

Overtures to the 2020 General Synod

Preamble Clarification

Overture 1

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commissions on History and Theology, to thoroughly examine the use of the word “all” in this statement in the Preamble of the *Book of Church Order*: “The purpose of the Reformed Church is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God and by all Christian good works” (*BCO*, Preamble), and to recommend, as clearly and specifically as possible, guidance for how RCA members are to interpret “all people,” for report to the General Synod of 2021.

Reasons:

1. The Preamble has been interpreted as “the most important section of the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*). It outlines clearly and constitutionally the foundation of a particular church, the Reformed Church in America. It reminds the church of the essence from which it lives and the principles by which it is ordered. What is claimed in the first few pages of the document shapes both the Government and the Discipline” (Allan J. Janssen, *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*, second edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2019], pp. 7-8). Interpretation of this statement, and the word “all” as noted in it, is therefore very important.
2. The word “all” appears 157 times in the *Book of Church Order*, 81 times in the Belgic Confession, 78 times in the Canons of Dort, 71 times in the Heidelberg Catechism, and 3 times in the Belhar Confession. How a word is interpreted in one part of a constitution should have bearing on how it is interpreted in the other parts.
3. Webster’s Dictionary defines the word “all” as an adjective that means “every one of the entire number of” and as a pronoun that means “everyone or every one.”
4. First Corinthians 14:33a says, “for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.” The *Book of Church Order* itself builds upon this passage, stating that, “Church order provides a way for us to live and work together as the body of Christ, following the admonition that ‘all things be done decently and in order’ (1 Corinthians 14:40). Order is a way to express our unity and to achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as we seek to fulfill our mission. It is our theology lives out in the ways we live and work together” (“An Introduction to the *Book of Church Order*”). In order for us to achieve order, we need a very clear and widely disseminated agreement on what we mean by “all” as it is used in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Commission on Theology to review paper

Overture 2

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct its Commission on Theology to review the paper “Affirmed and Celebrated,” prepared by a committee of the classis and adopted by the classis, with an eye as to the paper’s doctrinal soundness in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture and the possibility of commending the paper to all RCA assemblies, for report to the Synod of 2021.

**Note: the paper “Affirmed and Celebrated” can be found as an appendix at the end of the compiled overtures to General Synod 2020.*

Reasons:

1. The paper “Affirmed and Celebrated” was adopted by the New Brunswick Classis in October 2019 upon presentation by its ad hoc Theology Committee. The classis then forwarded the paper to the Commission on Theology, which asked that the classis overture the General Synod for an instruction if the classis wanted the commission to study the paper.
2. The word “synod” comes from the Latin word *synodos*, meaning “together on the way.” Synods are meant to be places where ideas—in the case of ecclesiastical synods, ideas about the life of the church—are shared. The Classis of New Brunswick, as one of the classes which constitutes this synod, seeks to share its own wrestling with Scripture with other classes with whom we are on the way.

Keeping Permanent Records

Overture 3

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct its Commission on Church Order, in consultation with its Commission on History, to study what constitutes a preferred means for keeping permanent records, for report to the General Synod of 2021.

Reasons:

1. In the proposed amendments to the constitution sent by the General Synod of 2019, the term “permanent record” appears several times. We acknowledge that not all permanent records are books, especially in this digital age.
2. There is, however, a wide disparity in means and quality of keeping permanent electronic records. These are going to need to be available to the church for decades and even centuries to come. A preferred means of keeping these records safe, carefully and professionally reviewed, would be helpful to classes and other assemblies.

Consider Voting against Declaration Regarding Amendment 1

Overture 4

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to consider voting against the declaration that amendment 1, “Procedure for Amending the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship” (*MGS 2019*, EC 19-15, pp. 115-116), be included in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, should it be approved by the required number of classes.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of New Brunswick is grieved by the decision of the 2019 General Synod, which narrowly approved this amendment by a vote of 115 to 96. We believe that the amendment, by allowing a simple majority of classes to approve constitutional changes with deep implications for the life of the denomination, represents a stark departure from the consensus model of the early church represented in Acts 15, as well as the historic practice of the RCA when addressing deeply contentious matters, in both 1892 and 1969, which required a larger supermajority in order to better protect the interests of the minority.

