

Overtures

Note: Overtures to the 2020 General Synod, which did not meet, are also included if the sending body indicated that it would like them forwarded to the 2021 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 in America is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works” (*BCO*, Preamble [2019 edition, p. 1), 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. *Merriam-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 achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as we seek to fulfill our mission. It is our theology lived out in the ways we live and work together” (“An Introduction to the *Book of Church Order*,” [2019 edition, p. iii). 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 in an appendix to this workbook.*

Reasons:

1. The paper "Affirmed and Celebrated" was adopted by the New Brunswick Classis in October of 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.

International Pastoral Exchanges

Overture 4

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 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 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 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 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 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 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 8

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 9

The Regional Synod of Albany overtures the General Synod to instruct the Board of Benefits 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.).

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. And Vanguard and Fidelity hold 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 Dec. 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%). 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.

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: “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. 98). 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, representing more than \$12 trillion in assets, have committed to divest (www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-pledges-push-global-fossil-fuel-divestments-over-11-trillion). Wall Street is taking notice. In December 2019, Goldman Sachs announced it would stop investing in much of the coal industry and Arctic extraction (<https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/climate-change/474773-goldman-sachs-says-it-wont-finance-new-coal>), 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 (www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter). 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.”

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: www.pnas.org/content/117/5/2354/tab-figures-data.

Restructure Into Affinity Synods

Overture 10

The Great Lakes City Classis overtures the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to adopt and implement the following Affinity Synods restructuring plan:

To form two new regional synods as of December 31, 2021: The Central Synod, comprised of affinity-based churches who seek to be relationally aligned by adherence to existing General Synod statements regarding human sexuality; and the New Boundaries Synod, comprised of affinity-based churches who seek to be relationally aligned by their conviction that existing General Synod statements regarding human sexuality should not be adhered to with regard to marriage and ordination; and further,

To transfer the classes and churches from these existing regional synods into the two new regional synods as follows: Far West, Great Lakes, Heartland, and Mid-America into the Central Synod, and Albany, Mid-Atlantics, and New York into the New Boundaries Synod (Canada would be unaffected); and further,

To recommend an initial transfer window such that any consistory may petition the General Synod for transfer to the other new synod by February 28, 2022; and further,

To strongly encourage General Synod 2022 to give deference to the petitions of such local congregations to approve such transfer requests; and further,

To recommend to the new regional synods to adopt a substructure resembling their respective current regional synod groupings so as to sustain administrative continuity initially; and further,

To recommend to the new regional synods to develop statements describing their respective theological distinctives for the furtherance of the gospel within their bounds and to consider revising their synod name; and finally,

To instruct the general secretary, General Synod Council, and General Synod Council staff, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, to prepare further recommendations and propose necessary amendments to implement the ongoing restructuring of the denomination around these new affinity synods, including a revised General Synod agenda, assessment implications, and related bylaw updates (if any) for report back to General Synod 2022.

Reasons:

1. “The General Synod shall form regional synods. It may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 67]).
2. The Vision 2020 Report, as part of Recommendation 1 (“Together, Yet Changed”), identified the guiding principle that classes should be “reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based.” Because classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage, the report asserted that “This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model.”
3. The affinity-based restructuring would redirect the time and energies consumed by decades of internal theological discord toward enhancing external kingdom outreach. Each affinity synod could more effectively align its ministry efforts with its theological convictions with a diminished distraction from ongoing doctrinal disagreements with others in the denomination.
4. The Vision 2020 Report, also as part of the guiding principles for Recommendation 1, identified as one result of their research that “the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward.” We believe this reorganization would either provide for the possible continuation of three regional synods or provide a reasonable transition step towards their eventual elimination—which would entail a careful process of *BCO* amendments.
5. The transfer request deadline of February 28, 2022, is intended to allow for any necessary consultations and preparations before General Synod 2022. Ministers may seek to transfer membership to a classis in the opposite affinity synod following the existing process in the *BCO*, with careful consideration given to the nature of their commissioned, approved, or installed ministries.
6. “The regional synod shall create whatever organization it desires for the furtherance of the work of the gospel within its bounds, provided such organization does not infringe upon the prerogatives of the several classes or churches” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 5 [2019 edition, p. 64]). Adopting a substructure that mirrors the current regional synods initially provides administrative continuity and facilitates the transition without immediate disruption to existing staff positions.

Create Grace and Truth Commission

Overture 11

The Classis of Rocky Mountains overtures General Synod of 2021 to create a Grace and Truth Commission that will actively work to align the leaders and ministries of our denomination with our stated beliefs regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. We propose that this commission work with a three-fold mandate toward integrity: a theological mandate, a ministry mandate, and a disciplinary mandate.

