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.

**General Synod 2019**

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

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1. [www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-consensus-projects](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-consensus-projects)
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 metaphor of “family”? Or has our definition of “family” changed? And is there the desire, let alone the stamina, to be patient and keep working toward resolving the mistrust and tension that tend to divide us?

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

**Option 1B: Adopt a Centered-Set Paradigm**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

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3. In their book *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (B&H Publishing Group, 2011), Thom and Jess Rainer found that the majority of millennials they interviewed see nothing wrong with same-sex marriage and have a high level of tolerance for others who are different. Even those who hold to a more traditional view of marriage tend, on a whole, to be more tolerant of peers who see this differently.
What 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.

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—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 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 gracially.
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.