2. We are grieved that the proposed amendment was offered as new business, therefore not going through proper channels and being presented to delegates in advance of General Synod 2019, and that the proposed amendment, once determined to qualify as new business, did not go first to the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance for review and recommendation before being brought to the body.
3. This amendment does not make clear who gets to decide which actions of the General Synod are subject to this rule, and that, as a temporary rule, it does not constitute the body, and therefore does not belong in a constitution.
4. In the past, what we now call a declarative act regarding amendments to the Constitution of the RCA was called a ratification, and General Synods could and did decline to ratify votes of classes regarding amendments, when the synod discerned that the previous synod and classes had acted unwisely.

International Pastoral Exchanges

Overture 5

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint a person, serving pro bono, to publicize and manage pastoral exchanges between U.S. and Canadian congregations and congregations in other countries.

Reasons:

1. Exchanges create and enhance person-to-person contacts among Reformed and other Christian congregations in other countries.
2. Exchanges provide a way for pastors in different countries to get to know each other personally, exchange views, and learn from each other.
3. Exchanges can be simply arranged, where a pastor and family switch places for a week or longer.
4. Exchanges would not involve RCA funds, but the exchange programs could eventually attract donations that support such exchanges.

International Student Exchanges

Overture 6

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint a person, serving pro bono, to publicize and manage student exchanges between high school and college students in U.S. and Canadian congregations and those in other countries.

Reasons:

1. Exchanges create and enhance person-to-person contacts among students.
2. Exchanges provide a way for students in different countries to get to know each other personally, exchange views, and learn from each other.
3. Exchanges can be simply arranged.
4. Exchanges would not involve RCA funds, but the exchange programs could eventually attract donations that support such exchanges.

RCA Representatives to International Organizations

Overture 7

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint people to serve as the RCA representative to international organizations.

Reasons:

1. The RCA will benefit through increased contact to organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank.
2. The representatives will create a presence for the RCA among international agencies.
3. The representatives will provide information to RCA congregations on what the agencies are doing.
4. The appointments will provide honor to RCA people through international work.

Establishment of Professional Academies

Overture 8

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to establish professional academies that collect members according to professional discipline.

Reasons:

1. The academies would provide a new structure for collaboration among RCA members in fields such as law, foreign service, scientific research, engineering, and medicine.
2. The academies will provide honorable and special recognition to those church members who join the academy.
3. The academies will provide a source of trusted advice for the RCA and RCA-related agencies and institutions across the U.S. and Canada.
4. The academies will provide contacts among the members of each academy, contacts that can help in career development and in learning new aspects of their own profession.
5. The academies will provide a resource for RCA bodies that wish to make statements or take positions on specific topics.

Collection of Profession and Education Data

Overture 9

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary to include profession and education, as well as email addresses and personal web and social media sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn pages, in the collection of church membership data.

Reasons:

1. The information will help in the establishment of professional academies.
2. The information will provide a go-to list when needs arise for professional services.

3. The information, submitted voluntarily, will increase the level of communication among RCA members.

Socially Responsible Retirement Funds

Overture 10

The Regional Synod of Albany overtures the General Synod to instruct the Board of Benefit Services and the Investment Advisory Committee to add additional socially responsible funds (funds that consider environmental, social, and governance [ESG] issues in investment analysis), including at least one fossil fuel free fund, as options in the RCA retirement plan and the 403(b) plan.

Reasons:

1. Last year, three of the five ESG fund options were dropped from the plans, leaving only two options for those who want to invest in socially screened funds.
2. The target date Fidelity Freedom Funds in which the majority of RCA Retirement Plan and 403(b) participants are invested are not socially screened and include holdings not only in fossil fuel companies (Exxon Mobil, Phillips 66, ConocoPhillips, Chevron, Lukoil, Total, Marathon, Hess Corporation, and several others), but tobacco (Phillip Morris, Altria, British American Tobacco, Scandinavian Tobacco Group, Juul Labs), weapons (Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics), and gambling (Gaming and Leisure Properties, Inc.)¹
3. There is an urgent need to address the climate crisis. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has determined that we have until 2030 to dramatically change the way we live if we are to avoid a climate catastrophe. To avoid a climate catastrophe, 80 percent of all known fossil fuels must not be burned. Oil, gas, and coal companies already have five times that much in reserve.
4. The biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves calls us to address the climate crisis. The Commission on Christian Action report to the General Synod of 1999 noted: "We cannot ignore the plight of our neighbors who are already suffering as a result of global climate change. ... Moreover, since the effects of climate change will fall disproportionately on the poor and on future generations, the issue is a matter of justice. We cannot love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, and ignore the potentially disastrous consequences that human-induced climate change may have on future generations, on the poor, and on all of creation" (*MGS 1999*, p. 104). People who are poor will suffer the first and worst from the effects of climate change. Continued investment in the fossil fuel industry furthers this injustice.
5. Divestment can be an effective means of fostering social change. It helped end apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1980s. Divesting will put further pressure on the fossil fuel industry and will help accelerate the transition to a renewable energy economy.
6. Continued investment in fossil fuels is fiscally irresponsible. The energy sector was the worst performing sector of the S&P in 2018 and 2019. It is estimated that \$1 trillion in oil reserves and \$300 billion in natural gas reserves will become "stranded assets" and need to be written off, resulting in enormous loss of value. Globally, over 1,100 institutions, many of them churches or faith-based organizations,² representing more than \$12 trillion in assets have committed to divest. Wall Street is taking notice. In December 2019, Goldman Sachs announced it would stop investing in much of the coal industry and Arctic extraction,³ and in January 2020, Black Rock, the world's biggest investor in fossil fuels, announced coal divestment from funds controlling about \$2 trillion in assets.⁴ Continued investment in fossil fuels is not a good long-term strategy.

