

GENERAL SYNOD 2021 DISCERNMENT GROUPS REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Three times over two days the General Synod 2021 delegates met in discernment groups to reflect prayerfully and organically on the three recommendations from the Vision 2020 Report.

These groups were formed for the purpose of discernment: to listen to God, listen to each other, and consider the future of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) together. Each group appointed a scribe to report back comments, reflections, and questions from their discussions. A few facilitators from these discernment groups reviewed all of the feedback provided by the scribes, with support from members of the Vision 2020 Team.

Here are the highlights and common themes we heard across the discernment groups.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Affirmed in Recommendation #1

- There is clear recognition that structural change is needed in order to move forward as a denomination. This recommendation may be the best way to maintain relationship with churches that might otherwise leave.
- It maintains and acknowledges classis authority. By leaving decisions to the classis we allow greater diversity and the potential to maintain the overall unity of the denomination.
- It acknowledges that we are dealing with an issue that is larger than human sexuality, i.e., authority, Scripture interpretation

Resisted in Recommendation #1

- There is a concern about “just kicking the can down the road.” The process is taking so long and there is little or no progress happening.
- It dilutes or ends the geographic reality of classes.
- There will be loss of diversity within classes.
- It creates an us versus them mentality.
- Where does the concept of affinity classis end? (How far does it go?)
- There are potential disruptions and shuffling of members between churches based on affinities, particularly in areas with high church density.
- It doesn't deal with the underlying issue of disunity.
- There is fear that choosing affinity classes will lead to division in the local church.

Questions regarding Recommendation #1

- How many classes, and what size of classis?
- Where does the judicatory fit in this structure?
- Can we remain a denomination if we lose too many churches/people?
- What is the timeline for this happening?
- Who decides who makes up the restructuring task force?

Potential impacts of Recommendation #1 on the RCA

- Challenges in gathering together and in pastoral care/oversight, which become more difficult over greater distances
- Hard to decide where individuals fit, as restructuring feels forced, causes splits in the congregations
- Financial burden of creating another task force
- Uncertainty about the RCA “brand” (what to expect when you enter an RCA church)

- People in the pews don't care about the denomination or classis.
- There will be an impact if something doesn't change.
- Hurts the overall mission of the church
- The potential impacts of Recommendation #1 are less than the potential impacts of a split.
- How does this impact the staff?
- How does this impact Canada?
- How does this impact ecumenical partners?

Other considerations that might have an impact on Recommendation #1

- Overture 10 was brought up numerous times; people wondered whether it might have something to offer.
- The Alliance of Reformed Churches (A.R.C.) was also brought up twice; a few people wondered if it might provide an example of organizational clarity.
- Feeling the pressure to "get something done"
- The Conscience Clause is an example of having a denominational position but allowing a minority view; could this be considered?

Delegates' sense of God's heart for the RCA in relation to Recommendation #1

- God desires unity, truth, and peace. We're called to listen to God and to each other. We need love, acceptance, and patience in the process. We also need to move on (think of Paul and Barnabas, where division led to furthering the church).

Additional thoughts regarding Recommendation #1

- Did we get distracted from what is important?
- Could it be a testimony to the world if we work through this hard time?
- Somewhere unity got equated with sameness.
- Why are we not willing to address polity?

RECOMMENDATION #2

Affirmed in Recommendation #2

- It values Global Mission and missionaries.
- It acknowledges that moving Global Mission from the denominational structure might help churches and classes support missions. It might give an opportunity for churches outside of the RCA to support RCA missions/missionaries.
- The intent to preserve Global Mission in the midst of conflict and division. This recommendation unites people in the intent to protect missions, missionaries, and the people they serve.
- A shared love and appreciation for the missionaries. We should not leave missionaries in the lurch.

Resisted in Recommendation #2

- There is nothing that prohibits a non-RCA church from supporting an RCA missionary; this takes away covenant responsibility that we presently have with Global Mission.
- It seems a bit premature to make a decision on this recommendation. We don't yet have enough information on how many are leaving and whether or not they want to support these same missionaries.
- This would create a loss of a denominational global mission ministry, both its deep history and current work. How can we be a denomination without a missions component?
- People have concern for the missionaries and are worried about JP. If this passes, how will this negatively impact them?

Questions regarding Recommendation #2

- How do the RCA missionaries and Global Mission staff feel about this? All of us probably should have done research on this prior to General Synod, but before voting, we would like to hear from them as much as possible.
- Is there really a need for a different structure since the financial support is already in place?
- Where is the data that shows a potential loss of support for Global Mission (should churches leave)?
- What will this do to the relationships with host countries/governments if the missionaries no longer hold the RCA name?
- Overarching questions of the relationship between the church and mission
- How would this affect our relations with our ecumenical partners?

