting shall be specified in the notice of the meeting. A meeting may be held without notice if all members of the governing board are present or if those not present waive due notice of the meeting in writing and those who are present do not protest their failure to have received notice. Any member of the governing board may waive in writing his or her right to receive written notice of any meeting, and no member of the governing board who attends a meeting may object thereto on the grounds of not having received notice thereof.

D. A majority of the voting membership of the governing board shall constitute a quorum thereof. A majority vote of the voting members of the governing board shall be necessary to take any action, but a lesser number present may adjourn a meeting to a later date.

E. Any one or more members of the governing board or of any sub-committee thereof who is not physically present at a meeting of the governing board or sub-committee may participate by means of electronic communication. Participation by such means shall constitute presence in person at a meeting as long as all persons participating in the meeting can hear each other at the same time and each governing board or sub-committee member can participate in all matters before the governing board or sub-committee, including, without limitation, the ability to propose, object to, and vote upon a specific action to be taken by the governing board or sub-committee.

F. Any action required or permitted to be taken by the governing board or any of its sub-committees may be taken without a meeting if all members of the governing board or the committee consent to the adoption of a resolution authorizing the action. Such consent may be written or electronic. If written, the consent must be executed by the moderator by signing such consent or causing his or her signature to be affixed to such consent by any reasonable means including, but not limited to, facsimile signature. If electronic, the transmission
of the consent must be sent by electronic mail and set forth, or be submitted with, information from which it can reasonably be determined that the transmission was authorized by the governing board member. The resolution and the written consents thereto by the members of the governing board or sub-committee shall be filed with the minutes of the proceedings of the governing board or sub-committee.

G. Any reports prepared for presentation to the General Synod shall be considered and adopted at the meeting of the PFOB governing board immediately preceding the annual meeting of the General Synod.

H. Each meeting of the governing board and any sub-committee shall be opened and closed with prayer.

VIII
AMENDMENTS

A. These Bylaws may be amended at any properly constituted meeting of the PFOB by a two-thirds vote of all the voting members of the PFOB (regardless of the number of voting members present at the meeting), provided that the proposed amendment has been presented in writing at a previous properly constituted meeting of the PFOB. Any amendment adopted by the PFOB shall become effective only after approval by the General Synod at a regularly constituted meeting.

B. These Bylaws may be amended by the General Synod at any properly constituted meeting. Any proposed amendment may be submitted in writing to the PFOB for its consideration before the meeting of the General Synod in order that the PFOB may be able to present its views on the matter. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business was to vote in favor of RF 19-1.

The rationale for the creation of this board was presented to the 2018 General Synod, which approved the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB). The proposed bylaws have been completed in consultation with the Commission on Church Order as well as the General Synod Council, both of whom give their support for this recommendation.

One change that was made in the current recommendation that was not brought before the 2018 General Synod was the inclusion of the call and care of commissioned pastors under the purview of the PFOB. This change was made in consultation with the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team (CPAT). Accordingly, the makeup of the PFOB has slightly changed to assure commissioned pastor representation. The PFOB values the training of commissioned pastors for today’s church. It seems mutually beneficial to include commissioned pastors in this group, both for those who train commissioned pastors and also for the three theological agents as each works to raise up leaders for today’s church.
Assessment for Theological Education

In order to fulfill our mandate to assist the General Synod Council (GSC) in setting the budget and division of the Assessment for Theological Education, the PFOB has recommended the following to the GSC:

To set the General Synod assessment for theological education to $829,000 ($6.12 per member) for Fiscal Year 2020, to be allocated in the following manner:

- An initial $75,000 given to the MFCA to cover expenses and to account for their lack of ability to raise funds compared to an educational institution.
- 75 percent of the remaining funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, NBTS, and MFCA).
- 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.
- 5 percent to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.

The GSC will bring this assessment request to the 2019 General Synod.

Collaboration between Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) has encouraged and funded an annual collaborative meeting of the RCA seminary presidents, deans, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) executive director—the leadership of the RCA theological agents (MFCA, NBTS, and WTS). The group met on February 28 and March 1, 2019, in Holland, Michigan. In attendance were Timothy Brown, Cornelis Kors, Micah McCreary, Alvin Padilla, and Beth Tanner.

At this meeting, the participants agreed to work toward collaborative efforts in cross-registration for students between the institutions, mutual efforts in offering quality Spanish education, faculty/student exchanges, and a review of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and how it is administered by each agent.

The group took note of data and matters that are influencing the operations at MFCA, NBTS, and WTS. Observations included: a) there are fewer General Synod professors, and presently only one at NBTS; b) the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) is difficult to oversee and implement properly when there is minimal RCA representation, in particular General Synod professors; and c) there is confusion regarding the role of the agent versus the classis in the ordination process—who is responsible for what?

It was decided to take the next year to investigate options to address the observed phenomena, together with the PFOB and the General Synod professors. Considerations include the following:

- To rethink how we understand the role of the agents, acknowledging that the classis has distinctive responsibilities in the ordination process that are not the domain of the agents. Examples would include fitness and orthodoxy. The actual responsibility of the agents is to prepare candidates for classis examination.
- To replace the CFM with a “Declaration of Readiness for Examination.”
- To recognize the Standards for the Preparation of Ministry approved in 1998 as guidelines for both classis and agent, whereas the five criteria, established
by the Board of Theological Education in the late 1980s, better describe the responsibility of the agents in their role.

• To utilize an edited version of the five criteria as the guideline for determining the Declaration of Readiness for Examination. The edited version of the five criteria would read as follows:

  Academic preparation—successful completion of the fields of study as required by the Book of Church Order (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7 [2018 edition, pp. 45–46]), normally fulfilled through the attainment of a Master of Divinity degree at an accredited seminary, with exceptions as noted in the BCO.

  Spiritual formation as defined in the RCA Constitution—manifest progress in the candidate’s faith journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

  Ministry development as defined in the RCA Constitution—affirmation of gifts and calling, and development of competencies for ministry in such areas as preaching, teaching, congregational care, evangelism, administration, and equipping church members for ministry.

  Personal wholeness as defined in the RCA Constitution—pursuit of reasonable health in all significant aspects of life, including the physical, psychological, and social.

  Denominational identity—knowledge of the history, mission, worship, polity, and confessional statements of the RCA.

As part of the discussion of possible changes, the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) hopes to invite classical representation from across the denomination to one of its meetings to engage the church regarding the role of the agents and the classes in the ordination process.

Classis Best Practices

As part of the board’s charge to engage classes regarding best practices for caring for candidates under care, the PFOB will continue to maintain and promote the website www.candidate-care.org. Bart Strong will continue to oversee this website. It continues to be used by many classes to better care for and examine candidates for the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

We are grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve the church in this area of leadership preparation and care.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce (moderator)
Ken Eriks (staff support)
Tim Brown
Jaeseung Cha
Cornelis Kors
Eun Jae (Dan) Joo
Brad Lewis
Micah McCreary
Alvin Padilla
Cora Taitt

To appoint a 2020 Vision Group to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

- Staying together
- Radical reconstituting and reorganization
- Grace-filled separation

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are “for” rather than what they are “against” and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.

As the vision group engages these options, its work should include, but not be limited to:

- A commitment, as much as is possible, to the unity of the church in its being, spirit, covenantal relationship, mission, and kingdom witness in the world.
- An understanding regarding the foundational role that biblical hermeneutics and Reformed exegesis play in the life and witness of the church, and a commitment to articulate how those methods are operative in the church’s way forward.
- An analysis of the role that the RCA’s theology, Standards of Unity, and liturgies play in the present and future life of the church.

The vision group will consist of 10–12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the RCA. The general secretary will serve as an *ex-officio* member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed $250,000.

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020.

**REPORT OF THE VISION 2020 TEAM**

**Current Reality**

The RCA is at a crossroads. As a historic, confessional, and covenantal church, we have long held in common our love of the Bible, as well as our creeds and confessions as standards of unity. But we have also lived with underlying tensions between some of our differing theological convictions. Over the years, and especially recently, some of those tensions (or probably the unhealthy ways we addressed them) seem to have driven us further apart. This happened slowly and over time so that we now find ourselves in a place where we are not sure we can be connected in our differences. Many do not want to stay at the table.
Formation of the Vision 2020 Team

In June 2018, interim general secretary Don Poest brought a proposal to the General Synod, asking for a team to be assembled that would consider the future of the denomination in light of these deep divisions. Delegates approved the recommendation, and 12 RCA leaders, plus Don and general secretary Eddy Alemán, began working as that team. We did this in consultation with Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and their colleague, Ryan Donovan, consultants who have a long relationship with the RCA and who help congregations and denominations with strategy planning, conflict resolution, and leadership development.

