

Report of the Vision 2020 Team

Prologue – July, 2021

To the 2021 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When our denomination began the Vision 2020 journey in June 2018, none of us could have foreseen where that journey would take us. There have been great joys and great sorrows along the way. Some of our joy has been in seeing people with very different perspectives come together in various meetings to listen to one another, listen to God, and talk frankly about the future of the denomination. We have seen curiosity, grace, courage, ingenuity, determination, and love.

Not the least of our challenges was (and still is) a global pandemic, which caused not only personal stress to each one of us in the RCA, but also the devastating loss of several dear saints, and the postponement of the General Synod meeting where our decisions were to have been made for the future of the denomination. We are also all navigating, to different degrees and in different ways, the grief that comes with that unknown future of our denomination. Sometimes that has caused us to act out in ways that are less than ideal. It's not surprising, since so much of our faith, our history, our theology, and our belonging have been connected to this denomination for so long. There is much at stake.

Since the Vision 2020 journey began, we have all experienced a combination of feelings like love, hope, creativity, determination, sadness, anger, frustration, and fatigue. In the initial version of the Vision 2020 Team's final written report to General Synod, published in the summer of 2020, we also mentioned the opportunity that this time of waiting affords us. We hoped that this unanticipated delay would provide us with a time of reflection, a time to turn toward God in prayer and to turn toward one another in a posture of listening.

Of course, God has also been with us each step of the way. We have felt the grace of Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in this difficult work. We have also felt your prayers, received your feedback and heard your encouragement. Thank you for journeying with us. We believe the end of the Vision 2020 road is in sight. And we pray that at the end of the road, a new horizon will open up before us.

As we contemplate that horizon, several new considerations have emerged. One is the "Rules and Regulations" approach that is now included in this report as our third recommendation; this is the final form of the proposal regarding gracious separation. We had sketched out what we planned for this proposal to include in our original report last year, with the acknowledgment that the specific recommendation text still needed to be developed. Our plan when we published our original written report in summer 2020 was that that third recommendation would consist of the proposed *BCO* changes that would be necessary to facilitate the things we had suggested regarding gracious separation. However, our work with the Commission on Church Order quickly made clear that another route would be more effective in facilitating the spirit of graciousness with which we hope to treat one another, one that does not require constitutional changes. This route works by creating more specific regulations within the existing framework for congregations separating from the RCA that is already established by the *Book of Church Order*. You will read the reasons for and further explanation of this "Rules and Regulations" approach in the third section of this report.

At this point you might be asking, “*Why is the Vision 2020 Team publishing another report? Wasn’t the report published in June 2020 the team’s final report?*”

We want to make clear that this is not an entirely new report, but rather an updated and more complete version of the report published in June 2020. When we published our report in June 2020, we made clear within the report that further work still needed to be done around our third recommendation in the time until the next meeting of the General Synod, since recommendation text was not included – it was simply an outline of what we planned to propose, but the specifics of what General Synod would be asked to vote on still needed to be developed in consultation with the Commission on Church Order (CCO). This updated version of our report replaces the original sketch of our third recommendation with the final product of our work with CCO, complete with an actionable motion. Our first and second recommendations, with their accompanying explanatory text, remain unchanged. Aside from the updated portion regarding the third recommendation and this new prologue, the only things in this report that have changed are dates and similar references to ensure clarity now that more than a year has passed (for example, a sentence that read “In the first half of this year” in the June 2020 report would now read, “In the first half of 2020”). [If you wish to see our June 2020 report, you can find that here.](#)

While it’s not a common thing for written reports to General Synod to change from the time when they are first published to the time when they are presented to the General Synod, it is permissible. Typically, there is only a month of time between publication of a report and its presentation to the General Synod during the meeting. In this case, there was more than a year. Our team’s work was not finished in June 2020, as there was no General Synod in 2020 to which to present a report. To reiterate, the Vision 2020 Team will not have completed its work until our report (and particularly the motions contained therein) have been officially presented to and acted upon by the General Synod.

In addition to the updates to our report, other bodies have had the opportunity to submit overtures to the General Synod, some of which could have the potential to affect or be affected by the Vision 2020 Team’s recommendations. While the Vision 2020 Team is not in a position to either affirm or discourage any of these overtures, we do urge discernment of everything properly submitted to the synod, and careful consideration of the way some of these proposals might intersect with one another.

Finally, in our report first published in the summer of 2020 we suggested that General Synod consider the three recommendations in our report to be parts of one cohesive proposal, where the parts all work together, and to adopt all three of them. That said, our recommendations are crafted in such a way that they can stand alone, and delegates may choose to approve one or two but not all three of our team’s recommendations if that is what General Synod discerns.

In the end, we pray that your discernment would be guided by the Holy Spirit and seasoned with wisdom, clarity, and grace. We pray that you would be blessed in the work that you do at this synod, and that Christ would be glorified. We pray that God, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, would receive glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Introduction

Since June 2018, the Vision 2020 Team has been researching possible scenarios for the future of the RCA. We give you thanks for helping us, for praying with us, for offering support, giving

feedback, and sharing your hopes, dreams, and best thinking. The following report is a synthesis of what we have seen and heard and what we propose as next steps for our beloved denomination.

In crafting this report, we want to acknowledge that there are challenges and opportunities that face us in the midst of the current global health crisis. Our main challenge: the June 2020 meeting at which this report would have been delivered was postponed until June 2021, and then further delayed until October 2021. Just as it is difficult for our team to wait for our work to be completed, we recognize that many others are waiting to see what the ultimate impact of that work will be: candidates for ministry, current and hopeful seminarians, pastors, missionaries, staff, and in some cases, entire congregations, classes, and regional synods. We remember you, and we acknowledge this tension.