Based on the example of the early church in Acts 15, we propose a 12-member team, three leaders from four areas of ministry and spiritual authority within the RCA: three denominational officers, three ministers of Word and sacrament or commissioned pastors, three missionary leaders, and three professors of theology. These leaders would need to affirm the basic biblical and theological framework presented in the previous statements by the denomination. The selection of this team would be made in conjunction by the general secretary, president and vice president. These three leaders would not only select members of the council, but also choose a director (from within the 12 leaders), help form the schedule of meetings, and chart a course for fulfilling all three aspects of the commission mandate.

MANDATE 1 (Theology): To reaffirm and restate the RCA's theological and biblical views on homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, giving special attention to the challenges faced by the leaders and ministries of the RCA today. The commission must think through the implications of our Reformed theological lens (hermeneutic) regarding present day issues facing the church. These questions need to include but are not limited to: leadership, service, sacraments, membership, and jurisdiction. The commission shall then provide counsel, recommendations, and resources to leaders.

MANDATE 2 (Ministry): To identify and/or develop resources and ministries to people within the LGBTQ community that are consistent with the RCA's stated biblical understanding of these issues. The commission must seek to discover and/or develop ministries that reflect the grace and truth of Christ in the areas of outreach, discipleship, and support/encouragement specifically for the LGBTQ community.

MANDATE 3 (Discipline): To address leaders and churches that have been living and ministering in ways that are inconsistent with our stated biblical views surrounding these issues. Following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17, the commission would implement a process of discipline: first, one-on-one discussion with any individual promoting, teaching, or living in sin regarding homosexuality and related issues; second, engage in the discussion another commission member and one in spiritual authority over this individual ("one or two others"); finally, if there is no improvement, the commission can then choose to either begin the appropriate disciplinary processes within our polity or make the necessary recommendations or overtures to the next General Synod to make the needed changes. Of course, any of those in error may opt to leave the RCA, in which case we should be mindful of the words found in our liturgy for church discipline: "Nevertheless, we exhort you, beloved Christians, to count him not as an enemy, but to admonish him at all times as a brother" (RCA *Liturgy and Confessions*, The Order for Church Discipline).

Note: The liturgy referenced above is not found in the current edition of *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*. Historically, the Liturgy also included two orders for church discipline, namely the Order for Excommunication and the Order for Readmission of the Penitent. A board of elders wishing to use the Orders for Church Discipline is referred to the 1968 publication *Liturgy and Psalms*.

Reasons/Further Explanation:

The Classis of Rocky Mountains overtures General Synod of 2021 to create a Grace and Truth Commission that will actively work to align the leaders and ministries of our denomination with our stated beliefs regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. This commission will work with a three-fold mandate toward living in integrity with these stated beliefs: a theological mandate, a ministry mandate, and a disciplinary mandate. At the end of every 12 months, the RCA leadership will evaluate the ongoing need for it and, if such a need exists, establish new or adjusted mandates.

The RCA's stated positions related to homosexuality and the LGBTQ community have been consistent throughout its history. The most definitive statement by the RCA was the paper submitted by the Commission on Theology in 1978 (www.rca.org/synod/statements/#sexuality), which the General Synod voted to make available as a resource and guide to the congregations of the RCA. The following excerpts are from that accepted document:

- "Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality."
- "While avoiding simplistic and obnoxious social crusades, the church must affirm through its preaching and pastoral ministry that homosexuality is not an acceptable alternative lifestyle. God's gracious intent for human sexual fulfillment is the permanent bond of heterosexual love. This redemptive word must be spoken, with sensitivity, caring, and clarity to any person who would make a perverted sexual choice, and to society as a whole."
- "It is one matter to affirm that self-chosen homosexual acts are sinful. It is quite another to reject, defame, and excoriate the humanity of the person who performs them. This distinction has often been missed. It is possible and necessary on biblical grounds to identify homosexuality as a departure from God's intent. However...there are no theological grounds on which a homosexual may be singled out for a greater measure of judgement. All persons bear within them the marks of the fall."
- "The denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology."

Since this declarative statement, the RCA has re-affirmed this position in various ways. Since that 1978 paper, there have been several additional papers and/or statements related to these issues. (See the 1979 statement entitled, "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual," the 1990 General Synod statement related to homosexuality, the 1994 General Synod statement related to the lack of compassion toward the homosexual and reaffirming our theological position, and the 2012 General Synod statement reaffirming our theological position.) There have been affirmations of our liturgies and confessions regarding these issues. (It is worth noting that our marriage liturgies from *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the RCA in America* contain the following statement, "Christian marriage is a joyful covenanting between a man and a woman," see pg. 85; the 2017 General Synod approved the recommendation stating that the Heidelberg Catechism's text on "unchastity" includes a prohibition against homosexuality).