Work of the Team So Far

The team has been given two years to do this work—from General Synod 2018 to General Synod 2020. Our mandate during this time is to identify and explore possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the RCA: (1) staying together; (2) radical reorganization; (3) grace-filled separation. It is also possible that a fourth scenario will emerge. At General Synod 2020, we will bring a recommendation for how to move forward.

General Synod 2019 is the halfway mark toward our goal. Over the past year, in subcommittees, our team has been researching a number of possible next chapters and their implications for the RCA. We are imagining the impact of each scenario on people in different regions, on commissions and mission agencies, and on the overarching work of the denomination. We are considering theology, finances, assets, the Book of Church Order, statistics, relationships, and ecclesiology. We are considering in what ways each scenario bears witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and in what ways it fails to do so. And in all this we are learning to listen to one another, to love one another, and to work hard together, despite our differences.

In making his proposal, Don identified something that has rung true as we’ve done our research: The RCA is at a turning point. Our denomination as we know it will never be the same—and we believe that gives us the opportunity to write the next hopeful chapter.

“Doing nothing”—or even making minor adjustments to our denominational structure—will not lead to a future where God’s kingdom thrives in our midst. To continue with the status quo will be to continue patterns of institutional dysfunction and will involve significant loss. However, making deep change will also not be easy. Any change, even good change, involves loss. Opening ourselves up to something new will require us to redefine some of our ideas about success, about who we are as the RCA, and about what it means to be the church. If we propose a radical new action, some congregations and classes will leave the denomination. Others will stay and be tasked with the hard work of writing a new chapter. It is critical that we as a denomination embrace the reality that change or no change, the impact will be serious.

We are convinced that the RCA must face significant loss and do something different if it wants to live out the gospel. But we want to be clear that the team has not yet chosen one preferred scenario to recommend. And as we’ve said, we are at the halfway point. We know that each of these scenarios will be disruptive, and each requires thorough, thoughtful consideration. Still, our team continues to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide our denomination toward a hopeful way forward.
Delegates of General Synod 2019, will you help us with this work? We know that many of you are already praying for the work of the Vision 2020 team. We have received numerous notes from RCA members, with encouragements and suggestions. Many of you filled out an online survey to share your feedback. (For those who missed it, there will be another.) Feedback is of high value to this team, and we would like to invite you to continue helping us in this way.

It’s been a surprising pleasure for us to be part of a team that, despite its great differences, is learning to trust each other and work together. And we think that if we’re a diverse group, the RCA as a whole is far more diverse! There are still many voices to be heard.

One of our goals is to create spaces at General Synod 2019 that invite the same respectful authenticity and idea-sharing that our team has experienced. Let us be clear that there will be no vote at General Synod 2019. The vote will be in 2020. General Synod 2019 has been restructured to make space for delegates to engage in prayer and reflection and to offer generative feedback around the three scenarios we are researching. We need your wisdom, your perspectives, and your creativity as we consider all the angles of each option.

We have included three draft impact statements, one for each of the three scenarios, in this report. Let us reiterate: we have not yet chosen one of these scenarios; our work is not finished. We are completely open to the Spirit’s leading in our understanding of each of these options.

We ask you to prayerfully consider the three impact statements below, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to ask yourself: “What do I affirm?” “Where do I feel resistance or concern?” “What’s missing?” “What do I wonder?” “Where do I hear the Spirit inviting us to go?” If you are a delegate to General Synod 2019, you will be invited to share your feedback during synod, and your feedback will be taken seriously in the work our team does between 2019 and 2020. A final recommendation will be made to General Synod 2020.

Please wonder with us about what Christ is doing in this moment of our history together and where the Spirit might be leading us as we stand on the edge of a new future.

A Word on How to Read These Scenarios

Before you start reading the scenarios, we want to share our understanding of the kind of discernment we are all doing here. Our team has not been called to discern in isolation and then emerge and make a proclamation of something that the church can either accept or reject. The best discernment for the body of Christ takes place within the body of Christ—the covenant community—and it often takes place over time. Discerning collaboratively and over time aligns with the kind of gradual revelation we see God give again and again throughout biblical history. In Hebrew and Greek, the word “revelation” means “uncovering.” We think the will of God is being uncovered for us in this moment of the RCA’s life as we engage Scripture and listen to the Spirit, and that it will take time and participation.

Here are some of our convictions about the work of discernment (you can read more detailed explanations at www.rca.org/vision-2020):

- **Discernment happens in community.** It is both communal and participatory, in that each member of the church is called to offer their gifts readily and joyfully for the service of many (Heidelberg Q&A 55). We think those gifts include the many
skill sets of discernment, e.g., wisdom, knowledge, prayer, study, understanding, prophecy, and interpretation, to name a few. We do this work together.

- **Discernment is often gradual.** God’s plans for us are often revealed over time. In Acts 16, followers of Christ receive just enough direction from the Spirit for each stage of their journey. While we’d like our final report to be revealed to us immediately, discernment is more often gradual. And the journey will shape us as much as the destination does.

- **Discernment is both spiritual and intellectual.** John Calvin said that the knowledge of God comes from God alone, but that human beings do not get much benefit from it until God gives them eyes to see and light to see by (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter II, Section 21). And so we pray with Paul that God would give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation and would enlighten the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:17-18). But Paul also exhorts us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we can test and approve God’s will (Romans 12:2). So, we see the work of the Spirit and the work of the intellect participating together in discernment. We’ve provided reflection questions to help you engage both the mind and the spirit through prayerful reflection.

- **Discernment requires curiosity and can be uncomfortable.** The Vision 2020 Team has invited you to participate in our discernment by asking for your feedback on several unfinished impact statements, which attempt to deeply and prayerfully consider all the possible outcomes of a certain path. We know that each of these scenarios requires change, and so each will be necessarily disruptive to our current reality. We invite you to let yourself be curious about the many possible ways the Spirit might work inside and outside of each scenario. We also invite you to let yourself be uncomfortable, as a way of feeling the impact of each scenario. Do you feel angry, grieved, confused, excited, or something else? Why? Let yourself be curious, and let yourself feel uncomfortable.

We hope you understand that the scenarios you are about to read are by no means complete. They are like an unfinished marble sculpture that still requires many months of chiseling before the full image will emerge. And we hope you understand that we believe your prayers and your perspective, along with the guidance of the Spirit, will help us shape that final image. We thank you for participating with us in this good and difficult work. And we continue to place our confidence and hope in the assurance that our Triune God is able to do abundantly more than we can ask or imagine, according to God’s power that is at work within us.

Respectfully submitted,
The Vision 2020 Team:
Eddy Alemán, *ex officio*
Charles Contreras
Diane Faubion
Barbara Felker
Tom Goodhart
Brian Keepers
Kristen Livingston
John Messer
Christa Mooi
Don Poest, *ex officio*
Rudy Rubio
Marijke Strong
Scott Treadway
Imos Wu
As we stated in the preamble, the RCA is at a crossroads. Many find themselves wondering if it is really possible, or even desirable, to “stay together,” given our deep theological, socio-political, and ecclesiological differences. Based on the feedback we’ve received, our denomination seems to be divided on whether or not the RCA can embrace a shared identity and mission that transcends our deep differences.

The first scenario we have been tasked with considering is “staying together.” Under the umbrella of “staying together,” we have actually considered two versions of the scenario, which we will outline here. First, we’ve provided a narrative of staying together in which we as a denomination don’t do anything differently than we have. We’re calling this Option 1A. This is important not only to paint a picture of the current reality and possible default future, but also to create a sense of urgency for change. Second, we’ve provided a narrative for staying together that involves a different approach to our shared life (Option 1B). It preserves current RCA structures and governance (in other words, it’s not the radical restructuring that you’ll see in Scenario 2), but we believe its changes are possible and, dare we say, even hopeful, though not without their challenges.