Here in the waiting, we also see opportunities. Where General Synod delegates typically have a month to digest reports like this prior to meeting as a full body, the pandemic afforded us 16 extra months. Where much of delegates' reflection and discernment about recommendations often takes place in isolation leading up to General Synod, we had time to do that important work in community through regional events. As a team, we suggested that RCA leadership take advantage of the extra time given us by creating opportunities for dialogue on the report at every level of the denomination. We also encouraged you, the delegates, to create these opportunities with each other. You talked to your local bodies, to your neighbors within your classes, and to those beyond classis boundaries. You prayed earnestly, and you listened to the ways our recommendations may impact those who agree with you and those who see things differently. In the end, we hope that you are carrying all of those reflections and conversations with you now, to General Synod 2021.

What to expect

In the paragraphs and pages that follow, there are several things we hope to accomplish. First, we want to share a bit about what this process was like for us and how we approached it. Knowing the potential impact of this work, it has been a strong value for our team to be as transparent as possible in communicating our process and progress with you along the way. We have attempted to do this faithfully, using RCA communication channels to offer news updates after each meeting, share feedback surveys, and provide discussion tools. We hope this has allowed you to feel invited into the work rather than playing the role of an observer. We will make every effort to continue in this spirit in what follows.

Secondly, we hope to make connections for you between the study, prayer, and dialogue we engaged in and the recommendations we're making for the denomination. We did our best to go broad as well as deep in our research and conversations, wrestling with our understanding of what it means to be the church, Christ's body, and seeking to be faithful to our common values and theology in all things. While there isn't space to include the fullness of our work in detail, we will summarize it for you and help you see where the recommendations we make have been informed by it. Further, where the details of the work we have done and resources we have gathered would be helpful to future work groups, we will be happy to make them available.

Finally, we hope to clearly communicate our very best thinking about the current reality of our denomination and the possible ways forward that we have explored.

Historical context

Before diving into our recent work and the ways it may impact our denomination, we feel it important to briefly note the historical context in which this work was done.

In 1974 the Christian Action Commission, citing the “need for expression of pastoral care towards those who are rejected because of their homosexual identity,” called for the simultaneous affirmation of “the Bible’s teaching against the practice of homosexuality” and the “study of homosexuality as it relates to the life and work of the church” (*MGS 1974*, p. 222). This recommendation held in tension a need to be defined (to affirm the RCA’s theological position on human sexuality) and a desire to extend care to a group seen to be living on the margins. We might view it as the first in a long line of efforts by the RCA to answer the questions of “What does God say about God’s children who identify this way?” and “What is the right way for us to be in relationship together?” Or said another way, “Can we be in fellowship with each other if we see this differently?”

These questions have continued to resurface over the last 46 years, with various overtures, papers, study teams, and dialogues attempting to answer them. In all this time and through all these actions, the people of God at all levels of the denomination have done their best to faithfully interpret God’s will for the church where those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or ally are concerned. There have been many moments where we have truly been the church, drawing closer to God through prayer and worship, and drawing closer to one another by listening and seeking to understand. Other moments have been a cause for grief, admonition, confession, and repentance, when we have forgotten who God calls us to be as the church and in relation to one another.

Two years ago at General Synod 2018, then–interim general secretary Don Poest shared a necessary and critical observation; namely, that these questions have never been answered to the full denomination’s satisfaction, and our ongoing attempts to answer them are ultimately “keeping us from the mission on which we should be focusing” (*MGS 2018*, p.18).

With the support of then–general secretary candidate Eddy Alemán and the General Synod Council and informed by consultation with the Council of Synod Executives (COSE), Don proposed a team be formed to examine possible ways forward for the denomination. In the proposal, the team was directed to thoroughly examine and discern (at a minimum) the following three scenarios:

1. Staying together
2. Radical reconstituting and reorganizing
3. Grace-filled separation

The work of the Vision 2020 Team

Members of the team were named by Poest and general secretary Eddy Alemán in consultation with the General Synod Council (GSC), and were chosen to reflect the wide diversity of the RCA, including all regional synods and racial/ethnic councils. The members are as follows:

- Charlie Contreras: Faith Church Munster Campus pastor, Indiana; served on the GSC until his term ended on June 30, 2021.
- Barbara Felker: pastor of leadership development at Highbridge Community Church (RCA) in the Bronx, New York; member of the board of trustees at New Brunswick

Theological Seminary; vice president of strategic community partnerships at Northwell Health (Brooklyn region).

- Thomas Goodhart: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Ridgewood, New York; served at Plattekill Reformed Church in Mount Marion, New York; past GSC vice-moderator.
- Brian Keepers: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa; served congregations in Holland, Michigan, and Sheldon, Iowa.
- Kristen Livingston: pastor of congregational care at Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan; serves as a specialized minister for Great Lakes City Classis. Previously served Abbe Reformed Church in Clymer, New York.
- John Messer: regional executive of the Synod of the Great Lakes; served as pastor of Good News Community Church (RCA) in Okoboji, Iowa.
- Christa Mooi: RCA minister of Word and sacrament currently living in Iowa; past GSC moderator.
- Rudy Rubio: pastor of Reformed Church of Los Angeles, an RCA church plant in Lynwood, California.
- Diane Smith Faubion: elder at First Reformed Church of Scotia, New York; serves on the board of the Church Growth Fund; executive vice president of First National Bank of Scotia.
- Marijke Strong: executive secretary of the Regional Synod of Canada; served Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.
- Scott Treadway: pastor of Rancho Community Reformed Church in Temecula, California; president of the California Classis.
- Imos Wu: co-pastor of Bogart Memorial Reformed Church in Bogota, New Jersey; serves on the GSC.

Alemán and Poest served as *ex officio* members without vote.