There have even been legal actions that have related to these issues. (In 2005, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield was convicted by the General Synod of violating his vows as a professor of theology and minister of Word and sacrament for officiating the marriage of his daughter to another woman.)

So, the present struggle is not a lack of clarity of the denomination's stated beliefs regarding these issues. The difficulties arise from practices and actions of leaders and churches within the RCA that are inconsistent with our stated beliefs. One might call it a lack of integrity between our stated beliefs and our teachings and actions. This proposed council would begin the necessary and vital work of leading the denomination to a place of living in integrity with these stated beliefs.

The Makeup of the Grace and Truth Commission

When the early church was facing a theological dilemma that threatened to split the church, they turned to their spiritual leaders to discuss and discern the way forward. In Acts 15:2b (NIV), we are told of the church in Antioch:

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Our denomination finds itself in an ongoing struggle that threatens to divide and/or dramatically diminish it as a body. We must now turn to our spiritual leaders. We propose a 12-member team with three leaders from four areas of ministry and spiritual authority within the RCA. These leaders would need to affirm the basic biblical and theological framework presented in the previous statements by the denomination.

- **3 denominational officers:** from our long history of past presidents.
- **3 ministers of Word and sacrament or commissioned pastors:** retired or currently serving.
- **3 missionary leaders:** retired or currently serving.
- **3 professors of theology:** retired or currently serving.

The selection of this team would be made by the general secretary, the General Synod president, and the General Synod vice president. We trust these leaders to be mindful of the racial, ethnic, gender, social-economic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA in the selection of this team. However, more importantly, we trust these leaders to be prayerful and Spirit-led in this selection process. These three leaders would not only select members of the council but also choose a director (from within the 12 leaders), help form the schedule of meetings, and chart a course for fulfilling all three aspects of the commission mandate.

The Commission's Three Mandates

Again, the overarching directive of the commission would be to lead the denomination to a place of living within the integrity of our stated positions regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community.

MANDATE 1 (Theology): To reaffirm and restate the RCA's theological and biblical views on homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, giving special attention to the challenges faced by the leaders and ministries of the RCA today.

Throughout its history, the RCA has sought to live in the tension of the grace and truth of Christ regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. We affirm in the Belgic Confession, “We receive all these books (of the Bible) and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them...” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 5: The Authority of Scripture). So while many claim that modern practices of homosexuality are unique to our era (and thus the Bible doesn’t speak directly to them), we believe these biblical statements remain true and relevant:

1. We believe wholeheartedly that the Lord deeply and passionately loves those who are same-sex-attracted and/or identify as LGBTQ (John 3:16).

- While we were yet sinners (heterosexual and homosexual), Christ gave himself for us and, in love, invites us to new life—kingdom life (Romans 5:6).
- The Lord invites—no he actually woos—LGBTQ people to seek him. He promises that all (homosexual or heterosexual) will find him if we seek him with all our hearts (Jeremiah 29:13).
- The Lord entreats his church to be a community of invitation and kindness (Colossians 3:12) to all peoples regardless of sex, color or orientation—not a place of condemnation (Romans 8:1). The statement “God hates gays” is a gross, unbiblical falsehood and contrary to the heart of God.

2. We believe that the Lord created us in his image (*imago Dei*) and in that image we were created male and female (Genesis 1:27). From this creation design, the Lord instituted Christian marriage between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5).

- This created order is affirmed throughout Scripture (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27; Ephesians 5:31-32).
- Deviation from his created order, i.e., sexual activity outside the context of heterosexual marriage, is considered sin (Matthew 15:19; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; Romans 1:26-27).
- In the story of God (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) homosexuality is located in the fall (Romans 1:18-32) and therefore is something to be redeemed.

The deep struggle that Christians and the church face today is how to hold these two biblical convictions together. We believe Jesus invites all of his church to walk in the tension of these two truths.

Our past statements regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community are seen by most as incomplete. It is not enough to simply state that “God does not bless same-sex sexuality in any circumstance and the churches should do their best to love.” The commission must do some rigorous study, prayer, and discussion about the many issues and nuances related to homosexuality and the church and seek to give guidance and direction to the leaders within it.