**Option 1A: Stay Together and Do Nothing**

If we continue to do “business as usual,” the default future seems to be one of continued tension, frustration, and polarization over our differences, especially regarding the presenting issue of human sexuality and marriage. These arguments and debates will likely continue to dominate our time and energy as a denomination, “distracting us from our priority of advancing the gospel,” as the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) wrote in a letter to the General Synod Council in March 2018. Anxiety and mistrust in our denominational system will likely only be heightened, and we’ll see a continuing pattern of people, churches, and classes feeling “emotionally and spiritually fatigued,” another observation of the regional synod executives about their members.

Continuing on the RCA’s current path may also fuel feelings of further disengagement and disconnect among individuals, congregations, and classes, and a diminished sense of covenant and loyalty to the RCA. Pastors and churches may function more autonomously, as in a congregationalist mode of governance, seeking networks and partnerships with those with whom they feel more theologically, socio-politically, and ecclesiastically aligned.

Even more concerning, if nothing changes, then as many as 40 percent of our churches (including entire classes) have indicated they will leave the RCA within the next two to five years. According to COSE, these are largely from Synods of Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, and Mid-America. This will have major impact on the entire denomination, which is already small, and will jeopardize the RCA’s future sustainability.

This kind of loss would necessitate major downsizing in denominational staff, programs, and initiatives, as well as in the support of RCA missionaries and mission partners. It would force the RCA to move toward radical restructuring and reorganization (Scenario 2) or risk dissolving in the absence of a sustainable future. If the RCA were to dissolve, churches would either close, find another denomination or association to call “home,” or become independent or nondenominational.

The trajectory of “staying the same and doing nothing” is one of continued decline, which may lead to many churches falling into a pattern of self-preservation and survival (many
churches are already in this pattern). Such a posture impacts our capacity to be missional and reach our communities and regions with the good news of Jesus Christ. According to quantitative and qualitative research done by a sub-team of the Vision 2020 Team earlier this year, “The strongest correlate of growth when all controls were in effect was the presence or absence of conflict. Obviously, conflict cannot be completely avoided, but whether or not a congregation finds itself mired in serious conflict is the number one predictor of congregational decline.”

We will continue to struggle to reach and disciple younger generations, which are leaving the church in droves. This will especially be true if the RCA is embroiled in fighting and conflict (along with the mean-spiritedness that often rears its ugly head over divisive issues like human sexuality). In their book *The Millennials*, Thom and Jess Rainer observe that young people, particularly millennials, are disenchanted with organized religion because they see it as argumentative and polarized (p. 153). Further, we will struggle to connect with persons who are part of racial/ethnic minorities, the majority of whom hold to a more conservative sexual ethic. New consensus projections for the United States (and based on other studies, we believe these are similar for Canada) “confirm the importance of racial minorities as the primary demographic engine” of future growth and project a population that is “minority white” by 2045. The point we want to make here is that “staying the same and doing nothing” will not only have a negative impact on the RCA, it may also hinder and undermine our Christian witness in a rapidly changing, increasingly post-Christian North American culture.

A counter-point might be offered here: this is not the first time the RCA has come to a crossroads where division over deep differences seems inevitable. On many occasions, especially in the last 70 years, the RCA has experienced major obstacles of disagreement and tension over differing views on things like ecumenical partnerships, social justice and political involvement, the possibility of merging with another denomination, communism, internal restructuring, the *Church Herald*, church planting models, women in ministry, and human sexuality. When conflict escalated and it seemed that division was inevitable, the “majority in the middle” often became more vocal and helped hold the RCA together. For many, relationships—in other words, “staying together”—were more important than dividing over differences. Over the last 70 years, the relational metaphor of “family” has been used to describe the RCA, albeit a family with deep differences and growing fragmentation. In addition to the importance of relationships, focusing on “church extension” and global mission brought some level of unity, although it didn’t ever resolve underlying issues.

So, one might argue that, based on the past, with enough patience, perseverance, and commitment, the RCA will also be able to stay together through this turbulent moment—without significant changes. As in the past, a “majority in the middle” might help us navigate the divide and find a way forward. This may or may not be true. What is uncertain is the extent to which this current impasse is similar to or dissimilar from the points of crisis in the past. What is also uncertain is the extent to which the RCA still has a “majority in the middle,” as all indicators suggest that the middle is vanishing, an observation confirmed in our conversation with George Bullard, who specializes in working with denominations. Furthermore, to what extent does the current membership of the RCA still embrace the

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1 www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects

metaphor of “family”? Or has our definition of “family” changed? And is there the desire, let alone the stamina, to be patient and keep working toward resolving the mistrust and tension that tend to divide us?

Our sense is that something needs to change if there is any possibility of staying together. Maintaining the status quo as a denomination seems to point to a default future of ongoing numerical and financial decline, as well as diminished kingdom influence in our communities, region, nation, and world. We believe that “business as usual” is not an option if we are to stay together and move into a more hopeful future. So might there be some options of staying together that demand change and open a way forward? We’d like to offer one possible option.

Option 1B: Adopt a Centered-Set Paradigm

One option for staying together with the current structures and governance is for the RCA to move away from a “boundaried-set” paradigm for identity and belonging, which places the emphasis on boundaries for who’s in and who’s out, for who’s right and who’s wrong. Instead, we’d more fully adopt a “centered-set” paradigm that focuses on the key theological beliefs and convictions that unite us. As we move toward the center (those key beliefs and convictions), we are drawn and held together, even with our differences.

In this scenario, the RCA would allow consistories and/or classes to decide where they stand on matters beyond the key theological convictions. If a church did not align with the decision of its classis, it would be permitted to join another classis.

One of these places of “permissible difference” would be biblical interpretations and practices around human sexuality and marriage. Each classis would discern and decide if it holds an “open and affirming” view, a “traditional” view, or something in between. If a consistory holds to a view that is contrary to the decision of the classis, it would be permitted to join another classis with whom it better aligns, free of penalty. Each classis would also be permitted to determine if it fit well with its region or would prefer to be relocated. We already established a precedent for this when City Classis moved from the Synod of the Far West to the Synod of the Mid-Atlantics and when Faith Church in Stickney, Illinois, moved from Chicago Classis to City Classis. (Both of these were approved by General Synod 2018.) Our current governance and structure allows for both classis and church realignment.

Beyond allowing for church and classis realignment, this option would call for a new way of functioning in our denominational system(s) when we encounter differences. Rather than doing what individuals and groups tend to do when they’re anxious (fight, flight, or freeze), we would commit together to becoming more emotionally healthy and spiritually mature across the board. This would involve growing in our capacity as individuals, consistories, churches, classes, regions, and a denomination to practice healthy differentiation (the practice of defining self while staying connected to others), choosing to show up differently with each other when there is anxiety and conflict. In particular, regarding issues of human sexuality and marriage, we would define ourselves and let others, both individually and collectively, define themselves. We would refrain from policing one another and filing charges to discipline people who believe differently.

As we consider the trajectory of this option, it is likely that those on extreme sides of these issues would leave the denomination. There would be loss in this, but there would also be the possibility of greater health. The volume of anxiety around these issues, and possibly other divisive issues, would get turned down. There would be a mass of people
who are ready to engage differences in a different way, keeping the focus on the main thing (centered-set paradigm). The RCA could demonstrate how to hold together despite deep differences, testifying to our unity and hope in Christ in a highly polarized culture. This may hold out hope for reaching the next generations, who are suspicious of church and organized religion (in part because of its divisiveness and hypocrisy), and who see issues of human sexuality and marriage differently than previous generations.

As with all of the scenarios, there are challenges and weaknesses to this option as well. After some churches leave the denomination, would there be a large enough mass of people left in the RCA to have a sustainable future? What would the impact be for the local and regional relationships of churches, if churches choose to join different classes and regions? Would allowing churches and classes to choose their classis or region create further divides, fragmentation, and silos? If the RCA allowed for differing views on human sexuality and marriage, what would the impact be on reaching racial/ethnic minorities? If paying assessments continues to be a tension point for those who are more conservative on these issues, can we reduce the assessments or limit them to go toward supporting staff, programs, and initiatives that unify us like church renewal, church planting, and global mission? And as we give emphasis to increasing the capacity for greater emotional health and spiritual maturity, can we get enough people and churches to participate in order to move the needle and really change the culture of the RCA? How long will this take?

