

Overtures

Ensure Prayers Are Explicitly Christian

Overture 1

The Classis of Rocky Mountains respectfully overtures the 2022 General Synod to instruct the Commission on Christian Action that any item on which the commission feels led to offer a prayer for the use and/or benefit of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), said prayer shall be explicitly Christian in nature, i.e., to make mention of the person and/or work of the Lord Jesus as it relates to the issue the commission is concerned with, and shall be offered in the name of Jesus.

Reasons:

First, in the aftermath of the recent military action taking place in Ukraine, the following prayer was made available to the RCA through the Faithward website (www.faithward.org/prayers-for-gods-mercy-in-ukraine):

Amid the increasing tensions on the Russian and Ukrainian border, the church lifts these prayers to our merciful God.

God of Peace, who desires your children to live in harmony, we humbly ask that you—by your Holy Spirit—restrain those who would make war. Give them a new desire to live in accord with all people.

In your mercy, hear our prayer.

Great God of Comfort, who desires all people to live without strife, we humbly pray that your Holy Spirit will bring peace and comfort to those in Ukraine who live under the fearful threat of invasion. Give them hope and confidence in your divine sovereignty.

In your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of Wisdom, who holds the hearts and minds of all in your hands, we humbly pray that you will put thoughts of peace in the minds of world leaders and words of peace in their mouths that a peaceful solution might be found to these escalating tensions on the Russian–Ukrainian border. Gift world leaders with wisdom and desires for peace and justice. May cool heads from among all involved prevail.

In your mercy, hear our prayer.

God who welcomed children while walking on this earth, we humbly pray that you will protect all children if conflict occurs. Surround them and their caretakers with a shield of protection. Guard them from all harm, that they may survive whatever may befall and that they will know your safety and live in innocence.

In your mercy, hear our prayer.

Great God, who created your church to be your body on this earth. We humbly pray that you make your church in Ukraine strong, be it in war or in peace. Give your grace to the faithful disciples in the nations so that they may continue to be faithful witnesses to you by their faithful actions during these troubling times.

In your mercy, hear our prayer.

While the intent to offer a prayer in the face of the situation in Ukraine is good, the prayer offered to the RCA is very generic in nature, such that all mentions of God, except for the references to the Holy Spirit in the first and second petitions, are vague and could be taken by a person who holds to virtually any faith system to mean the god that they worship, rather than the Triune God of Father, Son, and Spirit that is worshiped by the membership of the RCA. Additionally, there is no mention at all of the person and/or work of Jesus, who is the distinctive and unique revelation of God that sets Christianity apart from every other belief system. Jesus is in fact the one who commands his followers to pray in his name, per John 14:13-14.

Second, by its creeds and confessions (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Belhar Confession), each of which is explicitly Christian in both nature and wording, the RCA stands firmly in the Reformed tradition. As we seek to witness the good news of the Lord Jesus to the world, living out both the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), both the words we speak to each other within the RCA, such as the words of this prayer for Ukraine, and the words that we speak to the world, through actions of the Commission on Christian Action, should continually point people to the singular hope that comes through faith in Jesus.

Change Restructuring Team Reporting Date

Overture 2

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

To charge the appointed RCA Restructuring Team to move up their timeline and submit a definitive report in time to be presented to the 2023 Annual Meeting.

Reasons:

1. The RCA is hemorrhaging congregations at an alarming rate. It is clear that many of those leaving are frustrated with the prospect of a prolonged period of uncertainty. Until a clear path forward is communicated to the body, this trend will continue.
2. Under our polity, decisions made at the General Synod level, particularly those involving changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, move at a very deliberate pace. Congregations and the classes that serve them must respond to our challenges in real time. There is a needful urgency at this level. Since we cannot change the pace of General Synod, it behooves our teams and commissions to do their work expediently.
3. Those who are contemplating leaving the RCA can easily list reasons why they might choose to do so, or are hearing justifications from those who already have. The debates of this are distracting, and the current state of erosion is painful. We should embrace a sense of responsibility to provide reasons to stay with all due urgency, which must include mapping out a clear path forward.

Add Posting Date to GSC Minutes and Adopt Additional Definition Around New Business

Overture 3

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2022 General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council (GSC) to make sure that GSC minutes posted to the RCA website include a clearly visible posting date in the minutes and on the website;

and further, that the General Synod allow as new business any matter related to an item in GSC minutes that were posted less than forty-five (45) days from the cut-off date for business to be introduced by task forces, commissions, classes, or regional synods for the General Synod workbook.

Reasons:

1. Posting dates for the GSC minutes are not easily found by users of the RCA website.
2. It is not realistic to expect any assembly, commission, or agency of the church to meet, deliberate, decide, compose, approve, and submit for inclusion in the General Synod workbook, as part of the normal course of business, any recommendation regarding business and/or actions published in the GSC minutes in a time frame of less than forty-five (45) days.

General Synod to Approve Time and Place of General Synod Meetings

Overture 4

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2022 General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to formulate and propose an amendment to *BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 1 that would make it clear that the Synod shall approve the time and place of the next stated session of General Synod except in such cases where circumstances require the Committee on Emergencies to do so.

Reason:

The report of the Commission on Church Order to the 2021 General Synod, in proposing the amendment allowing for the Committee on Emergencies to act on a time and place for a stated session of the General Synod as required, noted: "At least in recent years, the practice has been that the GSC includes the time and place of the next session of the General Synod in its report, and no official action is taken by the assembly." Since this is an action effecting the entire assembly and the whole of the church, and since stated sessions have the power to propose amendments to the Constitution of the church and make declarative actions regarding them, it seems appropriate that, in ordinary business, the entire synod should vote on the time and place of the next stated meeting.

Determine Equitable Assessment/Covenant Shares Formula for Dual-Affiliated Congregations

Overture 5

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2022 General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order, meeting with representatives of classes

with dual-affiliated consistories, to develop a plan that accounts for an equitable payment of assessments/covenant shares without placing an undue burden on either classes or the denomination, for report to the 2023 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. The Commission on Church Order has issued an advisory interpretation on assessments for affiliated consistories which was shared with all stated clerks and which we expect is part of the commission's report to this General Synod.
2. Some dual-affiliated consistories have a formula for dealing with assessments. All dual-affiliated consistories have gone through agreed-upon processes with their classes, some taking several years, to deal with this issue in decent and proper order as they understood it at the time.
3. As the denomination enters into a plan for covenant shares instead of assessments—an income-based division of the costs of denominational ministry rather than a per-capita-based division—many of these formulae are again up in the air, and both consistories and classes are concerned and uncertain. While the Commission on Church Order's advisory interpretation was good polity, it might be considered less than pastoral.
4. The consistories who are trying to continue to participate in the full life of the RCA, who, at the time they chose dual-affiliation, felt a genuine threat to their ministries from some people in the denomination who directly told these consistories and congregations that they were not wanted, need some gesture of support. The RCA has recently been very intentional about generous separation with those who have chosen to leave the denomination, and those who are desperately trying to stay could interpret this ruling as punitive.
5. Had the 2017 General Synod approved the recommendation of the Commission on Church Order at that time, there would have been language and frameworks for dual-affiliated consistories in time for all of the assemblies in question to follow an agreed-upon protocol. Instead, all of this has been delayed by several years, while consistories that felt threatened had to make choices.