The commission must think through the implications of our Reformed theological lens (hermeneutic) regarding present day issues facing the church. These questions need to include but are not limited to:

- a. **Leadership:** If leadership within the church is called to a higher standard (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9) and homosexuality is clearly identified as sin (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Timothy 1:10), can we ordain any leaders in same-sex relationships into the identified roles of pastor, elder, or deacon? What of other leadership roles within the churches and

institutions, such as small group leaders, worship leaders, ministry leaders, teachers, etc.?

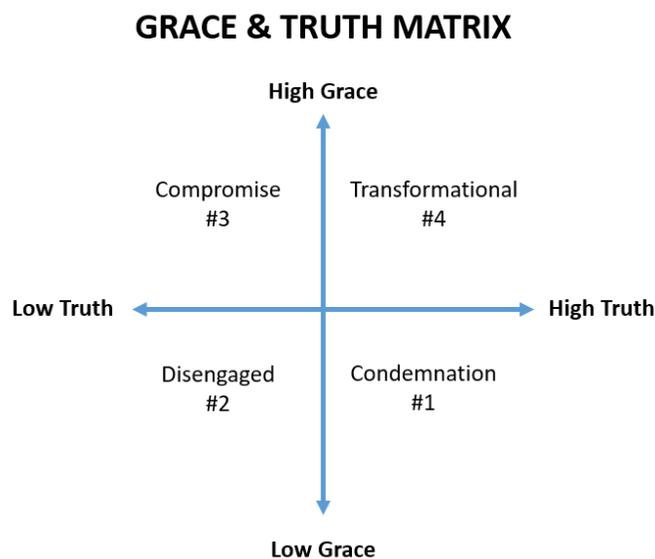
- b. **Service:** Can those in same-sex relationships serve the church in non-leadership roles?
- c. **Sacraments:** Do we open the “means of grace” (communion and baptism) to people in same-sex relationships?
- d. **Membership:** With no biblical category of “local church membership,” do we open membership to those in same-sex relationships?
- e. **Jurisdiction (congregation vs. classis vs. General Synod):** Of the above decisions, what is okay to leave at the local congregational level or classis level? What needs to be prescribed at the General Synod level?

Not only does the commission need to wrestle through these questions but also provide counsel, recommendations, and resources to the leaders that are facing these circumstances today. This counsel and direction would be for both the local leaders in our churches and ministries, and also to the General Synod for response and action.

MANDATE 2 (Ministry): To identify and/or develop resources and ministries to people within the LGBTQ community that are consistent with the RCA’s stated biblical understanding of these issues.

When Jesus came to this broken world, we are told, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV). He did not come filled with one or the other, but both, simultaneously. He modeled a life full and overflowing of the Father’s grace and truth. Jesus not only lived it but invited us to follow his example (John 13:34). He invites us not to resolve this tension, but in all things to carry this tension.

Regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, we are called to live and minister in both high grace and high truth. To compromise on either is insufficient for us. We are to minister to and love all people in the context of his grace and truth. We recommend the commission use the following matrix and its four quadrants to help shape each ministry and resource of this mandate.



Understanding the Grace and Truth Matrix as it relates to the issues of homosexuality. The quadrants represent the following approaches by leaders and churches.

1. **Low Grace and High Truth, the Condemnation Quadrant:** These leaders and churches proclaim the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexuality, but fail to embrace this community with the love of Christ. This comes across as condemnation and judgment.
2. **Low Grace and Low Truth, the Disengaged Quadrant:** Churches and leaders that fail to love people with the compassion of Christ and also fail to speak the truth of God in love.
3. **High Grace and Low Truth, the Compromised Quadrant:** This quadrant represents leaders and churches that have sought to be open and affirming to the LGBTQ community, sharing the love of God for them. However, these same leaders and churches fail to speak the truth of Scripture in love, not sharing the prohibitions on sexual activity outside of the context of heterosexual marriage.
4. **High Grace and High Truth, the Transformational Quadrant:** These leaders and churches are loving people within the LGBTQ community well. They invite them into a community where they can wholeheartedly seek the Lord and grow in a personal relationship with him. And yet, at the same time, they thoughtfully and pastorally speak the truth in love regarding what the Lord teaches on homosexuality.

We can't allow these issues to remain only in the theological and/or polity arena. We must begin to seek becoming a denomination that is truly ministering the grace and truth of Jesus to the LGBTQ community. We need to think deeply and prayerfully about the ways we create a culture of grace and truth. What does it look like to be churches of grace and truth which allow all people to grow and thrive, to be transformed by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), and to be conformed to the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19)?

Creating cultures of GRACE and TRUTH

The commission must wrestle with these ministry questions, seeking to discover and/or develop ministries that reflect the grace and truth of Christ.