7. Divesting from the fossil fuel industry is an act of leadership. It will raise public consciousness about the severity of climate change, and it will encourage others to take action. A National Academy of Sciences study identified divestment as a critical “social tipping intervention” that has the potential “to spark rapid yet constructive societal changes towards climate stabilization and overall sustainability.”⁵

¹ At one point, Fidelity also had holdings in private prison companies (CoreCivic and Geo). “60% of incarcerated migrants are held in prisons run by corporations like CoreCivic. Vanguard and Fidelity held a combined 20% of CoreCivic’s shares” (<https://actions.sumofus.org/a/tell-fidelity-and-vanguard-divest-our-pensions-from-private-prisons>). It appears that Fidelity Freedom Funds do not currently have holdings in either CoreCivic or Geo. Each of the Fidelity target date funds is a collection of other Fidelity mutual funds. The Fidelity Freedom 2020 Fund for example, is a collection of about 30 mutual funds. One of those funds, the Fidelity Series Large Cap Stock Fund, represents 4.189 percent of the Fidelity Freedom 2020 holdings (according to the December 31, 2019 report). The Fidelity Series Large Cap Stock Fund, in turn, has holdings in a whole lot of companies. Among the top ten are Exxon Mobil Corp. (third highest holding at \$643,423,447 or 4.6 percent of the assets) and Altria Group, Inc., one of the world’s largest producers and marketers of tobacco, cigarettes, and related products (fifth highest holding at \$502,646,555 or 3.6 percent). Fidelity Series Large Cap also holds Philip Morris International, Inc. (\$42,791,761 or 0.306 percent). That is \$1,188,861,763 invested in fossil fuels and tobacco—and that’s in just one of the 30 or so funds. So while the percentage may seem small, the amounts are not. Fidelity is a major investor in companies that produce products that harm the planet and harm people. And Reformed Church investors are helping to fund that.

² <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-pledges-push-global-fossil-fuel-divestments-over-11-trillion>; <https://operationnoah.org/news-events/faith-institutions-divest-from-fossil-fuels/>

³ <https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/climate-change/474773-goldman-sachs-says-it-wont-finance-new-coal>

⁴ <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter>

⁵ Excerpt from a recent article in *Grist* about a National Academy of Sciences study:

A recent study in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences outlined the positive “tipping elements” needed to address climate change — society-wide shifts that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions enough to avert disaster. Each tipping element, researchers say, can be triggered by one or more “social tipping interventions” — smaller changes that pave the way for societal transformation... [An] interdisciplinary team of researchers with backgrounds in earth systems analysis, geosustainability, philosophy, and other fields... surveyed more than 1,000 international experts in the fields of climate change and sustainability, and asked them to identify the tipping elements needed for rapid decarbonization... [They] identified seven interventions that have the potential “to spark rapid yet constructive societal changes towards climate stabilization and overall sustainability.” [One of] the two interventions that the researchers say can be achieved very rapidly, i.e. within a few years [is] divestment from fossil fuels. If national banks and insurance companies warn the public that fossil fuel reserves are “stranded assets” — that is, resources that no longer have value — companies and people could start withdrawing investments in industries that contribute to climate change en masse, and the flow of money to polluting companies could quickly dry up. We’re seeing the potential of the divestment movement already — BlackRock’s announcement that it’s shedding its investments in coal last week sent a tremor through the financial industry” (<https://grist.org/climate/stis-can-save-the-planet-no-not-those-stis/>).

The study from the National Academy of Sciences: <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/5/2354/tab-figures-data>.