

Report of the Commission on History

****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.****

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” (*MGS 2003*, R-41, p. 159). The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Sec. 5b [2019 edition, p. 113]) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the RCA,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is the commission’s 54th report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history. The transformation commenced:

- 2 years ago, when the General Synod installed Eddy Alemán as its general secretary, one of the first Latinos to lead a historic Protestant denomination in the United States;
- 10 years ago, when the General Synod adopted the Belhar Confession as a fourth Standard of Unity, making the Reformed Church in America the first North American denomination to do so;
- 22 years ago, when the General Synod installed the first woman professor of theology, Carol Bechtel;
- 27 years ago, when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president, Beth E. Marcus;
- 32 years ago, when the first woman of color, Bernita Babb, was ordained;
- 42 years ago, when the General Synod expanded RCA polity’s definition of “persons”;
- 50 years ago, when Sonja Stewart began her teaching career at Western Theological Seminary, the first woman to earn a doctorate and become a full professor;
- 52 years ago, when the General Synod renewed the RCA’s liturgies (and continues to do so today);
- 137 years ago, when the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions established *The Mission Gleaner* to “keep the women of the Church at home informed of the progress of the work on the field”;
- 150 years ago, when Mary Kidder founded Ferris Seminary for girls in Yokohama, Japan;
- 180 years ago, when the First Reformed Church was organized in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the home of Rev. Hart E. Waring, who came as a missionary from New York to form a “Reformed Protestant Dutch Church”;
- 205 years ago, when Rebecca Knox became the first woman to bequeath funds to New Brunswick Theological Seminary, benefiting indigent students;

- 207 years ago, when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since then;
- 246 years ago, when the church in America wrote to the Classis of Amsterdam requesting a professor of theology, recommending the appointment of Dr. John Henry Livingston, their last student from America;
- 392 years ago, when *dominie* (pastor) Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual congregation open to everyone.

Countless other transformations have occurred before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God's faithfulness and allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God's calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective which is not *just* a historical perspective, but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.

To do this work, the commission met on Friday, February 7, 2020, in New Brunswick, New Jersey; and in Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 17–19, 2019 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council); as well as communicating regularly via email.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 52nd year, has recently produced the following books:

- *A Constant State of Emergency* by Paul De Kruijff
- *Constitutional Theology (revised edition)* by Allan Janssen
- *Hope College at 150*, edited by Jacob Nyenhuis
- *Festschrift – Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Essays in Honor of Allan J. Janssen*, edited by Matthew van Maastricht
- *Festschrift – Before the Face of God: Essays in Honor of Dr. Tom Boogaart*, edited by Dustyn Keepers
(The practice of writing festschrifts was instituted by the Historical Series in 2014 to honor every General Synod professor who retires after serving ten years or more. The RCA's archivist, Russell Gasero, has made Travis West's essay, "Hospitality of the Heart", from *Before the Face of God*, and Daniel Meeter's essay, "Heidelberg and Westminster, especially on Worship", from *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, into individual e-publications for sale on Amazon after requests from courses at Western Theological Seminary and New Brunswick Theological Seminary, respectively.)
- A demand-publication version of John Coakley's history of New Brunswick Theological Seminary is now available on Amazon.

The commission also approved the following books, which are all in production:

- *Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York* by Francis Sypher
- *The Mission of Horace Underwood* by James Jinhong Kim
- *Global Grace Café at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey* by Elizabeth Estes

- *Reformed Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in 80 Documents* by James Hart Brumm

Beyond these approved projects, your commission is looking forward to a story about John Otte, medical missionary to China, by Linda Walvoord DeVelder; a history of the Warwick Conference Center by Una Ratmeyer; and a supplement to the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America* by Russell Gasero.

The commission, working with the RCA Archives and GSC Communication and Production Services, continues publishing the Historical Series under Reformed Church Press, which allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has been serving as general editor since July 1, 2018. Andrew Klumpp, currently a PhD candidate at the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University and a member of the commission, will conclude his service as associate general editor in June 2020. At our February 7, 2020, meeting, your commission unanimously appointed Jeff Chu as our next associate general editor for a five-year term, ending in February 2025. As of June 2018, Donald J. Bruggink serves as general editor emeritus. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of the Altamont, New York, Reformed Church and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the Congregational History Series.

As a courtesy, your commission, through the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, has prepared two gifts for all synod delegates. The first gift is a book of *The Church Remembers: Papers of the Commission on History, 1978–2019*. The second gift is a preview of James Hart Brumm's forthcoming *Reformed Reader*. Copies, which include a table of contents, introduction, and sample documents, will be made available during the plenary during which the commission's report is given. There will also be an opportunity to purchase a copy at a pre-publication discount as well as a list of other publications available.

Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with the RCA archivist, Russell Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee formed of commission members and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the Archives. He serves as production editor for the Historical Series and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries.

This year marks 42 years since the RCA first hired a professional archivist to look after the denomination's collection. His offices are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the Archives be not just a Dutch-American history resource, but a well of information for all of the cultural expressions which now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, Russell Gasero and the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management; with over 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing needs of the Archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the trustees of NBTBS pledged an annual grant of up to \$10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC), for each of ten years, to expand the work of the Archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. In just three years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, and video and audio tapes.
- Staff has been added to aid in the digitization projects.
- With new staff and equipment, documents from the Amsterdam Correspondence—some of the earliest records of the RCA—have been scanned for a major retranslation project; records from the Regional Synod of Canada, recently moved to New Brunswick so that they may be kept in long-term storage, relieve space issues for the Regional Synod—more than 80 boxes of material were processed within two months; and a pilot project has begun to provide low-cost digitization of significant records to local congregations.
- Some of the costs of transferring records to underground storage have been underwritten.
- New displays in Sage Library have enhanced programs for both NBTBS and the denomination and have helped publicize the Historical Series.