NOTE: At the beginning of this process in 2018, members of the Vision 2020 Team committed to two years of service that was intended to culminate at General Synod 2020. In the intervening time from June 2020 until now, four members of the team have needed to step away because their life circumstances prevented them from extending that commitment. The team has missed them deeply and values their faithfulness and the hundreds of hours of service they dedicated to the ministry of the church.

From the beginning, the Vision 2020 Team knew that trust was essential for such a diverse team to function at a high level. So we spent a considerable amount of time building relationships, learning about differing work styles and points of view on various topics that we would consider, and practicing the skill of dialogue. Coached and supported by consultants Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and Ryan Donovan from The Leader's Journey, trust grew, and authentic, vulnerable dialogue became the way we committed to engaging with each other in our meetings.

Parallel to working on building strong relationships, during our first year together, we focused on learning all we could about the impact that the three proposed scenarios would have on the denomination, its people, and the witness of Christ to the world. Not surprisingly, it quickly became clear that none of these options would be easy, simple, or ideal. We requested and were granted significant time at General Synod 2019 for delegates to work in facilitated small groups in order to engage in dialogue and feedback on our first year's work on the three scenarios. This revealed important themes to carry us into the next year. We heard from delegates their longing for unity in our denomination and reiteration of the hard truth we have

been learning for many years—that it would be unlikely for us to find that unity around the topic of human sexuality. The RCA is both deeply convicted and deeply divided on this topic, and none of the many efforts to date have produced a clear path forward without loss.

Our goal for the second year of our work was to gather more feedback from the denomination via an online survey, to interview various leaders, experts, and teams who could speak to the impact of our work, and to craft a final report that would inform recommendations to General Synod 2020. As we met in September and October, we reflected that our denomination has existed for many years as, what we would call, “defined and connected.” By this, we mean that we are unified in our core theological convictions, shared history, and practices (RCA standards and polity) and yet diverse (as allowed by our polity) in some of our interpretations and practices where we lack full agreement (such as sexuality, women in leadership, gun control, immigration, global warming, etc.). We combined feedback from the delegates at General Synod 2019 with insights gleaned from the survey conducted by Mullins Consulting, Inc. This combined feedback revealed that much of the tension we have been experiencing may stem from this reality: some people are comfortable to continue in a denomination that is diversely defined on such topics, while others see this as an untenable dilution of their theological position.

This understanding moved us to view the three scenarios—staying together, radically restructuring, and moving apart—less as mutually exclusive and more as pieces that would all be required in our final recommendation. Some churches will separate, and we want to provide a way for them to do that well. Some will stay, and we want what remains to be a healthy organization for them. Lastly, the landscape on which we all live out our faith is rapidly shifting, and new strategies may be needed for the RCA to not only survive but actually thrive in this rapidly changing context. Our meetings throughout the first half of 2020 allowed us to lean into both the loss we recognize as inevitable and the hope that comes with envisioning something new.

Recommendations and rationale

We were originally asked to imagine what it would mean for the denomination to embark on one of three possible paths: staying together, radically reorganizing the denomination, or grace-filled separation. Throughout our time together, we’ve come to believe that the most fruitful future for the RCA would involve all three of these things. Already we’re aware that some churches plan to leave the denomination regardless of what decisions are made, and these congregations deserve a thoughtful and generous separation. Others are committed to staying and helping to shape what remains into an organization equipped to live in theological tension and thrive in a changing context. We want to give them our best thinking on what that may look like. Some are waiting to see what comes of this report before choosing their paths. We have held all three of these groups in mind in crafting what follows.

Based on our time together, our study of relevant data, and the many generous ways RCA members have responded to our work to date, we present the following recommendations to General Synod 2021. While we hope and recommend that all three are adopted, we have structured them in such a way that each can exist independent of the others.

Together, Yet Changed (Recommendation 1—Restructuring)

Prior to the 2018 General Synod, the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) submitted a report to the General Synod Council (GSC) summarizing their understanding of the “current reality” of the Reformed Church in America. In that report, COSE outlined their general sense of the

denomination's present state and future and shared anecdotal reports from their specific regions regarding beliefs and practices around the topic of human sexuality. The report painted a picture of a diverse denomination in belief, practice, and even priorities. While it was difficult for the group to reach consensus around how the current reality should be defined, they were united in their assertion that deep change was needed to address both the present divisiveness around controversial topics and various areas of organizational dysfunction.

Following the COSE report, Don Poest called for the formation of our Vision 2020 Team (as referenced earlier in this report). One of the ways the team spent time in our first year together was reflecting on our past, present, and potential future as a denomination. We looked to works like Lynn Japinga's *Loyalty and Loss*¹ to learn about our past, to the COSE report and to survey data collected from our membership to understand the present, and to the expertise of George Bullard² to help us think about where many denominations, and ours in particular, seem to be headed.

As we reflected on what we learned, some key themes emerged that will give context to the recommendation that follows:

1. The tension and conflict we're facing today are not new realities. There have been numerous points, especially in the last 70 years, where the RCA has been at an impasse. Points of disagreement and tension have included differences of views on things like ecumenical partnerships, social justice/political involvement, merging with another denomination, communism, internal restructuring, the *Church Herald*, church planting models, women in ministry, and human sexuality.³ **This means we currently face something we have previously weathered, but it also means that we are likely to be here again if we do not find a way to handle conflict differently.**
2. Since the mid 1990's, about two-thirds of denominations in North America have shifted away from a "product delivery" model in which the headquarters (General Synod) designs a specific "product" and dispatches it to the branch offices (regions and classes) for distribution to the people. Instead, they have shifted to a model where the corporate assembly empowers a staff to equip the regional and local groups with the tools they need, but encourages them to use the tools in the way that best fits with what the Spirit is doing locally. This is what denominations that thrive are doing (Bullard). **The RCA has not quite made this shift, but we are moving in this direction with some of our initiatives.**
3. George Bullard views the RCA as being made up of three to four groups with unique understandings and priorities—the West, the East, and Iowa/Canada/the Midwest (with Michigan being similar to both the East and the Midwest, depending on which classis or congregation one considers). The COSE report and the second of the surveys we commissioned reveal similar regional identities at work. **These reports seem to indicate that we have already organically shifted away from a larger corporate identity to more regional identities.**

¹ *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994* by Lynn Japinga, Eerdmans Publishing, 2013.

