

## Report of the Commission on Church Order

**\*\*Note:** Because the General Synod will not meet in 2020, it will not be able to act on any recommendations contained in reports to General Synod 2020, though they remain in the reports for informational purposes. Reporting commissions, agencies, and institutions may submit these recommendations for consideration by the next session of General Synod.

**\*\*In consultation with the Commission on Church Order, because General Synod will not meet in 2020 to pass a final declarative vote on either amendments to the constitution of the RCA adopted by the 2019 General Synod and approved by two thirds of the classes or amendments to the bylaws of the General Synod adopted by the 2019 General Synod, a 2020 edition of the Book of Church Order will not be produced. The 2019 edition will remain current for the year 2020. Editorial changes indicated in this report will be reflected in the next updated edition of the BCO, anticipated to be in 2021.\*\***

### Responsibilities; Meetings

The General Synod's Commission on Church Order (CCO) is responsible for "making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the *Book of Church Order*" and for providing "advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the *Book of Church Order*" (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b [2019 edition, pp. 112–113]). To fulfill those responsibilities, the CCO met October 17–19, 2019, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and January 22–24, 2020, in Chicago, Illinois. The commission spent a portion of its January meeting conferring with the Vision 2020 Team, which was meeting separately at the same time and location. The CCO assisted the Vision 2020 Team by providing answers to polity-related questions and provided guidance on implementation of various possible scenarios. Additional communication—among the members and with the Vision 2020 Team—occurred by electronic means throughout the year.

This year, the CCO did not receive any referrals from the 2019 General Synod and received no requests for interpretation of the *BCO*. In this report, the commission makes only one recommendation, but also discusses other matters it worked on arising out of actions of the 2019 General Synod, questions raised by GSC staff in the course of their work, and items of interest encountered by the commission while carrying out its work.

### Discipline of a Member of a Local Church

Discipline of a member of a local church is discussed in *BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1. The section does not state that a charge must be filed to commence the disciplinary process beyond admonishment and rebuke. The commission concluded that the section should require that a charge be filed, and therefore presents the following recommendation:

#### Recommendation

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1 (2019 edition, pp. 79–80) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

#### *Sec. 1. Discipline of a Member*

All members of a local church are under its care and are subject to its government and discipline, as administered by its board of elders. The board of elders may, upon formal

presentation and trying of a charge, suspend from the privileges of membership in the church a member who persistently rejects its admonitions or rebukes. If a member fails to show marks of repentance after suspension, the board of elders may, with permission of the classis, proceed to excommunication. The board of elders shall publicly notify the congregation of its intention to excommunicate, and later, after a hearing, of its final action. The board may omit such public notification, if such omission will not impair the purposes of discipline and will best serve the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Such omission shall require a two-thirds vote of the board of elders.

### **Implementation of Amendments (if approved and declared effective) to “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures”**

During its spring meeting, the commission discussed the proposed amendments to the “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures” (BCO, 2019 edition, p. 75) that were adopted by the 2019 General Synod (MGS 2019, EC 19-15, pp. 115–116). If these amendments are approved by the required number of classes and declared effective by the 2020 General Synod, the commission is concerned about the process for their implementation. For example, how, when, and by whom should the determination be made that an amendment to the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship is “needed to implement the 2020 General Synod’s response to the Vision 2020 Team’s final report?”

After discussing various possible scenarios, the commission came to a consensus that a *specific recommendation should indicate, within its text*, that it purports to be a recommendation “needed to implement the 2020 General Synod’s response to the Vision 2020 Team’s final report.” This would allow the body to decide, by process of amendment, whether it believes that any particular action is indeed one which should pass under the proposed alternate route. It also avoids any later action by a commission, council, or staff, which, if known to the body (e.g., the General Synod or a classis), might have resulted in a different vote.

### **Commission on Theology Review of Doctrinally Substantive Matters**

The commission discussed a series of communications from the consistory of the Middlebush Reformed Church to, among others, the General Synod’s Commission on Theology, the General Synod Council, and current and past moderators of the GSC. The communications expressed concerns regarding the action by the 2018 General Synod (OV 18-21, MGS 2018, p. 148) to “commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry.” Among other things, the consistory wrote “to register [its] disappointment at the process resulting in this document being sent to the church at large. Our recollection is that proposed doctrinal statements or positions are vetted by the Commission on Theology *before* being sent to the church at large to allow the people tasked by General Synod to ensure appropriate exegesis and hermeneutics, consistency with RCA Confessional Standards, and reflection informed by previous General Synod statements.” In a subsequent email exchange between the pastor of the church and the moderator of the CCO, the pastor confirmed that the consistory was not making a formal request to take up the matter. Rather, it provided a copy of the correspondence to the CCO because the consistory’s concern was “broadly related to Church Order.”

During the fall joint meetings of the commissions, the moderator had a discussion with the moderator of the Commission on Theology regarding that commission sending a resource person to the advisory committees of the General Synod. The Commission on Theology agreed that it would send a resource person to provide advice to the advisory committees. Liz Brand (director of General Synod operations) has agreed to help facilitate this arrangement. If this arrangement does not appear to be effective, the commission may consider alternatives, such as recommending to the General Synod the creation of a separate advisory committee on theology.