All of this has helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Advancement office and the Archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the Historical Series Revolving Fund, and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. While there are virtues in thrift, however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

Your commission has requested that the RCA Archives investigate the digitization of the *Magazine of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church* as a possible prelude to the full digitization of the *Christian Intelligencer*. The goal is to produce a quality, digital copy of both publications that is legible. Versions already exist of the *Christian Intelligencer*, but many of the microfilm pages have contrasting and lighting issues, making them virtually unusable. A part of this work would include digitizing the specific volumes that need to be enhanced. The RCA Archives will consider a partnership with the Reformed Church Center to procure a grant to fund the *Magazine of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church* project as well as the *Christian Intelligencer* project. Your commission will also seek the help of General Synod Council to arrange for cooperation with the Reformed Church Center in order to handle the reception and distribution of grants.

In addition, your commission has requested the RCA Archives procure Quark Express to prepare PDF versions of the *Church Herald*.

Your commission has also been informed of Russell Gasero's impending retirement, scheduled for June 2020. The Reformed Church in America owes him a debt of gratitude for his many years of faithful service.

Recommendation

That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:

WHEREAS Russell Louis Gasero grew up in Steinway Reformed Church, Queens, New York, and received a bachelor of arts degree from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, in 1973, and worked in the Archives of the United Nations in New York City for five years, doing distinguished work in one of the world's elite archival programs, and

WHEREAS, in 1977, the Commission on History, seeking to preserve the heritage and properly manage the records of the Reformed Church in America which had been stored in the library of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America since it had removed to New Brunswick, New Jersey, some 160 years earlier, and which had never received professional attention, received the approval of the General Synod to begin a professionally managed archival program and then proceeded to recruit and hire Russell Gasero to be the first archivist of the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS, in the ensuing 42 years, Russell Gasero has built the Archives of the Reformed Church in America from a collection of documents kept in closets at Gardner A. Sage Library into a comprehensive, fully accessible collection of documents, video media, and other artifacts, including over one-half mile of paper records stored in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, collecting and preserving the acts of apostles who make up the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS, during that time, he earned a master's degree from the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1981, and has continuously partnered with denominational staff, classes, synods, and consistories to faithfully preserve and catalogue their records, saving the Reformed Church in America and its agencies hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses—and even saving the acronym "RCA" for us—through timely accession of needed records that were anywhere from months to centuries old, and saving congregations untold thousands of dollars through such storage, and

WHEREAS he has partnered with RCA colleges to create internship opportunities, partnered with denominational staff members to create volunteer service opportunities, and visited scores of congregations and church groups, expanding the awareness of the whole church in the preservation of its history, and distinguished himself in the membership and leadership of professional groups and historical associations, including the Society of American Archivists, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, the American Association for State and Local History, the Dutch Cousins, and Beardslee Press, all helping to secure a bright future for professional archival work in the RCA and all of North America, and

WHEREAS he has served the Commission on History not only as consultant but as staff and as production editor for The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America,

helping make possible over 100 volumes in that series which enlighten and edify the entire church and scholars far beyond us and saving tens of thousands of dollars in that mission, and

WHEREAS he has worked with the faculty and administration of New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create a partnership with the Reformed Church Center, whereby scholarship is expanded, local congregations and classes are supported in their work, and a ten-year grant program has been established that is helping the Archives expand its work, digitizing records to make them more easily accessible well into the future and expanding its program at no expense to the assessment budget of the Reformed Church, and

WHEREAS he has attended more consecutive General Synods than any other person in the history of the Reformed Church in America, often driving countless items across the country to the meetings not only for the Office of Historical Services and the Historical Series of the RCA but also for other programs and agencies of the church, and bringing his wife, Maria, to many synod sessions to pitch in as volunteer labor, and

WHEREAS he has been a supportive presence to his staff colleagues for decades, and has become the living institutional memory of the RCA,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 214th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in stated session at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, the eleventh through sixteenth days of June in the year of our Lord two-thousand-twenty, gives thanks to God for the life and ministry of Russell Louis Gasero on the occasion of his required retirement and prays God's richest blessings on Russ and his wife, Maria, for the many years of their life ahead,

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the 214th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America declares Russell Louis Gasero to be archivist emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, and that the synod rise, in body or spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving.

There will be a time of celebration at this synod for everyone to thank Russell and to celebrate the continuation of this important ministry for decades to come. Your commission looks forward to meeting and working with the new archivist of the Reformed Church in America once that person is hired.