² George Bullard serves as president and strategic coordinator with The Columbia Partnership [TCP]. TCP is a community of Christian leaders seeking to transform the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain vital Christ-centered ministry. Bullard has years of consultative experience within the RCA and has written extensively on the history and future of denominations in North America.

³ Drawn from *Loyalty and Loss*, Japinga

4. According to Bullard, it takes 2,000 churches to be a full-service denomination. We have fewer than 1,000 today, and our numbers are declining. We may not be large enough to support binational, regional, and local assemblies unless they are very well-defined and discrete from one another in function. Local congregations do not want to fund a structure that isn't delivering value and helping them move their mission forward. **We need to strongly consider the roles of our binational, regional, and local assemblies and look to the experiences of other small denominations for the most efficient and effective way to structure ourselves. This will likely mean dissolving our regional synods and restructuring our classes on an affinity model.**
5. The results of the second survey suggest that we desire unity but that we aren't sure what unites us. We want to be mission-focused, but there is a diverse understanding of what that mission looks like. We share a strong desire to be faithful to the Word of God, but we don't know how to function when we differ on our interpretation of it. **Centering us at the highest levels of our organization around the things we *can* all agree on and giving authority to decide the things we can't agree on to the local levels may be the best way to grow our effectiveness and reclaim some of the unity we feel we've lost through this conflict.**

We know that we will face more loss in the coming years, and we can't yet know the full impact of that loss. Some churches will leave the denomination, and we will feel the impact of that in our relationships and our operations. We do, however, know that there will be those who stay. While we did research several possible options for the future structure of the denomination, we believe a restructure should ultimately be detailed and implemented by those who remain within the RCA. It would make little sense for members intending to leave to vote on what will happen to the denomination after their exit. For that reason, we are not recommending specific RCA *Book of Church Order* changes for restructuring to be voted on at this General Synod. To reiterate, we believe those detailed changes should be decided by those who remain in the denomination. However, recognizing that some will feel undecided about their future with the denomination until they have more clarity on what that future will hold, we do want to urge serious consideration of some of the changes we think will give the RCA the best chance at a healthy way forward.

We believe a team should be tasked with the specific work of restructuring the denomination in a way that is deeply informed by our ecclesiology (our theology of what it means to be the church) and seeks to optimize our sustained spiritual and organizational health for the 21st century. This team should include several members of current executive RCA staff as well as representation from those regional or local assemblies who have expressed an intention to remain with the denomination. Based on the research referenced above, our belief is that the best chance for success will include a structure in which:

1. **Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based**, with the ability of any church to choose the classis to which it belongs. We are already seeing these kinds of affinity relationships being sought by congregations both within and outside the RCA. It makes sense that our churches should have the ability to align themselves around shared values, understanding, and practices.
2. **Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.** This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model for classes.
3. **Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level.**
4. **The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod are examined** in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that

remains. Our research shows that the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward. One scenario would be for affinity classes and General Synod to assume the responsibilities of the regions. Options like this need to be evaluated and decided upon by those who remain in the denomination.

Recommendation 1

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should use the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2023.

Note: the Committee of Reference may determine that there are financial implications to this recommendation that necessitates an assessment amount. If this is the case, that amount will be added to the recommendation in the General Synod workbook.

Preserving Our Shared History (Recommendation 2—A New Mission Agency)

We have had multiple opportunities during our two years together as a team to celebrate God's faithfulness in the good efforts of our denomination to see the gospel spread to every part of the globe. At the same time, we have had to face some hard truths about the RCA's declining membership. For many years the overall number of confessing members of RCA congregations has been declining.

Since 1992, we have lost an average of 1 percent per year, and we have informally learned of entire classes' intention to exit the denomination in the near future. These losses have made it and will continue to make it increasingly challenging to fund the work of a full-service denomination, which calls into question whether many of the good works the RCA has begun will ultimately be able to continue.

Much of what the Vision 2020 Team has heard from the RCA over the course of our work reflects a corporate commitment to and desire to preserve this part of the RCA's legacy—that of expanding and strengthening God's kingdom through global missions. When we think through the reality of declining numbers and what separation or a restructure may mean for the organization, this is one of the things no one wants to lose. Additionally, there are sometimes aspects of a denomination (often unrelated to missions) that make it difficult for external organizations to enter into a missions partnership with it. As a team, we wondered if there might be a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed our denomination in global mission and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that

everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy. We believe the following recommendation is the best way to accomplish this.

We recommend that a new non-profit mission agency be formed independent of the RCA (but in partnership with the RCA) to house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions. We can find inspiration for this idea from thriving para-denominational mission agencies like Wycliffe, New Tribes Mission (Ethnos360), Operation Mobilization, China Inland Mission (OMF International), Pioneers, SEND International, and Africa Inland Mission. This specific organization would carry on the legacy of Reformed missions, while the support of churches in disciple-making, leadership development, next-generation spiritual formation, and local missional engagement would remain in the RCA through initiatives like Transformed & Transforming.

The RCA has a rich history of forming agencies that serve the church well, including the Church Growth Fund and Board of Benefits Services. These agencies are structured to serve the broader church if local congregations choose to use them. Similarly, all RCA churches, as well as churches outside the denomination, would be invited to participate in and be equipped by the work of this new para-denominational mission agency. This could include general financial support of the agency, specific financial support of missionaries, prayer support, short-term trips, and project partnerships. We see this as a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed us and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy.