Conclusion

While this scenario of staying together may be the least expensive and simplest of the three scenarios, staying together may also require the hardest work. Whatever form this scenario takes, even if there is realignment of churches and regions, it will still require the deep work of personal and corporate transformation, increased emotional health, and spiritual maturity. It will require us to learn how to show up together in a way that breaks out of our autopilot ways of reacting to anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. But it also could be the path that brings about the greatest change in us as a denomination and leads to our most profound public witness in a cultural moment when division and polarization pollute the air we breathe.

What if the RCA really could show our culture, and the broader world, a different way?

SCENARIO 2: RADICAL RECONSTITUTING AND REORGANIZATION

At this point in our life and history together as a denomination, we find ourselves at a crossroads. The second possible scenario for the RCA’s future that we have been tasked with considering is to radically restructure the leadership and organization of the denomination to enable Christians with diverse beliefs, commitments, and missional practices to work harmoniously together under a denominational “umbrella.” Radically restructuring the denomination raises many issues to consider carefully and many questions that must be asked and answered.

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3 In their book *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (B&H Publishing Group, 2011), Thom and Jess Rainer found that the majority of millennials they interviewed see nothing wrong with same-sex marriage and have a high level of tolerance for others who are different. Even those who hold to a more traditional view of marriage tend, on a whole, to be more tolerant of peers who see this differently.
What Cannot Change

As our team considered what was “on the table” for this scenario, we identified a few non-negotiables. Throughout its history, the RCA has been characterized as missional, Reformed, and confessional with a presbyterian governance structure. Our team considers these characteristics non-negotiable; they must also be present in a restructured denomination. Further, the RCA’s commitments to global mission, church multiplication, and care for missionaries and ministers (through the Board of Benefits Services, retirement benefits, insurances, etc.) must continue.

A restructured RCA should also address the cultural forces and trends that are impacting ministry now and into the future. Thinking and planning forward, our organizational and leadership structure should be streamlined and flexible enough to respond to opportunities in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous context in which we do ministry.

What Must Change

Understanding the historical strengths of the RCA and the current cultural and ministry contexts also helps us identify the things that can and should change.

What must change in order for the RCA to be faithful and effective in twenty-first-century cultural and ministry contexts? Our team believes that any restructuring should address both the unity and the purity of the church, and should eliminate redundancies and misalignments where there are unclear lines of responsibility and accountability. Streamlined organizational and leadership structures must empower and promote effective ministry rather than hinder it.

So, what is on the table? After researching and developing possible ways to restructure the denomination, we include the following changes in this scenario: eliminating unnecessary or redundant structural components, clarifying and simplifying organizational leadership lines, maximizing available equipping resources at the lowest possible level, maximizing networking relationships across congregational and denominational boundaries, and creating a variety of partnerships with denominations and parachurch organizations to further mission at all levels.

Scenario 2 Overview

After considering the historical, cultural, contextual, qualitative, and quantitative data, our sub-team has developed three possible alternatives for a restructured RCA. We have done significant research on all three alternatives, but we will focus primarily on the third (2C) as the most viable (the other two will continue to be researched).

Alternative 2A: Affinity Silo Structure (Three Mini-Denominations)

This alternative would create three “affinity silos” (conservative, progressive, centrist), allowing distinctive theological views and practices to coexist within the RCA structure. Congregations and classes would join one of the three. Essentially, the organizational and leadership structure would be divided into three mini-denominations, either with or without the denominational umbrella. (We are also researching how this alternative could be done in collaboration with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.) This concept might require less effort than the others to restructure, but it would likely form an uneven or imbalanced structure. It would be unlikely that we would have an even
distribution of churches and classes with three options. This structure would mandate
affinity classes within the affinity silos. We are still researching it.

**Alternative 2B: Denomination–Classis Structure (Eliminate Regional Synods)**

This alternative would eliminate regional synods but preserve much of the RCA’s current
structure, including classes and the General Synod. The judicatory responsibilities of the
regional synod would transfer to the General Synod, which could create imbalances in
decision-making power that would need to be carefully addressed. This alternative scenario
would achieve many of our restructuring goals, while requiring minimal organizational
and leadership restructuring. Staffing and resourcing for missional ministry would be
centralized in the denominational staff. Affinity classes are possible within this option but
not mandatory.

**Alternative 2C: Networks (Larger Affinity Groups, Formed around Prioritized
Mission)**

In this scenario, on which we will focus the rest of our attention, the General Synod would
function as an umbrella structure for approximately eight groups, or “networks.” Current
regional synods and classes would be “compressed” into formal ministry networks, which
would be staffed, resourced, and accountable for missional ministry within their bounds.
These networks would be formed by a combination of geography and affinity to maximize
the unity of mission and ministry strategies. While the entire denomination would be united
around the priority of mission, networks would be united in a more localized missional
focus and strategy. For example, one network might focus on evangelistic outreach and
the formation of new church plants as a disciple-making process. Another network might
focus on social justice ministries and serving their neighbors as their primary missional
identity. The network structure allows flexibility in the expression of our core identity as a
confessional, Reformed, and missional denomination.

Three components would facilitate network formation: affinity, decentralization, and
community-building. Through **affinity**, networks would define their focus and missional
emphases (within the bounds of the RCA Standards of Unity). There would likely be
a variety of theological beliefs, practices, hermeneutical approaches, and liturgical
preferences. Congregations would affiliate with the network best aligned with their
missional identity. **Decentralization** means that staffing and resources would be directed
to the networks, more than to higher levels. **Community-building** means that networks
could then cooperate across congregational, network, and denominational bounds (with
other congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations) for the benefit of all
involved. This, in particular, addresses the opportunities for churches across the spectrum
to work together across geographic, financial, and size boundaries.

**Functions of the General Synod**

In this network structure, the focus on missional ministry would be at the network
level. The General Synod would exist to equip and support network ministry. We think
denominational staff could be reduced to one primary ministry staff person in each essential
area (e.g., leadership development, discipleship, church multiplication, and outreach/
mission) to oversee ministry equipping, direction, and support. However, most ministry
staffing and resourcing would need to shift to the network level in order to maximize
flexibility, responsiveness, contextualization, and accountability. Denominational support
and operations staff could remain essentially unchanged in order to facilitate the RCA’s
core commitments to global mission, church multiplication, and care for missionaries and
ministers.
To accomplish this, significant changes to the RCA’s polity and to the Book of Church Order (BCO) would be required. The BCO would serve to address the issues, beliefs, and practices on which we are unified, the markers that identify us: missional, Reformed, confessional, and presbyterian in governance. These agreed-upon common commitments would be the only things requiring decision-making at the denominational level, and the body making those decisions would be composed of representatives of the networks (similar to the way the current General Synod is composed of delegates from classes and regional synods). At the network level, these common commitments would be worked out in ways unique to each district. Things that could be determined by the networks rather than by the BCO or General Synod include network guidelines and structures for the implementation and execution of a common vision and mission.

In this scenario, General Synod gatherings would probably be less frequent, perhaps every two or three years, since the overwhelming majority of ministry decisions would be made at the network level. Most synod work would focus on what unites us and our expression of those elements. No changes to real property guidelines would be necessary, but they are possible with a network structure.

Additionally, in this scenario, the General Synod Council would need to change significantly. We think that representatives of each network could form the denominational leadership body. They could focus more on strategic leadership than on management of issues, since polity issues would be resolved at the network level.

Functions of the Networks

In the “Network Model,” ministry staff (e.g., leadership development, discipleship, multiplication, and outreach/mission) would be located within each network. Networks would have similar staffing, mirroring our core missional commitments while emphasizing each network’s unique missional emphasis. General Synod would form new networks in coordination with existing networks, while congregational transfers and network affiliation (affinity choices) would be handled by networks.

Network assemblies would be composed of representatives of each congregation: ministers, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons. Networks could establish their own annual gatherings (assemblies or conferences) focused primarily on training and equipping leaders and congregations with a secondary focus on other business to set the network’s missional priorities and plan for the year. The decentralized and unique network identities would allow greater diversity of expression and thought.