Being Informed by Past Transformations

In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes that "biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously."¹ History is so important to God, according to Buechner, that God initiated it, entered it, and has promised to one day "bring it to a serious close." In order to understand our past, which informs our present, the study of history becomes paramount. This is certainly true of Christian history as well as denominational

¹ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 38.

history. The past affects the present, and ultimately the future, confirming the age-old wisdom that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”²

Your commission acknowledges that not everyone enjoys reading history. Depending on the subject, it can feel distant, tedious, and irrelevant. And yet Christianity is a history-moored faith, instructing us and helping us gain perspective. Buechner, contrasting biblical faith with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, says, “history is not an absurdity to be endured or an illusion to be dispelled or an endlessly repeating cycle to be escaped. Instead it is for each of us a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere.”³

While the “somewhere” has been debated over the centuries, Christian history points to God’s unbending faithfulness and the reality that life has a direction—one where we are being led back to God, to our life’s source, and ultimately to wholeness. Life and faith are rooted in the mystery of God’s love, merging in surprising ways throughout history. What’s needed are eyes that see and ears that hear. “We want,” mused Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, “only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ.”⁴

Without question, discerning just how God operates throughout all of human history is a difficult discipline. It requires honest humility since we “see in a mirror, dimly”⁵ and have only a glimpse into the spiritual realm. We wait with eager anticipation for the time when we will see and understand and know God fully. Until then, we recall those haunting words spoken through the prophet long ago: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”⁶

Historically, ours is a faith that’s more interrogative and less doctrinaire.⁷ In the Reformed tradition, we’ve grown accustomed to dancing with our doubts, and we attempt to tackle those nagging existential questions which encompass a wide range of subjects. This work is always done best in community. Together we accomplish these things while also affirming those tenets that have traditionally united us as a Reformed church, as the body of Christ in North America:

- The wonder of creation;
- The humility of God in Jesus Christ;
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit;
- The miracle of forgiveness of sins;
- The gift of new life in communion;
- The call to the ministry of reconciliation;

² George Santayana. *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), p. 284.

³ Buechner, p. 38. He adds, “True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people, including the one whose soul is at stake, are looking the other way.”

⁴ Paul Tillich. *The New Being* (New York: Scribner’s, 1955), p. 18.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV.

⁶ Isaiah 55:8, NRSV.

⁷ Daniel L. Migliorie. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 2.

- The promise of the consummation of God's reign.⁸

We are confessional Protestants who adhere to a Trinitarian theology, and since the Protestant Reformation, we have stressed the belief that salvation is by grace through faith alone. When someone comes to faith, it is God who initiates that saving work. In addition, our churches are, and have been, non-hierarchical, self-governing congregations. The decision-making power resides primarily in the local church, in various times and places of relative autonomy. Our common beliefs and shared practices far outweigh the things that seek to divide us.

Your commission is fully aware of what's at stake as we consider our future as a Christian denomination. We are holding this tension with the rest of our brothers and sisters. The fracturing of the Reformed Church in America would be one more ecclesial tragedy. We remain hopeful—and pray—that it can be averted. After all, for 392 years the RCA has had a continuous ministerial presence in North America—148 years before the colonies gained independence from Great Britain. That is a remarkable fact. It means the RCA remains the oldest operating Protestant ministry in this country, without any interruptions since 1628.

Our history wouldn't even be possible without our willingness to tell it. We are people of a story, of an *experience* (Tillich), and we keep those cherished memories alive when we share our stories with others. The person who loses touch with their story is like the candle that has lost its wick, essentially losing purpose and significance. "Despite their individuality," writes historian Ronald Wells, "Christians find their true identity firmly rooted in a collectivity: We are not alone in this life but members one of another. Our collective membership in *God's* kingdom rests on a common affirmation of a story. Christians *are* Christians not solely because they made a 'decision for Christ' but because they became 'members incorporate' of Christ's body."⁹

We may have our differences, but those differences pale in comparison to what has united us over these many years. We overcame our quarrels during some very tense moments in our denomination's history. While some have left for new adventures, others have stayed the course, keeping their promise to "walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."¹⁰ The same can be said of many faithful churches. They too have made a similar promise during the installation of elders and deacons to "encourage and pray for them, to labor together in obedience to the gospel for the unity, purity, and peace of the church, the welfare of the whole world, and the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹¹

Our differences need not tear us asunder. Sailing together as a fleet of ships ("classis") through turbulent waters is something we have a long history of doing. It's what we are called to do with humility and grace. Ronald Wells elucidates this point: "Knowing the 'author of truth' gives us an advantage in knowing truth over our secular neighbors, but it does not ensure that we know the truth, which surely exists in the mind of God but comes ambiguously to us. Once in a while we experience moments of clarity, and for these we are grateful. But, since the images remain

⁸ Migliorie, p. 3.

⁹ Ronald A. Wells. *History Through the Eyes of Faith: Western Civilization and the Kingdom of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁰ *Book of Church Order*, Appendix: The Formularies, 3, p. 132.

¹¹ *Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, p. 49.

blurred, we should practice the Christian virtue of humility in what we claim to know and to have 'right' in our historical perspectives."¹²

Because we are people of a story, and because history is critical to our survival, your commission has included papers that we hope are illuminating. The first paper is titled "Significant Conflicts in the Reformed Church in America: A Brief History." This work discloses our checkered past, identifying several key moments when the future of our church looked bleak. This paper has been adapted from Dr. Lynn Japinga's book *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945–1994*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 77, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). For a helpful overview of RCA history, please read chapter one. Also, for a discussion of the synod of 1969, arguably one of the gloomiest times in our denomination's history, read chapter five.

With permission, we have included a portion of Dr. Joseph Small's paper, "One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church and Ecclesial Fragmentation." Dr. Small presented his paper to the community at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, on Monday, February 10, 2020. His work addresses the tension we hold between confessing our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church while at the same time living comfortably amid the rubble of divided churches.

