

## Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met digitally on November 16, November 29, and December 6, 2021, as well as on January 25, January 26, and February 16, 2022.

COT is honored to serve the church through its theological reflections and is humbled by such responsibility and trust. The commission seeks to fulfill its tasks with integrity and faithfulness and prays that its work would be fruitful for the church. The commission's primary task this year was assigned by General Synod 2021. The commission also began to prepare for work that will be reported back to General Synod 2023, as well as responding to requests from Reformed Church in America (RCA) staff.

### Referral Regarding Affinity Synods

In response to an overture from Great Lakes City Classis, General Synod 2021 passed ONB 21-10, which included an instruction to the Commission on Theology:

To direct the RF 21-1 team to consider affinity regional synods in accordance with principles 1 and 4 of the Vision 2020 report; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology to study the structure and implications of affinity synods, with a report to General Synod in 2022 (*MGS 2021*, pp. 121-123).

At its fall meetings, the commission discussed the possibilities and challenges presented by "affinity" being used as a structural principle for the RCA, with particular emphasis on the underlying understanding of the church contained in such a proposal. To this end, the commission has written "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" as a resource for congregations and larger assemblies seeking to understand what it means to belong to the RCA, as well as for the Restructuring Team as they do their work. The full text of the paper and the accompanying recommendation are included at the end of this report.

### Ongoing Work

At General Synod 2021, an overture from the Classis of New Brunswick led to the adoption of ONB 21-2, which instructed "the Commission on Theology to review the paper 'Affirmed and Celebrated,' prepared by a committee of and adopted by the Classis of New Brunswick, with an eye as to the paper's doctrinal soundness in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture, and to report on its findings to the 2023 General Synod" (*MGS 2021*, pp. 112-113). The commission has begun reviewing our previous work related to the Reformed understanding of Scripture and human sexuality in preparation for reviewing "Affirmed and Celebrated."

The commission received a request from the RCA staff to address whether the RCA should have a preferred Bible translation in its publications. The commission is working on a resource on the virtues and vices in Bible translation. COT also received a request from the staff to address the topic of bodily resurrection and is preparing a resource.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the church in its mission and gives glory to its head, Jesus Christ.

## **Acknowledgments**

The commission also offers thanks to Dr. David Komline, associate professor of church history at Western Theological Seminary; Dr. James V. Brownson, General Synod professor, James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary; and Rev. Stephen Shaffer, pastor of Bethel Reformed Church in Brantford, Ontario, for their faithful and fruitful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending and the commission is sincerely grateful for their gifts, leadership, and generous and significant contributions to the life of the church, especially the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Rev. Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his consistent and effective guidance of its work.

## **BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS**

*“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).*

*“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27).*

Imagine a brother and sister who live in the same city but refuse to sit in the same room together. The disagreement is deep and has been building for a long time. Because of the mounting tension, the family decides that they are still family but will have separate Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter celebrations. Some of the uncles, aunts, and cousins will meet at the brother’s house, while others will meet not far down the road at the sister’s home. In this way, the family hopes that they can finally start talking about something other than the conflict between these two siblings. They want to move on from this familial struggle. However, a solution that may seem more peaceful is not always healthier.

For the past several years, particularly through the work of the Vision 2020 Team, the RCA has wrestled with what binds us together as a denomination amidst significant division. “Affinity” (expressed most often in reference to affinity synods or classes) is being considered as a structuring principle for the future of the denomination, particularly as a way of maintaining unity and mission in this conflictual time. General Synod 2021 passed the following recommendation related to the possibility of affinity regional synods:

To direct the RF 21-1 team to consider affinity regional synods in accordance with principles 1 and 4 of the Vision 2020 report; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology to study the structure and implications of affinity synods, with a report to General Synod in 2022 (ONB 21-10, *MGS 2021*, p. 123).

This paper is the Commission on Theology’s response to this request.

As the RCA considers reorganization models, including the shift of regional synods to an affinity-based model, we as a denomination must first look at the more fundamental question of mutual belonging. Why are we together as a family? What binds us together in the RCA, and how should those ties affect the way we structure our life together as a denomination? Only once we have answered what unites us can we then think clearly about which forms and structures will deepen that bond and which will, like the family with separate Thanksgivings, only give the appearance of peace while deepening the fractures.