While the leadership of this new missions agency would need to be determined by those tasked with forming the agency, we recognize that the skills and experience needed may be readily available in current RCA staff, so decisions about agency staffing would need to be made in consultation with executive RCA staff. Funding, too, would ultimately be the responsibility of the new agency's board, but the Vision 2020 Team imagines that the RCA might choose to seed this work with funds from the current RCA Global Mission budget. Future funding would likely be found through donations (primarily for missions and similar initiatives) as well as fees charged for services.

Faced with the hard truth that our denomination is shrinking and that global missions is not the only part of our work worth preserving long-term, we also see this agency as being a potential home for other RCA functions and initiatives, *should that be required in the future*. For that reason, we recommend that the agency's mission (as stated in the founding documents) be defined in broad enough terms so that absorption of other RCA efforts and services in the future would be possible. We imagine that if both this recommendation and the restructuring recommendation are approved, the restructuring team would factor these things into their work.

Recommendation 2

To form a new nonprofit mission agency independent of the RCA that will house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions; and further,

To direct the GSC to form an implementation team that will be tasked with incorporating the new agency as a 501(c)(3), drafting bylaws, and recruiting a board of directors, who would then be responsible for appointing an executive director for the new agency in the manner specified in the bylaws. The implementation team

should work closely with the RCA Global Mission team to ensure diligent care for current RCA missionaries during the transition to the new agency. And further,

To instruct the general secretary to transfer a portion of the current RCA missions budget to the new agency as seed money (to be determined by the general secretary in consultation with GSC); and further,

To urge RCA churches and individuals that currently support RCA missionaries and mission projects through Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares to continue that support through the new agency.

Note: the Committee of Reference may determine that there are financial implications to this recommendation that necessitate an additional assessment amount. If this is the case, that amount will be added to the recommendation in the General Synod workbook.

A minority report on Recommendation 2 follows at the end of this report.

Forward with Grace (Recommendation 3—Mutually Generous Separation)

Our hope is that both of the preceding proposals, once formally presented to General Synod, will be adopted by the denomination and that they will meet many of the needs that we have heard expressed. Some who had considered leaving the denomination may choose to stay and see the restructuring as an opportunity to breathe new life into an organization they love. Others may still leave but find ongoing connection with their former denomination through the new mission agency. Still others may decide to forge an entirely new path, to seek God's call on their lives through other relationships and partnerships.

Recognizing that some separation is inevitable, we believe the RCA has an opportunity to act in an exemplary way by providing a generous exit path for those churches which decide to leave and by inviting those churches to also act generously. While the process currently outlined in the *RCA Book of Church Order (BCO)* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]) allows a classis to be generous with a church petitioning for withdrawal from the denomination, it also allows a classis to deny a church's petition for withdrawal or to be less than generous in granting the withdrawal. Given that we are entering a period when there will likely be more petitions being put forth than has been typical, we believe it is the right time to provide more guidance for this process so that generosity is prescribed rather than simply permitted.

In our conversation with the Commission on Church Order, our team has come to the conclusion that such guidance could be provided by proposing that the General Synod adopt rules and regulations for the current process on considering an application for leave to withdraw from the RCA instead of proposing changes to the *BCO* itself. The adoption of rules and regulations is specifically authorized in Section 1 of "Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures" of the *BCO* (2019 edition, p. 75):

Sec. 1. The General Synod shall have power to make all rules and regulations necessary to put into effect any and all articles of the Government, the Disciplinary Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America.

Although this approach is somewhat unconventional and has not been used recently, it has a number of advantages over adopting amendments to the *BCO* that would restrict the ability of the classes to deny a petition. (For helpful commentary and historical precedents, read Allan J. Janssen, *Constitutional Theology, 2nd Edition*, pages 245-248.)

Proposing amendments to the *BCO* has the disadvantage of requiring a two-thirds vote of the classes and a one-year waiting period for the final vote of the General Synod, assuming the amendments are adopted by the General Synod in the first place.

Recommending regulations for the implementation of the current *BCO* processes is advantageous in that they would establish protocols for the consideration of all petitions to either withdraw from the denomination or to transfer to another classis within the RCA. These regulations would be enforceable through the complaint process already provided to address a violation of or failure to comply with “other laws and regulations of the church” (*BCO* Chap. 2, Part II, Art. I, Sec. 1 [2019, p. 89]). If the regional synods agree to follow the regulations adopted by the General Synod, any complaints could be resolved in a timely manner.

Since the adoption of regulations requires only a majority vote by the General Synod, the protocols for approving such petitions could be implemented immediately, eliminating the need for “letters of intent” and rules for retroactive generosity. If the regulations are adopted by a super majority of the General Synod, they could receive wide support as a “common sense” solution to the goals expressed in Recommendation 3. However, since regulations can be adopted by a majority, they could also be amended or rescinded by a simple majority at a future General Synod. We are confident in the careful writing of these regulations, and while some “tweaks” to the regulations may be helpful in the following years based on actual experience, if these regulations are adopted, we highly recommend that they remain in effect until the sunset provision in 2026.

Proposed Regulations for Considering the Transfer of Churches

The following proposed regulations relate to RCA *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]).