Having served as director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Theology and Worship from 1989–2011, Dr. Small is now adjunct faculty at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary and church relations consultant to the Presbyterian Foundation. He serves on the boards of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, the Institute for Church Renewal, and the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity. He served as co-chair of the second and third rounds of the international Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue, and he has participated regularly in international ecumenical consultations sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the Centre International Reformé. He has also authored several books, numerous monographs, book chapters, journal articles, study series, and theological papers.

We conclude with a brief, but very important paper, addressing the 17-year model of the annual meeting between General Synod Council and commissions. The paper, "An Observation from Our Recent History," also includes a recommendation to the synod and the church.

SIGNIFICANT CONFLICTS IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA:

A BRIEF HISTORY

One of the tasks of the Commission on History is to "offer a historical perspective on matters being presented to General Synod." At this writing, we do not know what proposals will be presented to synod, but there have been many meetings and a considerable amount of anxious conversation about the future of the RCA.

As a denomination, we share a remarkable 392 years of history. For almost four centuries we have proclaimed the gospel, comforted the afflicted, and relieved the oppressed. Despite our

¹² Wells, p. 3.

relatively small size, we have had a significant impact in world missions and North American church life.

The RCA has had its conflicts, as all denominations do. Conflict is inevitable when passionate, committed people live and work closely together. They do not always agree on biblical and theological issues, or how the faith is best lived out in the world. The RCA has generally functioned as a big tent where we share a common core identity while holding different opinions about infant baptism, the ordination of women, and preferred worship style.

At times in our history, conflict was severe enough that it appeared to threaten the sense of denominational unity and connection.

In the 1720s and '30s, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, a Reformed pastor in New Jersey, created tension when he concluded that some of his parishioners were unconverted, and that some Reformed church ministers were arrogant and vain. He emphasized emotion, conversion, and piety, and called for a more rigorous and exclusive definition of what it meant to be a Christian. Some Reformed churches warmed to the idea of a more personal faith, but rejected the judgment and exclusion.¹³

This debate took a slightly different shape several decades later. In the 1750s and '60s, some ministers wanted more independence for the American church, while others wanted to preserve close ties with the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam. Months and even years could pass while the American churches waited for an opinion from Amsterdam. Some promising young men died at sea while traveling to or from the Netherlands for theological education. Independence for the American church seemed obvious to some, while others considered it defiant and reckless. The advocates of independence finally prevailed, in part because it was not realistic to continue the long-distance relationship.¹⁴

It is important to note that when colonists fought against the British in 1776, Reformed clergy and congregations were not all of one mind. Many supported the American cause, but perhaps a third of clergy and congregations were Tories who supported the British. They defended their action with Scripture, claiming that they were being obedient to their rightful rulers, as the apostle Paul instructed in Romans 13.¹⁵

By 1847, the Reformed Church was thoroughly Americanized. Congregations may have taken pride in their ethnicity, but "Dutchness" would not ensure their survival. The denomination was ecumenical and cooperated with other denominations in missionary and benevolent societies.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, a revival had occurred in some Reformed churches, but their piety led to some tensions with the state church (*Hervormde Kerke*) and eventually to a separation known as the *Afscheiding*. In the late 1840s, several Dutch pastors brought church

¹³ Donald J. Bruggink and Kim Nathan Baker, *By Grace Alone, Stories of the Reformed Church in America*, number 44 in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 48–49.

¹⁴ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 51–56.

¹⁵ John W. Beardslee III, "The American Revolution," in James W. Van Hoesen, ed., *Piety and Patriotism: Bicentennial Studies of the Reformed Church in America*, number 4 in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 21–27.

members to the United States. The Reformed Church gave them a warm welcome and financial aid, and eventually the newcomers joined forces with their Dutch sisters and brothers.¹⁶

This alliance did not last long before tensions appeared. Some of the new immigrants objected to the practice of singing hymns rather than only psalms, and feared that this musical choice signified that the eastern churches were too Americanized and insufficiently separated from the world and other less spiritual denominations. These critics left the Reformed Church in 1857 and formed the Christian Reformed Church in North America.¹⁷

Three decades later, some of the recent Dutch immigrants in the Midwest raised another concern. Eastern churches had always allowed Freemasons to be members of their congregations. Freemasonry and Christianity were not considered mutually exclusive. The newer Dutch immigrants had experienced Freemasonry in Europe as more hostile to Christianity and they did not want Masons to be allowed as church members. The Reformed Church in America (as it was now called) allowed individual congregations to prohibit Masons from membership, but refused to legislate for the entire denomination. It was not the role of the General Synod to set membership policy. That was the responsibility of the minister and elders in the congregation. The decision caused an additional group of churches to leave the RCA and join the Christian Reformed Church in 1884.

The RCA has considered several mergers with other denominations: the Reformed Church in the United States (German Reformed) in the 1890s; the United Presbyterian Church in the 1940s; and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterian) in the 1960s. Each prompted years of complicated committee negotiations and caused significant debate. Advocates for union cited Jesus's call for unity in John 17 and insisted that the small RCA could have a bigger impact if it was part of a larger denomination. Opponents of merger wanted to preserve the RCA's identity and criticized the other denominations as lax in their doctrine and spirituality. During each merger debate, some people threatened to leave the denomination if they were forced to merge. A smaller number of merger advocates also threatened to leave if merger did not happen. Each time, the RCA decided to preserve its distinctive identity. Few if any congregations left.