In ONB 21-10, General Synod 2021 tasked the Commission on Theology to report on *one specific way* that the RCA might reorganize, instructing “the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology to study the structure and implications of affinity synods, with a report to General Synod in 2022.” With this assignment as our guide, this paper will discuss **mutual belonging in Christ, mutual belonging in the RCA, and the effect affinity assemblies could have on mutual belonging in the RCA**. It is our hope that this review of mutuality within our denomination will present a framework for our conversations around restructuring the RCA.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mutual Belonging in Christ**

What binds us together as the RCA? What unites our many diverse congregations into one church? As our doctrinal standards profess, we belong to Jesus Christ. Christ has claimed his church, and by the Spirit, we have been brought into union with Christ. The opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort—in life and in death?” The answer: “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Jesus Christ is where we belong. It is “in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 16:38); he is our foundation for mission and service.<sup>20</sup> Christ is the one who unites us to himself and binds the church together by the work of his Spirit. As Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 54 proclaims, Christ “gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.”<sup>21</sup> Neither as individuals, nor as congregations and classes, do we belong to ourselves. We have all been bought with a price—the blood of Jesus shed on the cross (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Alongside our belonging to Christ comes our belonging to one another. Because we belong to Jesus Christ (body and soul), we as Christians belong to one another. Therefore, we do not own ourselves; we do not need to live as if our life, our future, our identity was something we needed to create, forge, or manufacture. Instead, we have been given an identity. We have already been claimed. The Belgic Confession, Article 28, calls for all believers to be united to the church:

But all people are obliged

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<sup>18</sup> For a survey of the history of the regional synod, see Howard D. Schipper, “An Essay on the Particular Synod of Michigan (Reformed Church in America): Its History, Present Identity and Program, and Its Future,” 1987, <https://repository.westernsem.edu/xmlui/handle/1866/1644>.

<sup>16</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1 in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen C. Shaffer, *Rooted: Growing in Christ in a Rootless Age* (Brantford, Ontario: Peniel Press, 2022), 49.

<sup>21</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54.

to join and unite with it,  
keeping the unity of the church  
by submitting to its instruction and discipline,  
by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ,  
and by serving to build up one another,  
according to the gifts God has given them  
*as members of each other*  
*in the same body.* (emphasis added)<sup>22</sup>

The Belgic Confession draws from Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Paul goes on to talk about how the various members of the human body are united and indispensable. Though there is a diversity of gifts, there is a fundamental unity to the body of Christ.

Unity in Christ is not easy. The apostle Paul reminds us through his life and ministry that such unity is not accomplished by us but by God. When people of faith are caught in antagonistic battles over the core of our faith, Paul states that there is only one gospel, which he received not from a human source, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11). Some differences in the life of the church do not touch on the core of the gospel, while others do. Throughout the New Testament letters, the gospel (and its implications for life in Christ) was guarded against error and misrepresentation (Galatians 1:6-9). However, at other, less significant issues, Paul cautions compassion and patience for those who believe differently and a trust that God will lead them to the truth (Philippians 3:15).

To belong to Christ is to belong to his body, the church. We cannot belong to Christ apart from his body. This is why division (schism) was viewed so seriously by the Reformers. Schism equates to tearing apart the body of Christ. As John Calvin says, "The church is called 'catholic' or 'universal,' because there cannot be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder—which cannot happen!"<sup>23</sup> Because the church is bound to Christ, to tear apart the church is akin to attempting to rip Christ apart. Even in the midst of deep disagreement, believers should recall the New Testament principle: the various members of the body of Christ are joined together because of our mutual belonging in Christ.

The many members of the church are united in Christ as one body and called to live out that unity in visible ways. Like sinews and ligaments hold together the human body, Christ holds together the diverse parts of the body of Christ through 1) our bonds of love and 2) our unity in true faith.

First, Christians belong to one another as we are bound together by the love of Christ, which manifests in our love for one another: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2). "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As Stephen Shaffer urges us, "We live and move and act because we *already* belong, not in order to belong.

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<sup>22</sup> Belgic Confession, Article 28 in *Our Faith*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles, volume 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.1.2

Because Jesus lived and died for us, we can now, in gratitude, live and die for him.”<sup>24</sup> The love of God in Christ *for us* leads to a life of love *for others*.

This is the unity in true faith—unity seen in the mutual love between members of the church. Christ has given us gifts and a place within his body, the church, and we are called to use those gifts in unity for the building up of the church. According to Question and Answer 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism, “believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts,” and it is our duty to use these gifts “readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.”<sup>25</sup> We share in Christ’s gifts and then share these gifts in love for one another.

