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
SCENARIO 1: STAYING TOGETHER

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 2045.¹ 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.²

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-Atlantic 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.3

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.

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—included 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 intensive 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.

Response to *MGS 2018*, OV 18-25, pp. 153–154, Small Church Leadership Collaboratives

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 Bossaret, 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 Bossaret, 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.