Recommendation 3

To adopt the following proposed regulations regarding RCA *Book of Church Order* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3-6 (2019 ed., pp. 40-44):

1. Introduction.

The regulations proposed below are provided to classes considering applications from member churches of the classis for leave to withdraw from the denomination. The Commission on Church Order remains available to provide advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the provisions of the *BCO* as well as these regulations. Requests for transfers are only considered when a consistory files an application following the process outlined in the *BCO*. There is no provision in the *BCO* for churches to transfer other than one church at a time or for a church to become “independent,” that is, to transfer out of the

denomination without joining another denomination. The *Dictionary of Christianity in America* defines denomination as “an association or fellowship of congregations within a religion that have the same beliefs or creed, engage in similar practices, and cooperate with each other to develop and maintain shared enterprises.”⁴ A separate process for transfer is provided for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and a minister must complete this process separately from the process of transferring a church.

Most of the regulations below are related to a church’s financial relationship with and commitments to the agencies and assemblies of the RCA with the goal of allowing a local church to retain its property and other assets while being solely responsible for any liabilities.

A. Unchanged Provisions.

The following provisions of Article 10 remain applicable and are unchanged by the regulations proscribed:

1. A written petition of the consistory must be filed with the stated clerk of classis.
2. The consistory must provide written evidence that the church would be received without reservation by another denomination.
3. The classis committee must meet with the congregation, with the consistory of the church, and with representatives of the denomination with which the church desires to affiliate.
4. The classis committee shall endeavor to ascertain the will of the congregation at a meeting held pursuant to the formalities in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4c of the *BCO*.
5. The classis committee shall file its report with the stated clerk of the classis within six months after its appointment, setting forth its findings and recommendations.
6. The report shall be considered by the classis at a regular or a special meeting held within sixty days after receipt of the report by the stated clerk.

⁴ Reid, Daniel. *Dictionary of Christianity in America: A Comprehensive Resource on the Religious Impulse that Shaped a Continent*. (Intervarsity Press, 1990).

7. The interest of the denomination in the property of a church withdrawing from the denomination shall not be completely divested therefrom until the church shall have met the requirements in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 of the *BCO* (with the possible exception of the repayment of loans from the Church Growth Fund).
8. The consistory shall fulfill any and all outstanding obligations they have as adopting employers to properly fund all accounts maintained for their employees in retirement plans (i.e., the Board of Benefits Services or the Regional Synod of Canada plan), as promised in the provisions of the call form (*BCO*, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134–135]) and outlined in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 of the *BCO* (2019 edition, p. 15).
9. In the event of dissolution of such a church within a period of five years after the classis shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the denomination, such property, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the classis from which the right of withdrawal was received.

B. Regulations.

These regulations shall be applied uniformly across the denomination during this period of response to the Vision 2020 report. The regulations recognize that Christ's kingdom is broader than any specific church, classis, or even denomination. Therefore, determining what is in the best interests of Christ's kingdom requires balancing different factors.

1. Petition to Withdraw from the RCA and Affiliate with Another Denomination. When considering a petition to withdraw from the denomination for the purpose of affiliating with another denomination, the provisions of Article 10 must be applied by each classis as interpreted by the following regulations:
 - a. The classis shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation regarding the question of how Christ's Kingdom may best be served in the matter. The classis will accept that the church can no longer function effectively in its present relationship and that the effectiveness of such congregation as a local church could be

enhanced if it were to affiliate with another denomination on the basis of the petition.

- b. **The classis must allow a church to leave the denomination with its property and other assets if that church has filed a petition as provided in Article 10 and is in compliance with the requirements of the *BCO*, subject to the following conditions:**
 - i. **The consistory has adopted a recommendation to withdraw by a three-fourths vote of the members of consistory.**
 - ii. **The congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation by a three-fourths vote at a congregational meeting called for the purpose of considering the transfer.**
- c. **If the congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation, but with less than a three-fourths majority, the classis must consider the percentage of the congregational vote, a recent transfer of property to the church, forgiveness of or adjustment to assessments or indebtedness, and the recent investment of classis funds in the ministry of the church when considering the division of the assets of the church.**
- d. **A church that is withdrawing is encouraged to continue support of RCA missionary personnel and Global Mission partnerships (mission persons and initiatives to which they have already committed financially) and is encouraged to give sufficient notice before severing these supportive relationships.**
- e. **In all cases where a church withdraws from the denomination before the sunset of these regulations, the church must pay all assessments to the classis (including assessments for the work of the General Synod and regional synod), as follows:**
 - i. **The General Synod and regional synod will assess the classis for the withdrawing church for a period of one year (four consecutive quarters beginning with the quarter in which the petition is filed with the stated clerk of the classis). All four quarters will be calculated based on the consistorial report form ("CRF")**

data and assessment rate in effect at the time the petition is filed even though one or more quarters will likely fall into the next assessment year.

- 1) The convention used for calculation are standard calendar quarters: first quarter, January 1–March 31; second quarter, April 1–June 30; third quarter, July 1–September 30; and fourth quarter, October 1–December 31.
- 2) This method shall be in effect immediately upon adoption by the General Synod for all petitions filed after its adoption.

Example A:

First Reformed Church files a petition on February 3, 2022. The stated clerk notifies the General Synod using a provided form that is also copied to the regional synod. The church is officially released from the denomination in August 2022. Because the petition was filed in the first quarter of 2022, the classis is assessed for FRC's membership for all four quarters of 2022, at the 2022 assessment rate, using the church's statistical data in effect for 2022 (i.e., from the 2020 CRF). After 2022, the classis's assessment billing no longer includes First Reformed Church.

Example B:

First Reformed Church files a petition on August 3, 2022. The stated clerk notifies the General Synod using a provided form that is also copied to the regional synod. The church is officially released from the denomination in January 2023. Because the petition was filed in the third quarter of 2022, the classis is assessed for FRC's membership for the third and fourth quarters of 2022 as well as the first two quarters of 2023, at the 2022 assessment rate, using the church's statistical data currently in effect (i.e., from the 2020 CRF). After the second quarter of 2023, the classis's assessment billing no longer includes First Reformed Church.