Second, Christians belong to one another as we are bound and united together by our common faith in the Triune God. In explaining what we mean when we confess “the holy catholic church,” the Heidelberg Catechism proclaims that the church Christ has gathered is “united in true faith.”<sup>26</sup> There is a doctrinal aspect of mutual belonging in Christ. Along with the ecumenical creeds, the RCA confesses four standards of unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belhar Confession. These are standards *of unity* because their purpose is to unite the church in true faith in its Lord, Jesus Christ. Christ unifies his church under his Word through the confession of the gospel. One of the visible ways we are bound to one another in the RCA is through our common confession of these standards of unity.

Because Christians belong to Christ, we also belong to one another in the body of Christ. This bond is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but also shows up in visible ways through our mutual love of one another and our common confession of the Christian faith. As Calvin urges, “wherever church unity is commended to us, this is required: that while our minds agree in Christ, our will should also be joined with mutual benevolence in Christ.”<sup>27</sup> Mutual love and common confession are visible signs of our belonging to one another because we belong to Jesus Christ.

Our culture is shaped by broad assumptions about relationships. What binds people together in a neighborhood, marriage, or society is our personal choice. We choose to belong to communities and can choose to leave them when it is no longer beneficial. Some of these relationships are lasting, but they can also be very fragile. Even in the church, we often participate in these patterns. We choose what churches to attend, often driving past many others on the way. Even when we choose well, we still *make the choice*.

This human reality of “choosing” can impact how we view belonging to an individual congregation as well as what it means for that congregation to belong to a denomination. Is a denomination merely a voluntary association we belong to for the sake of mutual benefit? Or is it, as the Belgic Confession claims in Article 27, “a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed in his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit”? Is the church something we choose to be a part of or something we are a part of because of God’s gracious choice to gather us into it? None of us lives fully into our mutual belonging in Christ. We live in a world of voluntary associations and significant choice, a world in which we participate in many ways. Yet, what truly binds the

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<sup>24</sup> Shaffer, *Rooted*, 160.

<sup>25</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 55

<sup>26</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.2.5

church together is not our choice but Christ's (1 Peter 1:2). Our struggle to live belonging to one another in Christ does not invalidate this call but only reinforces the need for all of us to hear it again.

### **Mutual Belonging in the RCA**

Having reviewed the foundation of our mutual belonging in Christ, it is now appropriate to think about how this belonging might express itself in our church structures. For the past several years, particularly through the work of the Vision 2020 Team, the RCA has been exploring different ways of organizing its life together as the family of God. It is the task of the RCA to discern well the will of God as it relates to how we live and work together as the church. It is the aim of the Commission on Theology to aid this discernment process through its own theological reflections. Church structures are, after all, theological and practical. To quote Eugene Heideman, "Ecclesiastical structures can never be primarily a means of human government or program; they are gifts of the Spirit, who is preparing the way for the coming presence of Christ; they are the bones of the body, which he has elected to minister in this world."<sup>28</sup>

The regional synod has long held an important place in the Dutch Reformed tradition. The second Synod of Dordrecht in 1575 declared that the church ought to structure itself into four levels of assembly: consistory, classis, particular synod, and general synod. (The RCA adopted the name "regional synod" for what it previously called the "particular synod" in 1992.) Whereas the polity established at Dort included particular synods, no particular synods existed in America during the colonial period. They were, however, referenced in the first constitution of the RCA, passed in 1793, and built on the polity of Dort.

One year later, a decision of the RCA General Synod formed the particular synods of Albany and New York, assigning them to meet triennially. Among the duties explicitly enjoined on these particular synods was to send delegates to "the examination of all candidates for the ministry" in order that "uniformity, order, and purity of doctrine may be maintained, and established" (Article 49 of the Constitution of 1793; for a similar clause in the reworked constitution of 1834, see Article III, Section 4). In other words, one of the major functions of these regional synods was to foster unity among the churches.

As the polity of the RCA grew, the role of the particular synod also expanded and, indeed, became more debated. The minutes of the General Synod are littered with such discussion. In 1899, a committee tasked with reporting on the history and possible reformation of particular synods summarized the whole four-fold assembly system: "The keynote was union; and as the Consistory was, in intent, the standing together point and bond and conservator of union, of good and peaceful government, in the congregation, so was the Classis within its sphere of churches, the Particular Synod within its sphere of Classes, and the General or National Synod within the periphery of the whole. In its government and form of union so was the Church of the Netherlands established, welded into one, in 1578" (*MGS 1899*, pp. 497-498).