One strategy the RCA has *not* used in its history is the imposition of a single answer or position in response to conflict. General Synod did not state that Tories were wrong. It did not make a definitive statement about hymns versus psalms. It did not condemn Freemasonry but allowed congregations to decide whether Masons could be members. It allowed the ordination of women but did not force the practice upon resistant congregations.¹⁸

In 1948, the Particular (Regional) Synod of Chicago asked General Synod for a definitive statement about dealing with divorced people.¹⁹ A number of people had entered into hasty marriages during World War II and later regretted them. Churches and pastors were anxious. Should divorced people be allowed to remarry? Should they be allowed to be church members?

¹⁶ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 131–133, 135–137.

¹⁷ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 138–139.

¹⁸ See Donald J. Bruggink, "Extra-Canonical Tests for Church Membership and Ministry", pp. 49–63 in Jacob E. Nyenhuis, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Rev. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty*, number 56 in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁹ *MGS 1948*, p. 121.

A committee was appointed and reported to synod in 1949. Their interpretation of RCA polity was that General Synod could not make a definitive statement on these difficult questions about divorce. Synod could make suggestions, but ultimately, the decisions about marriage and membership rested with the pastors and elders who knew the circumstances of the people involved. Synod could not interfere or make rules that must be followed uniformly.²⁰

The most conflicted time in the history of the RCA occurred at the meeting of General Synod in 1969. The proposed merger with the Southern Presbyterians had been defeated. A majority of classes (23-22) had voted for merger, but not the requisite two-thirds. Synod voted to stay in the National Council of Churches but postponed and effectively denied a recommendation to join the Consultation on Church Union. The denomination, like the nation, demonstrated sharp disagreement over the Vietnam War. A group of women marched through the synod meeting carrying signs protesting their exclusion from the roles of deacon, elder, and minister. Finally, the RCA offices in New York City had been taken over by a group demanding reparations for African Americans. Tensions were high. Delegates were angry and frustrated. They did not trust or like one another.

On the second to last day of synod, at a particularly tense time, Harold Schut, pastor in Scotia, New York, made a motion that a committee be formed to plan for the orderly dissolution of the RCA. He did it with tears in his eyes and much regret. He did not want the church to continue fighting. His strategy called the whole church to account. Neither side would “win.” The RCA would cease to exist if it decided it could no longer be a church together.²¹

Over the next year, the committee wrestled with the painful reality of conflict, which was as present among them as in the denomination. In the end, they had not reached unity or agreement, but they recommended that the RCA continue to exist. Several other events helped to rebuild community and trust. It was not easy; the denomination had certainly not resolved all of its disagreements, and some of its short-term solutions eventually led to further conflict. But the denomination decided that its shared history and theology was enough to hold it together even in the face of disagreements.²²

The most significant conflicts in the history of the RCA have centered on ecumenism, biblical interpretation, and the nature of the church. These are questions of identity and mission, sin and grace, individual and community, and mind, body, and soul. Often in these conflicts, some people describe them as church-dividing, or essential to the gospel. If the denomination doesn't get it right, the church will fail and die. These claims were made about the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam, and hymns, and Freemasons, and the Vietnam War, and the role of women. Some people left the RCA, but each time the denomination managed to work out its differences and continue to be a broad tent where people of different opinions were still welcomed. The differences seemed important at the time, and they were, but when we look back, we have a broader perspective, and we see that the church survived its differences and that God's grace preserved the church.

²⁰ *MGS 1949*, pp. 196–198.

²¹ Lynn Japinga, *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994*, number 77 in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 147–150.

²² Japinga, pp. 155–157.

ONE HOLY CATHOLIC APOSTOLIC CHURCH AND ECCLESIAL FRAGMENTATION

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” —1 Peter 2:9

“In general, the churches... bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.” —John Updike, A Month of Sundays

Protestant Christians live in a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance. We stand in worship and speak the Apostles’ Creed, declaring our belief in the holy catholic church. Or, if we speak the older Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church. The words are unambiguous: *The church, one church*, just as we confess our faith in one God the Father Almighty, one Lord Jesus Christ, one Holy Spirit. What do we think we are doing?

As we affirm the creeds, we are surrounded by innumerable separated churches. Distinct ecclesial traditions are divided into discrete denominations, many of which continue to subdivide into more denominations. The disjunction between what we say we believe, and what we see around us, and casually accept as the way things are, only makes sense if we segment the two: cognitive dissonance. “Indeed,” says Ephraim Radner, “the most manifest mark of the divided Church appears to be its own insensibility to the symptoms of its condition.”²³

Catholic and Orthodox Christians have a cognitive advantage over Protestants. Catholics believe that the one church subsists in the Catholic Church, while the Orthodox believe that autonomous Orthodox Churches compose the one church. We may dismiss their claims as ecclesiological fantasy, until we realize that we assert a similar, although weaker, theological attempt to overcome the divide between belief in the one church and acceptance of many separated churches. Our pleasant fiction is the “invisible church.” “Yes,” we say, “what is visible are myriad separated churches, but they are all united in an invisible church that transcends what we see. So,” we continue, “our creedal affirmations are about invisible unity that renders visible disunity less consequential. Not only that, our claim of invisible unity provides theological cover for our willingness to continue subdividing already divided churches.”

The Body Lies Bleeding

The genesis of our ecclesiological double mindedness is found in the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation—which might more properly be called the Western Church Schism. The twelfth century split between the Greek East and the Latin West was the Great Schism, but it had little effect on the consciousness of the medieval Catholic Church or its reformers. In the aftermath of 1517, however, it was the reformers who had to struggle with the reality that necessary reform was accompanied by division of the one church into multiple churches.