## **Explanatory Tools**

A glossary for the *BCO* has been available on the RCA website, having been originally prepared in 2003 and most recently updated in 2012. Howard Moths, a current member of the CCO, confirmed that during his prior service on the commission, he prepared the glossary at the request of the commission after a discussion on how to make the *BCO* more accessible to the average RCA member. The CCO believes it appropriate and useful to the church to update the document more frequently and to cause it to be published with the paper version of the *BCO*. In so doing, the CCO does not intend the glossary to have constitutional authority, but like the explanatory notes to the disciplinary procedures, and the sections entitled “How to Use the *Book of Church Order*” and “An Introduction to the Book of Church Order,” it believes the glossary serves as a useful tool to regular users of the *BCO*.

The CCO wishes to thank Howard Moths for his work on the glossary. The glossary will now be included in both print and online version of the *BCO*. It will be located at the end of the *BCO*. The commission, and applicable staff, will ensure the glossary remains current each year.

In addition to updating the glossary, the commission also made updates to the section entitled “How to Use the *Book of Church Order*.”

## **Revisions to “The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament”**

At its spring meeting, the CCO adopted revisions to the RCA section of the document “The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” as established by “A Formula of Agreement.” Following adoption, it forwarded the revised document to the RCA’s ecumenical associate, Monica Schaap Pierce, for transmissions to the other parties to “A Formula of Agreement.” Additionally, the revised document was uploaded to the stated clerk private page hosted on the RCA’s website for use by the classes.

## **Editorial Changes to Book of Church Order**

1. GSC Communication and Production Services staff noted to the moderator that traditionally the formularies have used blanks to indicate places where information must be inserted, but the proposed new Formulary 17 instead uses brackets around a word or phrase to describe information that must be inserted. The commission agreed that all formularies should contain bracketed descriptions wherever language must be inserted.
2. The text of the *BCO* uses the term “Formulary” while the “References to the Minutes of General Synod” (which discusses Formularies beginning at page 169 of the 2019 edition) uses the term “Formula.” The commission discussed whether one of these two terms should be used consistently throughout the *BCO* (including such things as its

related tables, indexes, and references). The commission agreed that the term “Formulary” should be used in the “References to the Minutes of General Synod.”

3. The commission voted to delete an incorrect citation in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 5 regarding supersession of a consistory because of its close proximity to the section cited.
4. The commission agreed to eliminate from the guide captioned “How to Use the *Book of Church Order*” the reference to Faith Alive Christian Resources (and its related contact information) from the section describing how to acquire a copy of the book *Constitutional Theology* and the reference to the New York office from the section describing how to contact the commission.
5. The commission agreed to eliminate the word “the” from the phrase “candidate for the ministry” wherever it appears in the *BCO*. This will make the phrases consistent with the heading of *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11. Locations in the *BCO* affected by this editorial change are the Preamble; Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 11, Sec. 1 (2019 edition, p. 45); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 11, Sec. 2 (2019 edition, p. 45); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 11, Sec. 3 (2019 edition, p. 45); twice in Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 12, Sec. 1 (2019 edition, p. 46); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 12, Sec. 2a (2019 edition, pp. 46–47); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 11, Sec. 3 (2019 edition, p. 47); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 11, Sec. 4 (2019 edition, p. 48); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 13, Sec. 2 (2019 edition, p. 49); Ch.1, Pt. II, Art. 13, Sec. 3 (2019 edition, p. 49); Ch.1, Pt. IV, Art. 2, Sec. 8 (2019 edition, p. 68); and Formulary No. 1 (2019 edition, p. 131).
6. In Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1b, the commission agreed to delete “(hereafter “governing body”).”
7. In Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1c, the commission replaced “and it” with “which.”

### **Membership in Assemblies in More than One Denomination**

The stated clerk of the Classis of Pleasant Prairie asked at least two GSC staff members whether a minister of Word and sacrament may be a member of a classis in the RCA and at the same time be the member of a comparable entity/assembly in another denomination. The question was shared with the current moderator and a former moderator of the commission, and at the commission’s fall meeting was discussed by the commission.

Following its discussion, the commission believes that it is best that a minister be accountable to only one assembly at a time. The commission also acknowledges, however, that each situation is unique, and situations may arise where the desire for accountability to only one assembly may be outweighed by other considerations. Consequently, the commission does not currently propose any additions or amendments to the *BCO*, but encourages classes to act with caution in this area.

### **Election of Moderator and Secretary; Appointment of Corresponding Delegate to 2020 General Synod**

The commission elected Joshua Scheid to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2020. Additionally, the commission appointed Philip De Koster to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2020 General Synod.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to the work detailed in this report, the commission provided advice to the Vision 2020 Team, continued to review the *Book of Church Order* for possible amendments, and continued to be about its work in the service of Christ's church. The commission had no members whose terms ended in 2020.