- 3) For all petitions filed before the adoption of these regulations, the General Synod and regional synod will continue to assess the classis for the withdrawing church for the remainder of the calendar year in which the church is officially released from the RCA (i.e., not from the date of filing) and the subsequent calendar year, based on the consistorial report form data (“CRF”) and assessment rate(s) in effect for each year. *Note: this is the method that is currently in effect.

Example C:

First Reformed Church files a petition on July 1, 2021. The church is officially released from the denomination on November 15, 2021, and since the church is no longer an organized congregation of the RCA on December 31, 2021, it does not submit a 2021 CRF. The classis is assessed for FRC’s membership for the remainder of 2021 (at the 2021 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2019 CRF) as well as 2022 (at the 2022 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2020 CRF). Because the congregation is not on the 2021 CRF, the classis is not assessed for its membership in 2023.

Example D:

First Reformed Church files a petition on October 1, 2021. The church is still an organized congregation of the RCA as of December 31, 2021, so it files a 2021 CRF. The church is officially released from the denomination on February 15, 2022. The classis is assessed for FRC’s membership for the remainder of 2022 (at the 2022 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2020 CRF) as well as 2023 (at the 2023 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2021 CRF). The congregation does not file a CRF in 2022 (as it has ceased being an organized congregation of the RCA before December 31, 2022), and so the classis is not assessed for its membership in 2024.

- ii. Classes are encouraged to adopt the same method as the General Synod and regional

synods (detailed above) when calculating the remaining assessments for a withdrawing congregation as part of the approval of the petition for leave to withdraw.

- f. Where applicable, a church must pay off loans and other obligations to classes and regional synods, as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those organizations, unless specific written permission is given to continue the regular payment of those loans.**
- g. If the church provides written consent from the Church Growth Fund to maintain an existing note without immediate repayment, such consent constitutes a specific compromise by agreement of the parties as provided in Article 10, Section 5a, and shall not be a basis for denying the petition, retaining any of the church's property, or otherwise deviating from these regulations.**
- h. If a church dissolves within the period specified in Article 10, Section 6 and the classis from which it withdrew is no longer in existence, references in Article 10, Section 6 to "classis" shall be read to include the classis's successor in interest, which may include a regional synod or the General Synod.**
- i. Prior to approving the withdrawal, a church and classis shall cause statements similar to the following to be:**
 - i. recorded in the public record indicating the right of the classis or its successor to the property upon dissolution:**

This affidavit concerns the following described real estate situated in the [insert Municipality], [insert County], [insert State, Province, or Territory]:

The [insert name of classis] has granted [insert name of church] leave to withdraw from the denomination of the Reformed Church in America ("RCA") and transfer to the denomination of [insert name of denomination]. As consideration for approval of the [church name]'s leave to withdraw, the [church name] agrees that in the event of

dissolution of [church name, or its successor organization] within a period of five years after the [classis name] shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the RCA, such property of [church name] or its successor organization, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the [classis name], or its successor organization.

- ii. added to the church's Articles of Incorporation:

The [insert name of classis] has granted [insert name of church] leave to withdraw from the denomination of the Reformed Church in America ("RCA") and transfer to the denomination of [insert name of denomination]. As consideration for approval of the [church name]'s leave to withdraw, the [church name] agrees that in the event of dissolution of [church name, or its successor organization] within a period of five years after the [classis name] shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the RCA, such property of [church name] or its successor organization, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the [classis name], or its successor organization.

- 2. Petition to Transfer to another Classis. During the five-year period of response to the Vision 2020 report, a church may likewise petition its regional synod to withdraw from its classis and transfer to another classis, within or outside the regional synod's bounds.
 - a. The regional synod shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation regarding the question of the furtherance of the work of the gospel. The regional synod will accept that the church can no longer function effectively in its present relationship and that the effectiveness of such congregation as a local church could be enhanced if it were a member of another classis on the basis of the petition.
 - b. Such petitions shall be processed as follows:
 - i. A written petition of the consistory must be filed with the stated clerk of the regional

synod, and a copy given to the stated clerk of the current classis.

- ii. The consistory must provide written evidence that the church would be received without reservation by another classis, as well as its regional synod, if in another regional synod.**
- iii. The regional synod will consult with the consistory, classes, and other regional synod, if applicable, in accordance with Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 4 of the *BCO* (2019, p. 63). After consultation, the regional synod:**
 - 1) may transfer a church from one classis to another classis within its bounds.**
 - 2) must submit the petition and record of consultations to the General Synod for final approval to transfer a church to a classis within the bounds of another regional synod.**
- c. Regional synods must allow a church to leave the classis with its property and other assets if that church has filed a petition in compliance with the requirements of the *BCO*, subject to the following conditions:**
 - i. The consistory has adopted a recommendation to transfer by a three-fourths vote of the members of consistory.**
 - ii. The congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation by a three-fourths vote at a congregational meeting called for the purpose of considering the transfer.**
- d. If there is a majority vote but less than three-fourths, the regional synod must engage in a period of discernment with the church and the classes to determine how best to further the work of the gospel.**
- e. The church must continue to pay assessments for the work of the General Synod and regional synod to the classis being billed by the General Synod and regional synod. The General Synod and regional synod will continue to assess the classis from which the church is transferring for the remainder of the calendar year in which the church**

is officially transferred and the subsequent calendar year, based on the consistorial report form (“CRF”) data and assessment rates in effect for each year.