In the early years of reform, the theological task was to identify which ecclesial bodies were “true churches,” faithful to the gospel. Luther asked, “How can a poor confused person tell where such holy Christian people are to be found in the world?” He answered by setting out

²³ Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 277.

seven marks by which a true and faithful church could be recognized: possession of the Word of God, the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys (discipline), the ministry, prayer, and the cross.²⁴ Calvin set forth the heart of the matter in two marks: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered in accord with Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”²⁵

It is essential to realize that Calvin did not see the marks of Word and sacrament as strong borders protecting a small principality of pure churches. “We may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist,” he says, “even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.” As if this were not expansive enough, he goes on to say, “What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church”²⁶ Calvin’s marks are not intended as a test to determine which churches are in and which are out, but rather as pointers to the core of any church’s faithful life, for it is in Word and sacrament that we know most clearly the real presence of Christ among us.

In our time of subdividing denominations and congregations, it is worth pondering Calvin’s observation that, “we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.” Calvin knew what we seem to have forgotten: “not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort,” he writes, “Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all ... [while] there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of the church.” Do you know which doctrines Calvin believed were necessary? The list is short: “God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.” Three essentials and an et cetera! Again, he was not providing a checklist to judge others. He was pointing us away from marginal matters toward the heart of the gospel.²⁷

Calvin wrote all of this in the final, 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. By this point in the ongoing reform of the church, it was apparent that the pressing issue was not marks of the true church, but division and hostility among the various reformation churches—each of which possessed the marks! Doctrinal disputes had not only separated Protestant churches from the Catholic Church, but Lutherans from the Swiss Reformed, the Swiss Reformed among themselves, Lutherans and Reformed from Anabaptists and others, with the ambiguous English church in turmoil of its own.

Early in Calvin’s reforming work, he was confronted by a thoughtful Catholic critique of the reformers by Cardinal Sadoletto, including the charge that they “attempted to tear the spouse of Christ in pieces.” Sadoletto went on to ask, “since these men [the reformers] began how many sects have torn the Church?”²⁸ How many indeed. While Calvin dealt confidently with most of Sadoletto’s lengthy critique, he acknowledged that “the most serious charge of all is that we

²⁴ Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 366–375.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.1.9., p. 1023.

²⁶ Calvin, 4.1.12., p. 1025.

²⁷ Calvin, p. 1026.

²⁸ Jacopo Sadoletto, “Sadoletto’s Letter to the Genevans,” in *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto*, ed. John C. Olen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 40.

have attempted to dismember the spouse of Christ.” Although Calvin denied that was the intent of the reformers, he admitted, “Were that true, both you [Sadolet] and the whole world might regard us as past redemption.”²⁹

Despite his rejection of Sadolet’s indictment, the passage of time forced Calvin to deal with evident division and discord among multiplying churches. In a letter responding to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s call for a council of all the reforming churches, Calvin writes, “This other thing is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, that the Churches are so divided that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute among us.” Then, in apparent acknowledgment of Sadolet’s now 14-year old critique, he concludes, “Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding.”³⁰

Neither Luther nor Calvin desired the division of the church. Calvin worked for Lutheran-Reformed reconciliation and for unity among the Swiss churches. He envisioned a universal council of the whole church, including Catholic bishops and representatives from the reformation churches. Remarkably, he was even open to the possibility that the pope would preside!³¹ When we ignore the distress that sixteenth century divisions caused for the earliest reformers, going so far as to claim them as warrants for our division, we accede to the cognitive dissonance that places the church’s foundational creeds in a time capsule while accepting the church’s present disarray and ongoing ecclesial subdivision.

Even so, we sometimes feel pangs of discomfort when surveying the current ecclesial landscape. The PC(USA) split four times in the twentieth century: the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the 1930s, the Presbyterian Church in America in the 1970s, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the 1980s, and the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians in the 1990s and beyond. American Lutherans, once divided by European ethnic origins, united only to re-divide along theological/ethical lines. Episcopalians have also broken up. The United Church of Christ and the Southern Baptist Convention have witnessed the departure of congregations for alternate affiliations.

Now the United Methodist Church is about to be the latest entrant in the ongoing parade of fractured churches. The plan to split into (at least) two denominations is termed, “restructuring through separation” and “reconciliation through division.” The plan also provides that one part of the newly divided church will retain the name *United Methodist Church*! Cognitive dissonance sometimes slides into Orwellian delusion.

Invisible Church?

We confess our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church at the same time we live comfortably amid the rubble of divided churches. But we sidestep the obvious incongruity by imagining two churches—an invisible church that remains one and a visible church that is divided. What we can see is not one, while what we cannot see is one. In the recent PC(USA) split, the visible/invisible distinction made it possible for those who wished to leave, and those who were

²⁹ John Calvin, “Reply to Sadolet,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p. 255.

³⁰ John Calvin, “Letter to Cranmer” (1552), in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pp. 5:347–48.

³¹ John Calvin, “Letter to the Reformed Churches of France” (1560), in Beveridge and Bonnet, *Tracts and Letters*, pp. 7:158–61.

happy to see them go, to assert that they were not dividing the indivisible invisible church, but only dividing a humanly constructed denomination.