Each network would determine its own unique expression of those characteristics, supplementing the denominational BCO with bylaws that identify and regulate the implementation of the network’s unique characteristics. Representatives to the denominational leadership body would come from the network assemblies.

Additionally, networks would be responsible for all credentialing processes and decisions regarding potential ministers and commissioned pastors. Each network would establish its own criteria in conjunction with the core educational criteria established by the denomination.

How Might Restructuring Impact Us?

On the surface, this version of the restructuring scenario seems to involve the most work and the most pain to accomplish; the change—and thus the loss—involves in Scenario 2
is dramatic. However, on closer examination, this scenario could also provide great benefit in return for the obvious work and pain required to implement it.

The impact of the restructuring scenario could be widespread and deep. Almost every person and every program of the RCA has the potential to be impacted, and many would experience the pain of disorder, confusion, and questioning as the process works itself out. Because the initial pain and workload seem daunting, the denomination would need to focus on the long-term gains over the short-term consequences.

The first, most obvious pain would result from the disorder, confusion, and questioning that come with significant change initiatives. Yet, our sub-team believes that those who persevered through the initial stages of restructuring would see the benefits of dramatic change as the denomination learned new ways to lead, relate, and collaborate. Long-term benefits of restructuring include the possibility of greater responsiveness in our structure, new perspectives on how to accomplish our mission together, increased understanding of our identity and commonalities, and increased effectiveness through our willingness to ask hard questions.

Impact on Individuals

As you consider all three of the Vision 2020 Team’s draft scenarios, we ask you to think about how this option would impact not only organizational structures but also real people; at its foundation, restructuring is a choice that would need to be made, supported, implemented, and experienced by individuals. Every individual would need to choose whether to invest in the restructuring scenario or opt out. Individuals making the choice to restructure would likely create networks of committed people for mutual support, encouragement, and communication.

That said, those same individuals would probably also experience pain and loss. They could experience frustration with the inevitable delays as the change was implemented; we estimate that implementing a restructuring scenario would take three to five years. In the interim, people might also question and second-guess some of the proposed results or outcomes that were not perceived as beneficial at first. They might interpret the flexibility of the new organizational structure as uncertainty, and the widespread informal networking as a lack of order. However, the most intense and painful experience of restructuring would probably be at the congregational level, as each church decided which network to affiliate with. Without knowing the details of how implementation would work, we are fairly sure that congregations and leaders would be faced with both good choices and tough choices. Although the intent would not be to force congregations to make divisive choices, there would likely be pain involved in the process of affiliation as a congregation’s identity was matched with a network. If this scenario were chosen, we believe the denomination could help people embrace it and navigate the changes by contrasting the new, flexible, decentralized, and responsive structure with our current structure, which serves to control a disparate and distant organization.

Impact on Outside Bodies

If this scenario were to be adopted and the network option pursued, we think it likely that the RCA’s relationships with Formula of Agreement (FOA) partners and Reformed bodies and councils would not be greatly impacted since the denomination’s Reformed and confessional identity would remain unchanged. Ecumenical partnerships and ministers serving in FOA churches would require no change unless a network chose to modify how they interact with other denominations. Ministers in FOA churches could choose to affiliate with a network that affirmed the ecumenical relationships.
We believe RCA relationships with mission organizations and other parachurch ministries would also not change since those relationships are supported through denominational offices—mission, multiplication, outreach, etc.

**Tough Questions, Honest Conversations**

Clearly, restructuring raises numerous critical questions that would need to be answered prior to and during implementation. For example, if we adopted the network option, how would the RCA initially form each network? Would that affiliation be completely voluntary? How would we create networks of approximately equal size—or would size not matter? How would the networks be kept accountable to the denomination? What are the critical unknown questions and issues that we would need to identify and address before we could implement a radical restructure?

**Impact on Congregations**

Although the restructuring process would require tough choices and commitments to change, the sub-team researching this scenario is intent on finding ways to provide a denominational home for all or most RCA congregations. As we continue to do our work, we will continue to look for ways to help congregations avoid the either/or choice of staying in the RCA or leaving. (However, regardless of, and perhaps because of, the work and pain involved, we should be ready to lose some congregations that cannot or do not want to endure the process.)

In some ways, structural reorganization is one of the most complex scenarios before us, and we would like to reiterate that there are still several options within this scenario for us to research. If this scenario were to be chosen, reorganization (in whichever form it took) would require significant patience, perseverance, and cooperation at every level. During the time of transition, there would be much uncertainty, and lines of communication would need to be clear and consistent. Although the organizational pain might tempt some to forego the process of change, focusing on the goals of a better future could help people persevere.

As our denominational leadership structure changed, congregations would need to maintain constant cooperation and coordination within the existing structure. Obviously, these changes would take time and wouldn’t take effect without transitional processes. Part of the pain would come from learning to relate to one another in new ways as we grew into our new structure. We would need to ask questions of one another throughout the process, not expecting every answer to be provided in advance. Many details would need to be worked out along the way. If this scenario were to be chosen, we believe this would be possible, by God’s grace.

**SCENARIO 3: GRACE-FILLED SEPARATION**

The RCA is at a crossroads. There are several choices before us, including the third scenario we have been tasked with considering, which is “grace-filled separation.” In order to forecast the possible impacts of separation, our team considered historical, statistical, and relational data. There is yet much research to be done, but based on what we have seen so far, we believe the impacts of separation would be profound. That said, we believe the impacts of being grace-filled in our separation would be even more profound.
Grace-filled

In our sub-team’s work together, we debated passionately about what it means to be grace-filled in this specific context of possible separation. We agreed that grace from God is a free, unmerited gift (Ephesians 2:8-9), and that grace between human beings involves mutual benefit. It is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6). It is being sure our conversations about each other are filled with grace (Colossians 4:6). It is doing good to all, but especially those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:10). It may take the form of forgiveness, generosity, or compassion. It is always unearned and always costly. Grace does not take, but it gives lavishly from an open heart.

However, after that agreement, we found ourselves at odds with each other on how grace might be given and experienced in our current situation. Does it mean that we see the image of God in the “other”? Does it mean staying together? Does it mean that we separate and keep our assets? We decided to hold our agreements and our differences in tension in this narrative.

Options

Below are some of the ways we could see “grace-filled separation” playing out. To be clear, our sub-team believes that if the grace-filled separation scenario were to be chosen to be recommended to General Synod 2020, we would advocate for all the theological options within the scenario to be presented at the same time. We see it as the prerogative of this group to recommend a structure. It should be up to General Synod 2020 to choose the theology.

First, we considered the option of separation without doctrinal clarification. In other words, the RCA would maintain current positions and make provision for anyone to leave who wishes. We spent much time researching the impact of this option and came to the conclusion that it is a non-starter in the conversation about separation. It would basically amount to doing nothing, a concept that is considered in Option 1A of the first scenario. We will not cover that option here. That leaves us with three options, summarized here:

Option 3A: Theologically Moderate; Make Provision for Those Who Wish to Leave

This option is a determination that the RCA is theologically moderate (living in the tension) on issues of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously.

Considerations of this option:

- This would require developing a theologically moderate position that determines to live in the tension between polarities and makes space for differing viewpoints.
- It would require amendments to the Book of Church Order (BCO).
- Would adopting a moderate position safeguard that a split wouldn’t happen again?
- This does not address other underlying issues and theological differences.
- We would still need a radical change of attitudes for those who remain to be able to interact in a grace-filled way toward each other and toward those who leave.
- What would happen to those who leave? Would they be assisted in their discernment? How would assets be divided?
- This option does not address the need for discipline or enforcement. How would the moderate membership be regulated?
Option 3B: Theologically Traditional; Make Provision for Those Who Wish to Leave
This option is a determination that the RCA holds to a theologically traditionalist view of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously.

Considerations:

- This would require *BCO* amendments.
- Would clarifying traditional theology safeguard that a split wouldn’t happen again?
- This does not address other underlying issues and theological differences.
- We would still need a radical change of attitudes for those who remain to be able to interact in a grace-filled way.
- What would happen to those who leave? Would they be assisted in their discernment? How would assets be divided?
- This option does not address the need for discipline or enforcement. How would the traditional membership be regulated?