- a. **Outreach:** How is the gospel good news (Luke 2:10) specifically to the LGBTQ community? What does it look like to invite them to seek Jesus and His kingdom (Matthew 6:33) with us, as they wrestle with issues of sexual identity and same-sex relationships?
- b. **Discipleship:** What does sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3) and restoration look like to people within the LGBTQ community? What does it mean to be "hidden in Christ" (Colossians 3:3), to find your identity in Christ?
- c. **Support and Encouragement:** What does it look like to offer true community (Acts 2:42-49) and sacred friendship (John 13:34-35) to our brothers and sisters who wrestle with these issues?

The commission needs to do the prayerful work of seeking, evaluating, and possibly creating ministries to be resources for RCA leaders who are serving the LGBTQ community. Possible authors for the commission to review: Dr. Mark Yarhouse, author of many books, including *Homosexuality and the Christian*, and leader of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute; Dr. Preston Sprinkle, author of several books, including *People to be Loved*, and leader of The

Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender (centerforfaith.com); Rev. Dr. Wesley Hill, author of *Washed and Waiting* and *Spiritual Friendship*, www.spiritualfriendship.org.

MANDATE 3 (Discipline): To address leaders and churches that have been living and ministering in ways that are inconsistent with our stated biblical views surrounding these issues.

Scripture instructs us to lovingly address sin within our communities of faith. The most poignant example within Scripture is perhaps in the book of Revelation, when the risen Christ speaks to the churches. To the church in Pergamum, he blesses them but then reprimands them for not addressing those who are holding to the “teachings of Balaam” and those who hold to the teachings of “the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:12-17). He then also addresses the church in Thyatira, saying,

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling” (Revelation 2:20-21, NIV).

Jesus is reprimanding these churches for “tolerating” false teaching and sin within their communities of faith. He is directing the leadership of the churches to confront and address those among them who are in error. A major reason we find ourselves in such a difficult place as a denomination is that our leaders have failed to address sin as the Scriptures command.

The RCA has been clear and consistent in understanding homosexuality and same-sex activity and relationships from a Reformed perspective. Furthermore, each of our leaders declared their commitment and submission to the Scriptures, and the Reformed understanding of the Scriptures, through the Standards of Unity.

...[I]n becoming a licensed candidate for the ministry [minister of the Word of God] in the Reformed Church in America [I] sincerely and gladly declare before God and with you that I believe the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America. I accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life. I accept the Standards as historical and faithful witnesses to the Word of God (*Book of Church Order*, Declaration for Licensed Candidates [2019 edition, p. 131]).

So the teaching/affirming and living into any form of same-sex sexual activity amounts to the breaking of the covenantal commitments we have made as leaders in the RCA. Any leader doing so must be called to account for their teachings and actions.

The Belgic Confession articulates that discipline within the church is necessary and essential. “So we accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God” (*The Belgic Confession*, Article 32). Scripture states that there are times in which we must separate from those who are in error (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13). However, the purpose and desire of this confrontation is always restoration. Paul says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (Galatians 6:1, NIV).

Following the Principles of Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus gave these instructions regarding discipline within the church:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17, NIV).

- a. **One-on-one discussion:** The commission will appoint an individual from within their team to engage with a brother or sister that is promoting, teaching or living in sin regarding homosexuality and the related issues.
- b. **One or two others:** The next step would be to engage another commission member and a leader that is in a position of spiritual authority over the brother or sister. This could be a classis, regional, or institutional leader.
- c. **Denominational engagement:** If there is still no movement, then the commission can take two possible actions. First, they can begin the appropriate disciplinary processes within our polity. Second, they can make the necessary recommendations or overtures to the next General Synod to make the needed changes in our polity to bring the discipline appropriated by the Scriptures and our creeds and confessions.

If our brothers and sisters who are in error decline to repent and choose to leave the RCA, we should be mindful of the words found in our liturgy for church discipline. “Nevertheless, we exhort you, beloved Christians, to count him not as an enemy, but to admonish him at all times as a brother” (RCA *Liturgy and Confessions*, The Order for Church Discipline).

Note: *Liturgy and Confessions* is a previous version of the RCA’s liturgy, published in 1968. The Order for Church Discipline does not appear in the current version of the RCA’s liturgy, *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*.

Conclusion

We believe that the creation of this Grace and Truth Commission and the implementation of this three-fold mandate would go a long way in restoring the integrity of the RCA. Furthermore, it would go a long way in sharing the love of Christ with all people, particularly those within the LGBTQ community.