Where did this invisible/visible distinction come from? From an odd alteration of the classic view that all the faithful throughout time and space are united in the communion of saints. When we confess the Apostles' Creed, voicing our belief in "the holy catholic church" and "the communion of saints," we are not saying the same thing twice. The holy catholic church is the mundane gathering of ordinary people around Word and sacrament that we see, hear, taste, feel, and smell. The communion of saints is the great cloud of witnesses from Abraham to squirming infants at the baptismal font. The holy catholic church is the church we know. The communion of saints is known only to God; to us it is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

In this classic understanding there is no opposition between the communion of saints and the visible church. The opposition is between what Augustine called the City of God on the one hand and the earthly city on the other. "Most glorious is the City of God," writes Augustine, "whether in this passing age, where she dwells as a pilgrim among the ungodly, or in the security of that eternal home in which she now patiently awaits until righteousness shall return unto judgment."³² The City of God is not distinguished from the visible church, but from the earthly city which "glories in itself" while the heavenly city "[glories] in the Lord."³³ But, says Augustine, "In this wicked world, and in these evil days ... many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are as it were collected in the net of the gospel, and in this world, as in a sea, both swim together without separation."³⁴

Calvin notes that Scripture speaks of the church in two ways, sometimes signifying all the living and dead who are in the presence of God and sometimes referring to all currently living people who profess the one God. Since those who are in God's presence are known only to God, Calvin promptly turns his attention to the only church that is humanly knowable, the visible church. Calvin writes, "Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eye of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called 'church' in respect to men."³⁵

Before leaving the fiction of the invisible church, two more things should be said. First, an invisible church is also a mute church. What cannot be seen cannot be heard because it has no voice—no witness to bear to God's continuing presence in the world, no call of Christ to discipleship, no groaning of the Holy Spirit to animate our prayers. It simply hovers above us as an amorphous ideal in contrast to the messy appearance and confusing utterances of the church we live in. An invisible church is also an inert church. It does not feed the hungry, welcome strangers, care for the sick, and visit prisoners. Its purported faithfulness is unseen and unheard inactivity.

The second thing to be said is that the fiction of the invisible church is only possible because we have denied our essential continuity with God's people Israel and our continuing kinship with God's people the Jews. The widespread view that the church has replaced Israel, that

³² Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans., R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book I, Preface, p. 3.

³³ Augustine, XIV.28., p. 632.

³⁴ Augustine, XVIII.49., p. 896.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.7., p.1022.

Christians have replaced Jews as the people of God, that God has transferred covenant faithfulness from “Old Testament Israel” to “New Testament Church,” reduces Israel to a negative prelude to the positive existence of the church. (It has also made it possible for the church to engage in centuries of theological abuse of the Jews, punctuated by intolerance, demonization, ghettos, pogroms, and, perhaps inevitably, Holocaust. The current rise in anti-Jewish rhetoric and action is grim testimony to this enduring reality.)

In the face of Israel’s chronic infidelity (related to us by Israel herself), the church has created a portrait of its invisible perfections to conceal its own chronic infidelity. This has enabled churches to replace repentance with renewal, confession with restructuring, fidelity with rationality, and hope with planning. Flawed, earthy Israel is superseded by an ideal heavenly Church, of which the thousands of separated earthly churches are but pale shadows. In our better moments, we understand the damage we have caused the Jews, yet we remain unaware of the damage we cause the church. Our ecclesiology—our doctrine of the church—is flawed, marked by theological idealization or sociological deconstruction.

Communion

The church known in Scripture is a tangible reality as the people of God, the body of Christ, the communion of the Holy Spirit. Yet, despite Jesus’s prayer and Paul’s pleading, the church is not one as Jesus and the Father are one, the church does not have the same mind and the same love. We are divided without the backstop of invisible unity. How are we to make sense of this? Only through honest, serious, sustained theological thinking about what it means to be one holy catholic apostolic church at the same time that we are a divided, conformed, fractional, domesticated church.

The initial step toward the unity of the church is to stop subdividing the church. Slicing and dicing existing denominations is a sad, hopeless reversion to Babel. Every faction in every denomination should vow to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). While unlikely, it can and must begin sometime, somewhere, as a witness to the truth of the gospel. The place to begin thinking about the unity of the church is to recognize that the gathered congregation is the basic form of church, but not a sufficient form of church. Gathered around Word and sacrament, the congregation is the one holy catholic apostolic church, but not of itself alone—as if it were a solitary, self-sufficient ecclesia. The gathered congregation *is* the one holy catholic apostolic church *only* in its essential communion with its Lord and therefore in its communion with other gathered congregations.

“Communion” is the fundamental English translation of the Greek *κοινωνία*. Unfortunately, persons who rely on translations of the New Testament are unaware that *koinonia* is rendered in English seven different ways: *communion*, *fellowship*, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, *contribution*, and *taking part*. This conceals the fact that Scripture uses one rich word to display the character of relationships in the church—from eucharistic union with Christ through reconciling differences to sharing money. Ecclesial *koinonia* is deep, intimate abiding communion with the Triune God; communion in faith, hope, and love; communion in sacraments; communion in the truth of the gospel; communion in faithful living; communion in the reconciliation of differences; communion in patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability. Communion—community—communication—is, says Oliver O’Donovan, “to hold

something as common, to make it a common possession, to treat it as 'ours' rather than 'yours' or 'mine' ... to form a community, a 'we.'"³⁶

"We-ness" is at the heart of *koinonia*: ending partition, ceasing detachment, overcoming distance, dwelling in mutuality. In our time, the substance and aim of *koinonia* is deep, intimate, abiding relationships within and among congregations, denominations, and global families of churches. "We-ness" is not uniformity. Barry Ensign-George makes the important ecumenical point that diversity lives within the call for the church to be one; variety "is not accidental to God's purposes and thus not irrelevant to what the church properly *is*."³⁷ While we are all familiar with Paul's articulation of this dynamic in his letters to churches in Corinth, Rome, Colossae, and Ephesus, we rarely acknowledge their bearing on inter-denominational and inter-congregational realities.