Option 3C: Theologically Progressive; Make Provision for Those Who Wish to Leave
This is a determination that the RCA is theologically open and affirming on issues of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously.

Considerations:

- This would require *BCO* amendments.
- Would clarifying progressive theology safeguard that a split wouldn’t happen again?
- This does not address other underlying issues and theological differences.
- We would still need a radical change of attitudes for those who remain to be able to interact in a grace-filled way.
- What would happen to those who leave? Would they be assisted in their discernment? How would assets be divided?
- This option does not address the need for discipline or enforcement. How would the progressive membership be regulated?

Each of these options would require the RCA to develop an orderly process that supports the logistics of separation. We envision a process in which the entire denomination is collaboratively involved in deciding on a mutually beneficial strategy for separation, with multiple voices at the table, and in which members, churches, classes, and regions are helped in their discernment and next steps. Any process we choose will also require stamina, since even separation involves polity and procedure changes, which would take time.

When we envision a future in which the RCA splits into two or more distinct organizations, we see a landscape filled with people, stories, history, relationships, convictions, questions, joys, and sorrows. We realize that many of the impacts we outline here could feel like joy to some and sorrow to others. Even within our own sub-group, we expressed conflicted feelings about some of these outcomes. For that reason, we will try not to comment on what we feel personally about the impacts, but to try to present them as objective potential realities. In each section, we will also consider what it could look like to be grace-filled in the way we handle ourselves.
Statistics and Stories

In an online survey completed by close to 4,000 people earlier this year, RCA members were asked to rank the three Vision 2020 scenarios in order of preference. For our purposes, we will focus on the separation scenario. Thirty-eight percent chose grace-filled separation as their first choice, 20 percent chose it as their second choice, and 42 percent as their third choice. About half of respondents said that the divisions in the RCA distract us from mission and ministry. However, opinion was divided on whether the theological differences in the RCA are too great for us to partner together on ministry: 24 percent agreed that the differences are too great, and 23 percent disagreed. Forty-seven percent seemed hopeful and said that we have overcome division in the past and we need to trust Christ to help us do so again. On the question of whether diverse perspectives in the denomination are more of a strength than a weakness, 21 percent agreed that it is a strength, and 29 percent disagreed.

While we cannot include them as proven statistics, there also exist what we call the “grapevine narratives.” Throughout the RCA, conversations are being had about the future of the RCA. In a recent report to GSC, the Council of Synod Executives shared their impressions of the future. Based on what they have seen and heard in their regions, they believe it is possible that if the RCA does not make some sort of change, a large percentage of the Heartland, Great Lakes, Mid-America, Far West, and Canadian regions will withdraw their membership from the RCA. The executives said they understood that this would not be solely because of disagreements around human sexuality, but also because of the deeper roots from which such issues rise (e.g., biblical interpretation), which have never been adequately addressed. They also shared that there are many congregations, classes, and regions that wish to stay and would be impacted if and when others leave. Many other congregations could seek out bodies and affiliations with which they feel theologically and missionally aligned.

The Impact on People

Real people would be impacted by a separation. There would certainly be a loss or a drastic change of jobs for RCA staff, missionaries, regional executives, and classis leaders—anyone employed through the current denominational system—and on their families’ finances. Being grace-filled would require looking at the financial implications of generous severance packages.

There would be an impact on funding for local and global missionaries and their projects. Perhaps a split would mean a shrinking of the breadth of missional impact that the RCA has enjoyed throughout the world. Or perhaps it would mean increased partnerships, as the potential mission partners who have been waiting for us to clarify our theological positions would now feel that they could join us (or that they can choose which body to join).

Ministers of Word and sacrament and students pursuing ordination would also be impacted. Ministers would likely need to choose the body into which their accreditation would be transferred. Some might be glad to do so, and some might not. We do not know the impact of this on their pensions and benefits nor on their current positions in their local churches. Students would also need to choose which organization to join and might be impacted in this choice by their current affiliation with a college or seminary that was not in alignment with their new denominational home. Again, some students might be glad for the choice, and others might not.

The RCA seminaries and colleges, which have historically tried to take a theological
middle road, might also be forced to choose a “side” and might lose funding and students as a result. On the other hand, it is possible that those who were waiting for the seminaries and colleges to take a clearer position would now enroll more freely. We also believe parachurch organizations, like the RCA camps and their staff, would be impacted, though we are not yet sure how.

Ecumenical partners would certainly experience the change. Currently, we have a voice in the ecumenical world as one of the oldest denominations in North America. We put our name behind ecumenical movements for justice and peace, working alongside other major denominations to make change in the world. We do not know how our ecumenism would look if we were to split into two or more smaller denominations. Perhaps we would lose some of the strength that we currently employ to work with others toward the common good. But perhaps we would also gain new partners who had been waiting for us to clarify our positions.

While several of these impacts on people have the potential to appear negative, it is also true that many RCA members are considering the possible blessings of a denominational split. Separation into two or more entities has the potential to reduce (at least temporarily) much of the anxiety we currently feel around topics on which we disagree. Most would affirm that our denomination has lost time and energy by focusing on these topics. Some feel that a separation will free people up to pursue mission and ministry unencumbered. A split could mean stronger theological positions for both groups, which would make it easier for others to choose to join or partner with us. Church plants would also have clarity on what they are joining.

Whichever path we take, we know that the impact on people will be dramatically influenced by how we treat one another: with grace, or with selfishness and fear. What does “grace-filled” mean in our human interactions? Some would say it means allowing churches to take property and assets when they leave, while others would say it means having the humility and open-heartedness to forgive. Some believe it’s a call for us to listen with love, respect, and dignity. Others say it is releasing one another from structures and relationships that have bound us to each other. In all of this, we must guard against the mentality of “winners” and “losers,” which can lead to pride and shaming, neither of which is grace-filled. And we must provide time and space for confession and repentance, acknowledging that we’ve all had a role in the brokenness of the system.

While we might struggle to find a common vocabulary of grace, we do know what it is not: it is not harming one another, and it is not fear. Perhaps “grace-filled” means that we wish one another well and act for one another’s well-being. In that case, it is not about what we get, but about what we give. We believe that the world and the global church are watching how we do this. If we are grace-filled, it will be a testimony to the grace of God. If we are not, it will strengthen the narrative many people tell about a church that does not embody Christ.

Financial Impact

Separation would have impact on finances. It would mean the loss or reduction of assessments, meaning the reduction of funding for staffing, programs, resources, supports, and initiatives. That said, as far as we know, assessments cover only one-third of RCA operating costs. In 2018, contributions and grants covered another 52 percent, and 15 percent was funded primarily through investment earnings and fees for services. Separation would impact each of these categories.
There would also be the loss or dramatic change of funding for initiatives like the Church Growth Fund (CGF) and an impact on churches that have invested in it. The CGF currently only allows loans to churches within the RCA. Changes would need to be made and approved if any of the churches that now have loans were to become part of a denomination other than the RCA.

Some people have asked if churches could take their buildings and assets with them if they leave the denomination. For many churches, this would be a great gift, as it would ensure future financial viability. For other churches, ownership of their building would not be a gift, as some historic churches are currently supported by endowments and are encumbered by the need for expensive upgrades. On the other hand, it could be seen as a loss to the classes, which would normally receive those buildings and assets. Some churches and classes might experience financial benefit as they separate from a large denominational infrastructure or the denominational infrastructure becomes smaller or more efficient. The question of who owns buildings and properties has a financial impact at all levels and will likewise be felt differently at each level and in each region.

What does “grace-filled” look like in the way we handle finances in a separation? It would mean a shared financial commitment for the transition (e.g., churches commit to fund missionaries, etc., for several years). The impact of building ownership must also be considered (some churches would want to take their building with them, and others would not). Some think that “grace-filled” should mean that we waive BCO requirements for churches that want to leave, especially regarding property and permissions. Others are not so sure about that. It seems “grace” should be two ways: grace toward the churches that separate (making their burden as light as possible), and grace toward the classes and the denomination (making their burdens as light as possible). If separation is the chosen path, imagine how God-honoring it would be if everyone looked out for the needs of everyone else in love.