- f. The church will begin paying assessments for the work of the classis to the receiving classis at the beginning of the second quarter following the date of approval of the transfer. When the church begins payment of the assessment for the work of the classis to the new classis, payment of assessments to the previous classis for the work of the classis shall cease, although payments for the General Synod and regional synod assessments may continue.
 - g. Where applicable, a church must pay off loans and other obligations to classes and regional synods, as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those organizations, unless specific written permission is given to continue the regular payment of those loans.
3. **Complaints and Appeals.**
- a. If the classis denies a consistory’s petition to withdraw, the consistory may file a complaint against the decision of the classis with the regional synod following Chapter 2, Part II of the *BCO*.
 - b. If the regional synod denies a consistory’s petition to transfer to another classis, the consistory may file a complaint against the decision of the regional synod with the General Synod.
 - c. All appeals to the General Synod regarding the transfer or withdrawal of a church will be heard by a panel designated by the General Synod. The panel shall adopt its own rules for consideration of appeals consistent with the provisions of the *BCO*, and shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation within the framework of these regulations.
 - d. The decision of the General Synod panel, and any decision of a lower judicatory for which a complaint or appeal is not filed within the times specified by Chapter 2, Part II, Article 2 and Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, accordingly, shall be final and binding upon all interested parties.

4. General Provisions.

- a. Before a church is officially released from the denomination, the classis must ensure that the church has taken appropriate action to amend its Articles of Incorporation and bylaws, paid all assessments and required loan repayments (or entered into a legally binding note that provides for installment payments), and otherwise fulfilled the provisions of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 of the BCO.**
- b. These regulations shall be of no force and effect for petitions filed to withdraw from the denomination or to transfer classes after June 1, 2026.**

NOTE: Regarding the treatment of and provision for denominational, regional, classis, and local church employees, we encourage the General Synod Council, in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, in cooperation with the general secretary, GSC human resources team, and legal counsel, to continue to conduct a compassionate and orderly evaluation of staff structuring, including the continued provision of fair salaries and benefits packages when possible, and appropriately generous severance packages should budget constraints require downsizing. Further, we encourage the same consideration at the regional synod, classis, and church level for staff at those levels.

Final Thoughts

In closing this report, we wish to offer a few final reflections to you, our beloved colleagues and friends. Foremost, that it has truly been a privilege to serve together in this work. None of us emerges from this journey unchallenged or unchanged. While we confess to being weary from the road, we also find ourselves better for having walked it together. We have sharpened one another, iron against iron, and will carry the marks of our learning with us in gratitude, to God's glory.

As a denomination, the RCA is standing at a crossroads. Having sent our team as scouts to explore different paths, the task before you now is to decide which paths to take. Perhaps surprisingly, our advice in the end has been "take all of them." None is without challenge or loss, but all of them also hold opportunities. For those who decide to stay in the RCA, there is a path that holds the potential for the renewal and strengthening of a denomination they love. For those who choose to go a separate way there is an opportunity to provision them well for their journey, knowing that the work they go to do is for the kingdom we all call home. And before moving on from this crossroads, we have the chance to build something new together in the form of a mission agency, as a place for us to work together, and to preserve some of our best work as a celebration of our shared journey.

May the grace of God go with us all on the roads ahead.

Throughout the process of this work, the Vision 2020 team came to understand that they could have unity without necessarily achieving unanimity. In the case of the team's second recommendation, that of forming a new mission agency, two of our team voiced strong concerns

for the impact of this recommendation on the denomination. Valuing transparency and believing that we are only at our best when everyone can be fully seen and heard, the team agreed that it would be fitting to include a minority report written by these members.

A Minority Report

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the 2020 Team has labored two years together as a diverse group of RCA leaders. As we close our work, two of us strongly oppose Recommendation 2, the formation of a new mission agency. At the request of our team, we now share these objections that prevent us from endorsing this recommendation.

We believe we are part of God's covenant community

When we are baptized into the church, we enter into covenant with God and one another to Christ's mission: "By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work."⁵ We believe Recommendation 2 does not assume a covenantal foundation. Its structure is voluntary and pragmatic. By design, the agency would be extra-ecclesial, existing outside of the connection and accountability of a covenant community. We believe assigning RCA global missions *to function* within a separate para-church organization weakens our Reformed practice of keeping covenant promises to each other.

We believe that God's mission has a church

As was stated and celebrated at the recent Mission 2020 event: "God's church does not have a mission, but God's mission has the Reformed Church in America." The mission of God and the identity of the church are as inseparable as the person of Christ and the work of Christ—indeed, the church and its mission flow from Christ's person and work. Further, our covenant identity and accompanying mission requires us not to separate global and local mission. Recommendation 2 enacts a formal separation of global and local mission, which implies that Christ's presence can be divided. In fact, Christ moves among Christ's body, within every geography.

We believe that the church is called to courageous dialogue

Because Christ is Lord, we need not fear difference. Being connected to one another is hard work, and it is exactly what belongs within God's covenantal community. This community, nourished by the Word and the sacraments, is the location that makes us able to engage in very difficult conversations. It is precisely in deep relationship with those whom we might not agree that the church must wrestle with our understandings of the gospel's call, our differing hermeneutics, and their implications for human sexuality. Recommendation 2 avoids confronting the very real divisions among us and pushes these hard conversations into other communities that do not have the support of covenant bonds.

Conclusion

⁵ RCA Baptism / Profession of Faith Liturgy

The creation of a new mission agency is not the answer to what divides us. What is urgently needed is a robust theological rationale for how the church exists in difference. What holds us together? How do we remain connected to and in covenant with one another?

As the Preamble of the *BCO* states, “The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head” (2019 edition, p. 2). And one of our Standards of Unity, the Belhar Confession, confesses: “that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16); that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23)” Especially in light of our deep divisions, we must hold fast to our union with Christ by the power of the Spirit.

In Christ, all things hold together and Christ is the reconciler of all things who makes peace through the blood of his cross.⁶ It is in this hope—that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and that Christ will come again—that we submit this report.

⁶ Colossians 1