Potential impact of Recommendation #2 on the RCA

- Potential loss of support for missionaries from local churches
- Loss of the RCA's key identity. This could potentially remove the mission life-blood from the RCA and remove the voice of the global church in local RCA churches.
- If this passes will there still be a missionary delegate to synod?
- Mission support provides a point of unity for the RCA. We would lose this.
- How would new missionaries get connected to RCA churches?
- This may not have an impact or make much of a difference on a congregational level.

Other considerations that might have an impact on recommendation #2

- How is this recommendation impacted if Recommendation 1 or Overture 10 passes?
- This decision should be made in the future when more information about who is leaving or staying is available. They could share their opinions on this topic. It's not wise to choose now; to wait is better.
- Appreciation for the minority report

Delegates' sense of God's heart for the RCA in relation to Recommendation #2

- Global mission is God's heart. Jesus gave us the Great Commission and a charge in Acts 1:8.
- Mission is the essence of God's work, and support is needed no matter what. Mission is central to the church; see the Great Commission.
- God desires for us to be his hands and feet and to be engaged in missions. If this recommendation facilitates living that out, it would be a good thing.
- To communicate the gospel to all the nations, and this could be done whether or not the recommendation passes.
- Can we be divided on a theological position but united in mission?

RECOMMENDATION #3

Affirmed in Recommendation #3

- It acknowledges the reality that churches will leave, even as we grieve this
- It is mutually generous, fair, and equitable.
- It provides a clear, standardized process for all churches/classes in the RCA.
- The spirit of it is captured in this phrase: "Holding the door open" rather than "don't let the door hit you on the way out."
- The "rules and regulations" approach allows for immediate implementation as opposed to a lengthy ratification process.
- The sunset clause provides a helpful window that gives adequate time for churches to discern.

Resisted in Recommendation #3

- There is pain in this. Feelings of loss and sadness.
- There seem to be unanswered questions and ambiguity around cases that are "exceptions."

- How will these rules and regulations be enforced?
- Are we making it too easy or expedient for a church to leave? What about the value of covenant?
- Concerns about a power shift: Is this giving too much authority to General Synod and taking away authority from classes?
- Are we setting a precedent with a “rules and regulations” approach for when other conflicts arise in the future?
- This doesn’t address the deeper issues where there is disagreement and conflict.

Questions regarding Recommendation #3

- Many questions related to specific situations and especially hypothetical situations
- Is this binding and enforceable, or does it depend only on “good will”? What happens if the church or classis doesn’t act with “good will”?
- What are the legal ramifications?
- How’s this different from what’s in the *BCO* now?
- What qualifies as a “denomination,” and is becoming “independent” an option?
- How will the classis manage the volume of churches that may leave, and what will happen to the classis if most or all of the churches leave?

Potential impacts of Recommendation #3 on the RCA

- The impact is uneven. It may not have much impact on some congregations and classes, *and* it will have a major impact on others.
- Involves loss and this requires processing grief and practicing lament. This may be more long-term in some parts of the church.
- This will lead to conflict in some churches and families, but also may provide relief to others. It allows churches to stay in positive relationships with each other, even if their relationships change.
- Separation will lead to grieving, restructuring, and a negative financial impact. But it may be necessary and could lead to greater health long term.
- Some church members will be surprised, while others have been well-informed.
- The RCA may become smaller, and this will have a financial impact. It will be necessary to downsize in terms of staff and programs.
- It could lead to greater health in the RCA and cause less strife.
- It could create echo chambers and lead to further division.
- If it is passed, this increases trust. If not, it may breed more suspicion and mistrust.
- It could create a sudden and heavy workload for some classes and staff.
- Both churches that stay and churches that leave might engage the world in more positive ways.

Delegates’ sense of God’s heart for the RCA in relation to Recommendation #3

- God desires unity and faithfulness to our covenant promises. And when separation is a reality, God wants us to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in the ways we treat each other.
- We need to learn how to manage conflict in healthy ways.
- God is sovereign and will work together for good, even through the pain of separation.

Final comments from the groups

- The discernment group participants expressed gratitude for the process, their groups, the facilitators, and the Vision 2020 Team.
- “We are grateful for the opportunity to listen to each other. We have shared deeply with one another. We need to see faces, not issues.”
- “Our discussion group has moved me from heavy-hearted to hopeful. The three recommendations offer us a way forward and a path towards figuring out what is next.”

- “This is a very tough decision and we need to keep praying about it. The real issue is how we can be together in a way that is gracious and loving.”