Political and Social Implications

In addition to relational and financial impacts, there would be political and social impacts to separation. First, as has been mentioned before, we believe the world and the global church are watching how we do this. Many other denominations have gone through separation before (with great pain and loss). Others are cautious about partnering with us until we figure this out. Still others are wondering about the viability of denominations in general: could our split provide new para-denominational or post-denominational options for the future?

Socially, the energy currently spent on this topic could be freed up for mission and ministry. Our personal crisis has caused us to focus inwardly. Perhaps a separation would free us to engage more socially again, for restoration of the world to God’s design. (On the other hand, some have wondered whether homogeneity is an illusion that does not last. How do we ensure that a future disagreement doesn’t lead to another split?)

Politically, the RCA is involved in justice initiatives (e.g., refugees, immigrants, nuclear disarmament, #wearespeaking), to which our size and historicity lend strength. We do not know the potential outcome of separation on our social-political involvement. Would we lose our political voice? Or would each of the new organizations created by a split feel more freedom to focus with specificity at the political level?

What would it look like to be “grace-filled” to our social-political commitments, in the midst of separation? Among other impacts, it would mean a commitment not to disparage
those with whom we disagree. And it would mean deliberately and intentionally setting a contrasting example to how the world is currently handling differences.

**Spiritual Impact**

The spiritual impacts of separation are many. On the one hand, splitting into two or more new organizations could free the divergent groups to explore their own spirituality and to adopt their own practices of ministry in the ways they feel called. Currently, some say they feel hindered by being part of a body that allows spiritual and ministerial practices with which they are at odds. Many say that our entire denomination is under the displeasure of God for allowing such spiritual and practical divergence. Others say that we are blessed by God for allowing such diversity. We believe this is a prime time for the RCA to humbly acknowledge how emotionally and spiritually unhealthy we have been in dealing with these issues in the past and thus use this as an opportunity to ask the Holy Spirit to move among us in new and fresh ways of healing.

The spiritual impact on congregation members would be profound. While some churches tell us that they would be split down the middle by a denominational separation, others long for a separation so that their whole congregation could join one organization and feel a greater integrity with themselves. A split affects not only our congregational relationships (congregation members often feel like family) but also our ecclesiology. What does it mean to be the church? Some want to wash their hands of the Christian tradition when they encounter the ugliness of division. Others believe that the true church needs to remain pure. How would a separation impact our theology of unity in Christ? For some, alignment with those who are likeminded might strengthen their theology. For others, separation is untenable, and division is theological heresy.

**Spiritually speaking, what would it look like to be “grace-filled” in separation?** It would mean taking seriously Paul’s analogy of the church as a body as put forth in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. We may be as different as an eye is from a foot, but only if we recognize the “other” as Christian, as a necessary part of the global body of Christ, with our Lord as the Head, and only if we live this out in agape love, will we be healthy and of use.

**Conclusion**

The impacts of grace-filled separation would be profound—on people, finances, our social-political involvement, our spirituality, and ultimately, on the kingdom of God. The impacts of separation would be felt differently by different people. The same impacts would be felt as joy and faithfulness to some, and as sorrow and shame to others. There are many impacts left unnamed and unexplored because of the bounds of this document.

One thing we know: if we must split, we think that our ability to do it with grace would be more profound than our reasons for separating. **Let us be clear: we cannot split unless we can do it with costly grace.**

For that reason, we have outlined several ways to help us prepare faithfully for this scenario:

1. **Foster healthy and “messy” dialogue between now and General Synod 2020,** in which we practice discussing our differences (and our potential separation) with grace. These dialogues could use the structures we already have, including our racial/ethnic councils, classis meetings, Room for All and the Gospel Alliance, commissions and task forces, seminaries and college faculty, and regional synods.
2. Find ways to pastorally assist people through the spiritual and emotional impacts of separation. How do we help RCA members navigate the pain, grief, and anger of loss? How do we make space for lament?

3. Foster emotional health, including the skill of being both defined and connected. We believe there are ways to be reconciled to one another in Christ, even in separation.

4. Train facilitators to help churches with discernment and the difficult conversations that will be necessary for decisions to be made.

5. Reframe “success” together: How many of us would feel that separation is a failure? How many of us would blame others for the loss of the RCA? And how can we help redefine the best possible outcomes? If success isn’t keeping status quo, and it isn’t “winning” in the current conflict, then what is it?

6. Work to identify the varying mental models (or definitions) at work in the RCA, including mental models of change (is change good or bad, exciting or shameful?), of unity (do we mean uniformity, unanimity, or staying together in our differences?), of biblical interpretation (inerrant, infallible, literal, dynamic?), and of grace (do we mean seeing the image of God in each other and forgiving one another, or letting churches keep their assets?). We need to surface our differing mental models so that we can better understand why and how we are at odds.

7. Create a collaborative discernment process. What does discernment mean? How is it done in community? How will the denomination decide together on a theological option? How will we help members, churches, and classes make a decision? It is important that we agree together on a process for decision-making.

8. Create a collaborative implementation process. Whatever General Synod 2020 decides, an implementation process will need to be developed with input from RCA members, leaders, churches, classes, and other stakeholders. We propose that this process be orderly and be created with input from those who are impacted by it.

9. Keep prayer and Scripture at the forefront. What does it look like in practice to love our enemies? How does Jesus ask us to deal with those whose viewpoints are radically different from ours? What does grace require? What does truth require? What kind of prayers do we need to pray for one another right now?

We believe that there will be many challenges and impediments to this work: our fears, our desire to “win,” our varying levels of emotional and spiritual maturity, our skills at handling conflict, our differing understandings of the end goal, our unhealed hurts, our mistrust, and our cumbersome polity. That said, we also believe that if we can find a common definition of grace, and if we can choose together to be “grace-filled” in even the most difficult moments, then we would be able to separate in a way that is respectful of one another and honoring to God.

During General Synod 2019, delegates met in 16 separate feedback groups three times—one time for each of the three scenarios discussed in the preceding report. At the conclusion of the feedback process the following written report was presented to the General Synod and discussed during its evening meeting on Sunday, June 9, 2019.

VISION 2020 TEAM PRELIMINARY REPORT ON FEEDBACK GROUPS

Three times over two days, delegates participated in small groups and discussed each of the three scenarios in depth. Every group had a facilitator and a scribe. Members of the Vision 2020 Team reviewed all the feedback captured by the scribes, as well as verbal
summaries provided by facilitators. This is a high-level overview of the feedback that they heard from delegates, and the Vision 2020 Team will continue to process nearly a hundred pages of feedback.

The Vision 2020 Team heard these themes:

We—delegates—are getting present to the loss before us. It’s becoming real: institutional loss, relational loss, loss of certainty, loss of a shared sense of identity. There has been a shift this year, and we recognize that next year we’ll need time to process the pain. This will be an important part of the process.

We long for unity, and have no shared understanding of how to live together in the midst of difference, or even whether it’s right to do so. We do not agree on what unites us.

We are also getting present to the complexity. We’re realizing how hard this is, and we’re starting to let go of the idea that there’s an easy fix. Each scenario contains varying amounts of complexity. As it’s written, Scenario 2 raised the most questions of the three. Each scenario needs further development by the Vision 2020 Team.

The way we are showing up is different. Groups are making plans to stay in touch. Some groups were taking pictures together. We tried to be both defined and connected, and for the most part it worked. We showed up courageously, respectfully, ready to listen and to share. That made a difference. You made this General Synod different.

The Vision 2020 Team also heard these polarities:

Some of us see human sexuality as a primary issue and cannot imagine having room for “permissible difference”; some see it as a secondary issue and do not believe we should divide over it.

Some of us desire and really want us to stay together (and are sad and frustrated that we’re considering some kind of radical restructure or split); some do not believe we can stay together and are frustrated that we’re still trying to find a way to do so.

Some of us believe that our polity is outdated and getting in the way of moving forward; some of us believe that our polity remains important and dynamic and will help guide us forward.

Some of us believe that taking a clear stance on human sexuality (even if it leads to separation) is essential to our witness; some of us believe staying together and allowing for diversity of views is essential to our witness.

Some of us are exhausted and fatigued having the conversation about human sexuality; some of us feel frustrated that we haven’t had enough authentic dialogue around it.