At their best, all denominations and their congregations embrace diversities of race, culture, class, gender, and age. But there is more. As Ensign-George says, "The Christian faith generates something like a field of possible embodiments of that faith," and this "requires choosing among multiple possibilities."³⁸ Various denominations embody distinctive patterns of theological insight, liturgical practice, missional engagement, and governance. Ensign-George's insight is that such distinctive patterns are *possible embodiments engendered by Christian faith*. Denominational distinctives do not necessarily draw lines between truth and error, nor are they mere idiosyncrasies to be politely tolerated. Denominational *koinonia* means deep, intimate, abiding "we-ness" that moves beyond "yours and mine" to "ours."

Commitment to the visible unity of the church is not the calling of ecumenical experts. It is the calling of every congregation and every pastor. It is sometimes easy to forget that most of Paul's letters were addressed to specific congregations: "Paul ... to the church of God that is in Corinth," "Paul ... to the Churches of Galatia," "Paul ... to the church of the Thessalonians." When he begs congregations in Ephesus, he also begs all of the congregations represented here to live a life worthy of our calling, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Why? Because there is one body, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (Ephesians 4:1-6).

You have seen the house built, you have seen it adorned
By one who came in the night, it is now dedicated to GOD.
It is now a visible church, one more light set on a hill
In a world confused and dark and disturbed by portents of fear.
And what shall we say of the future? Is one church all we can build?
Or shall the visible church go on to conquer the world?
—T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from 'The Rock'*

AN OBSERVATION FROM OUR RECENT HISTORY

In its report to the General Synod of 2002, the Task Force to Study the Relationship Between the General Synod and the General Synod Council recommended "that all the commissions of the General Synod and the General Synod Council meet together each fall in the same venue

³⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 242.

³⁷ Barry A. Ensign-George, *Between Congregation and Church: Denomination and Christian Life Together* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), p. 204.

³⁸ Ensign-George, p. 165.

and at the same time.” The task force, which had been working for two years, had good reason for this:

It is hoped that this coordinated meeting will not only receive a common report of the previous General Synod, but will develop a style of leadership and consultation in service of the priorities, mission, and ministry of the church. In fulfillment of its responsibility to propose the agenda for the General Synod, the GSC will invite to its spring meeting a representative from each commission that has business before the subsequent General Synod. This collaboration will enable the synod to give maximum time to the most crucial issues before the church.³⁹

At the time of this report, internet usage was still minimal, and the ability to hold online meetings was nearly non-existent. The intent of this annual meeting was for the commissions and the GSC to have more opportunities to work together cooperatively, and for the plenary sessions to be planned jointly by the commission moderators, the GSC, and the staff to address issues of common interest and concern. Rather than bringing the commission moderators to the spring GSC meeting, all of the moderators, including the GSC moderator and the General Synod president, would plan together over lunch at the end of this fall meeting.

It quickly proved impractical to schedule a planning session that involved the necessary officers of the synod, the moderators of the GSC and the commissions, and representatives of the GSC staff. Instead, plenary sessions were planned to address issues of concern to the GSC and staff alone, without commission input. The commissions were required to follow that agenda. While the concerns of the GSC and the staff are important, many commissions—such as Theology, Christian Worship, Church Order, Christian Discipleship and Education, and History—have responsibilities, assignments, and concerns that exist outside of the ten- or fifteen-year program goals established by the General Synod. Nevertheless, the meetings proved to be fruitful and enlightening. For several years, much was learned during shared commission meeting times, and the cooperative work of commissions was greatly enhanced.

This model has been in place for 17 years. During this time, the internet has transformed the world of long-distance meetings. It has become much easier for commissions, or their representatives, to have brief meetings online, while gathering two commissions together in one room, having everyone introduce themselves, and trying to develop a working rhythm in a short time at these annual gatherings can be very inefficient; most of the real joint work still happens between the meetings, via the internet, among smaller delegations from the commissions.

Moreover, in the experience of this commission, at least, the joint meeting is the most expensive—especially since Grand Rapids is not a hub airport—with the least time for the commission to do its own business. Also, since the meeting requires all the members of the various commissions, GSC, and staff to keep most of October open so that the meeting can move to the most economical time, and it cannot be changed if a few members of a commission have conflicts, this can be the least efficient commission meeting.

Therefore, your commission would like to present the following recommendation:

³⁹ *MGS 2003*, p. 240.

Recommendation

To instruct the General Synod Council (GSC) and the commissions of General Synod to meet together once every three years instead of annually.

Reasons:

1. The commissions and the GSC currently meet together every year by instruction of the General Synod. Only the General Synod can change this pattern.
2. If the joint meeting were held once every three years, all commission members would be able to experience the benefits of working and worshiping together, and would have the opportunity to foster important working relationships, while minimizing the added expense on all the various budgets.

Respectfully submitted,
Steven D. Pierce, moderator