Some of us believe we will not be able to stay together and do nothing without great loss and inevitable fracture; some of us look to our past and see the way we’ve weathered deep conflict before and believe we can endure this conflict as well.
Response to MGS 2018, OV 18-24, p. 153, Global Church Planters’ Leadership Collaborative

To urge the general secretary to explore possibilities for establishing a global church planters’ leadership collaborative to facilitate ongoing interactions between North American church planters and counterparts in selected countries where the RCA is engaged with indigenous global mission partners. The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

OV 18-24 came out of a proposal from 2018 General Synod president Lee DeYoung. In response, the Church Multiplication team, in partnership with Global Mission, is planning a summit in Orlando on January 15 and 16, 2020, which will lead into the Mission 2020 conference being planned by RCA Global Mission. Approximately 15 church planters from different continents will gather for mutual learning, inspiration, exploration of future partnerships, and discernment of God’s movement.


To urge the general secretary to help facilitate the launch of small church leadership collaboratives in at least three different RCA regional synods. Each leadership collaborative would seek to foster ongoing interactions among leaders of small churches (averaging fewer than 100 in worship). The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

Since the passage of OV 18-25 in June 2018, in response to a proposal from General Synod 2018 president Lee DeYoung, there has been a delightful positive buzz about the unique contributions of small churches in the RCA, and it has been a privilege for the Transformed & Transforming initiative of Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches to witness it.

The average worship attendance in North America is 75 people, and half the Christians on the continent will worship, pray, and serve in a church typically called “small.” Concurrent with the passage of OV 18-25, the release of the book *Small Church Essentials* by Karl Vaters, and the accompanying blog, “Pivot” ([www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters](http://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters)), added more weight to this conversation, giving pastors across the RCA literature to substantiate the statement that small churches are not defective big churches, but rather, they have their own place in the redemptive reign of God.

Over this past year, events have taken place, and cohorts have been formed across many of the RCA’s regional synods. The Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey, hosted an event with RCA staff, pastors from the Regional Synod of New York, and NBTS staff around the practical ecclesiology of the small church. Ongoing conversations about a longer-term process continue. The Regional Synod of Canada is currently hosting an online leadership collaborative, or learning circle, around Vaters’s book. This circle, led by Andy Bossardet, started in April 2019. The Regional Synod of Mid-America has already hosted two of these learning circles under the leadership of Chad Schuitema, a member of the Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches guiding coalition. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is hosting a multilingual learning community, facilitated by Andy Bossardet, around encouraging thriving congregations. This followed a classis event hosted by the Classis of Greater Palisades around the same topic. The Classis of Central Plains also hosted a classis event for small churches; a learning circle grew out of that event. The language of “leadership
collaboratives” may not be carrying through to 2019, but the spirit of encouraging and equipping smaller congregations certainly is. Thanks be to God.


W 18-2
To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and furthermore ensure that investigations into such allegations will result in protection and non-retaliatory behaviors toward the reporters; and To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistories, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation.

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

The GSC adopted GSC 18-38, “to instruct the general secretary to implement W 18-2 using current GSC staff resources within the limits of GSC authority.” In the fall of 2018, the RCA director of human resources and the coordinators for Women’s Transformation and Leadership and Local Missional Engagement met to coordinate and procure resources related to W 18-2.

The intended outcome was to provide resources that would be available at the regional synod, classis, and local congregation level. The work was pursued in three distinct areas: educational resourcing (including materials for worship, additional learning opportunities, and consultants/organizations for ongoing work), procuring existing sexual harassment policies from throughout the denomination, and providing an online, accessible platform for church leadership to find and select appropriate resources.

The combined resources provide individual congregations and classes with the necessary materials to address issues of sexual harassment and violence against others in their local contexts, and to create clear, consistent policies in the reporting and addressing of instances and patterns of harassment. In addition, the We Are Speaking site will either network or offer ongoing learning opportunities and experiences that fulfill the resolution’s goal of training churches and classes in creating environments of ministry that are safe from sexual harassment.

The RCA communication staff will have these online resources available during summer 2019. The site will include education materials, worship resources for local congregations, sample policies at the local, classis, and synod levels, and information on how to pursue a next step in ministry. The available resources will also coalesce with the We Are Speaking resources, which are informed from the ongoing work of Liz Testa, coordinator for Women’s Transformation and Leadership, and Eliza Cortés Bast, coordinator for Local Missional Engagement.
COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE RESPONSES TO ITEMS OF NEW BUSINESS

Three of the four items of new business presented to and received by the General Synod were retained by the Committee of Reference and then brought back to the General Synod for final disposition (the fourth was referred by the Committee of Reference to Western Theological Seminary).

In response to the item of new business regarding the establishment of an Office of Older Adult Ministry (see p.15), the General Synod Council serving as the Committee of Reference made the following recommendation:

**EC 19-13**
To not accept the request to establish an Office of Older Adult Ministry as new business. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
This does not meet the qualifications for new business as stated in the *Book of Church Order*.

In response to the item of new business concerning delegates to General Synod 2020 (see p. 15), the General Synod Council serving as the Committee of Reference made the following recommendation:

**EC 19-14**
To encourage that each classis and regional synod strongly consider sending the same pastor and elder delegates to General Synod in 2020 as were sent to General Synod in 2019. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Recommendation of the Vision 2020 Team facilitators
2. Recommendation of the General Synod president
3. To provide consistency between the Vision 2020 feedback groups of General Synod 2019 and those voting upon the recommendation of the Vision 2020 Team at General Synod 2020

In response to the item of new business concerning amending the method for amending the Book of Church Order (see p. 16), the General Synod Council serving as the Committee of Reference made the following recommendation:

**EC 19-15**
To adopt the following amendments to the newly adopted 2019 version of Section 2 of the “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures”:

Sec. 2
a. Amendments to the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship shall be made only upon adoption by the General Synod at a stated meeting, with recommendation to the classes for approval.

b. At least two-thirds of the classes shall approve a
proposed amendment in order to secure its adoption, except as provided in subparagraph c. Only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted are eligible to vote on the recommendation for approval.

c. A majority of the classes shall approve any proposed amendment needed to implement the 2020 General Synod’s response to the Vision 2020 Team’s final report in order to secure its adoption. Only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted are eligible to vote on the recommendation for approval. This subparagraph c. shall only apply to amendments approved at or before General Synod 2023.

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

Reasons:

1. The Committee of Reference has determined that this proposal qualifies as new business because it seeks to address a common concern which emerged from multiple Vision 2020 feedback discussion groups during General Synod 2019: “What if amendments required to implement the 2020 General Synod’s response to the Vision Team’s ‘final report with recommendations’ (MGS 2018, OV 18-23, p. 153), are approved by a majority of classes but by fewer than two-thirds?”

2. The committee submits this to the General Synod for consideration without comment.

A point of order was raised questioning the propriety of accepting the above item as new business. The president ruled that the point of order was not well taken. A motion was made and supported to appeal the ruling of the chair.

VOTED: To sustain the ruling of the chair.

A motion was made and supported as follows:

To refer this to the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance for report back tomorrow.

A motion was made and supported to recess for 10 minutes.

VOTED: To not adopt the motion.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the motion to refer.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL SYNOD

VOTED: To not cease debate.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt EC 19-15.

The following motion was made and supported:

EC 19-16
To direct the General Secretary, in consultation with the General Synod Council, to write a pastoral letter to the classes and congregations of the RCA, expressing the heart of this Synod regarding the two decisions that were made concerning the 2020 General Synod (returning delegates and majority vote of classes).

In the letter, we would suggest the following points be covered:

1. Our decisions were made with the understanding of the gravity of the situation in which we find ourselves as a denomination.
2. We want to honestly name that we felt anxiety as we debated and made these decisions.
3. Our decisions came at the end of a lengthy debate that was both vigorous and respectful.
4. We made our decisions fully aware that we were not making them on our own. We know the denomination will be joining us, as these decisions will go to the classes now. We ask the classes and congregations to prayerfully weigh the strengths and weaknesses of these changes.
5. We are committed to pray and to work toward discerning God’s preferred future in whatever ways we can this coming year, and we ask that the classes and congregations join us. (ADOPTED)

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt EC 19-16.