The RCA continued periodically to discuss the role of the particular synod in the twentieth century, with the subject taking on a major role in the General Synods of 1927, 1961, 1970, and then throughout the 1990s. In the twentieth century, much of the discussion focused around, as

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<sup>28</sup> Eugene Heideman, *Reformed Bishops and Catholic Elders* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 261.

William H. S. Demarest put it, “the possible increase of the value and usefulness of the synod through the larger use of it as a conference, for the presenting and discussing of addresses on subjects in the field of church life and work.”<sup>29</sup> To the extent that regional synods accepted this new function, their primary role shifted from providing oversight to fostering mission. In the twenty-first century, this new understanding of the regional synod as a body oriented around mission has taken center stage. This emphasis is especially evident in the rise of church structures based on affinity, particularly the structure of the classis.

The Commission on Theology first reported on the possible formation of the first modern non-geographic classis by the Synod of the Far West in 2008 (*MGS 2008*, p. 250). This classis (City Classis) did indeed come into existence, amidst widespread debate (see *MGS 2009*, pp. 120-121, 300). Whereas this first non-geographic classis was focused around mission to the city, several non-geographic classis focused around ministry in a specific language (Classis of the Americas and Classis de las Naciones) formed after. In these instances, the key questions concerned classes, not regional synods. But in each of these instances, a regional synod established an assembly of the church with the key organizing principle being not geography, but rather some kind of missional goal.<sup>30</sup>

Even more recently, General Synod, our highest assembly, has transferred congregations between classes that were members of different regional synods. General Synod 2018 transferred Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney, Illinois, from the Classis of Chicago, Regional Synod of Mid-America, to City Classis, Regional Synod of the Far West, for the reason “that Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney [as an urban congregation] can best serve the kingdom as part of City Classis” (*MGS 2018*, p. 115). Two years later, General Synod transferred Addisville Reformed Church, located in Richboro, Pennsylvania, from the Classis of Delaware-Raritan, Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, to the Classis of Central California, Regional Synod of the Far West. One reason presented was that the consistory of Addisville Reformed felt that there were areas in which it and the Classis of Delaware-Raritan were “not aligned and gradually have grown apart” (*MGS 2021*, p. 43). In both cases, the sending regional synod affirmed the transfer requests in response to churches that did not express any particular duress based on their classes or regional synods, but instead sought to strengthen mission or alignment.

This more recent free and willing movement of churches, supported by classes and regional synods, contrasts with the 2018 General Synod’s time-sensitive movement of City Classis (itself an affinity classis) from the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (*MGS 2018*, p. 154). The General Synod 2018 Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business undertook this matter in response to a transfer request from delegates from City Classis that was submitted as an item of new business because of existential time restraints (*MGS 2018*, p. 16). Unlike Faith Community and Addisville, the City Classis claimed that the Far West regional synod’s executive team had “rebuffed any attempt to discuss supporting the transfer of City Classis to another regional synod and [was] actively attempting to keep the broader RSFW delegates from having that discussion” (*MGS 2018*, p.

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<sup>29</sup> William H. S. Demarest, *Notes on the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick: New Brunswick Theological Seminary, 1946), 134-135.

<sup>30</sup> The Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology co-authored a paper on this topic. (See the response to TE 18-1 in *MGS 2019*, pp. 238-246.)

16). The dispute centered around the practices of City Classis, which in discord with its regional synod, decided to live together in difference when it came to pastoral ministry to LGBT persons.

General Synod 2018 adopted the transfer after the advisory committee ascertained that both sending and receiving regional synods had reached an understanding that the transfer was in the best interest of the kingdom of God (*MGS 2018*, p. 154). Subsequently, the Commission on Judicial Business reported to General Synod 2019 that the complaint of City Classis was dismissed in accordance with the request of City Classis (*MGS 2019*, p. 278). These three transfers (Faith Community, Addisville, and City Classis), though taking place under different circumstances, indicate that the General Synod has already been willing to transfer churches and classes to other regional synods for reasons other than geography.

The Vision 2020 process highlighted the potential of affinity-based assemblies. General Synod 2021 made three significant decisions in response to Vision 2020 Team recommendations, and two synodical decisions concerned affinity-based assemblies.

First, the synod approved a plan for a “mutually generous separation.” This plan supports petitions by churches to transfer to another classis, including doing so across regional synod lines. The logic behind these church moves again consistently points to mission and not to unity. Indeed, this appeal to mission is made explicitly at the expense of unity: one group is leaving another specifically because the exiting party feels that it cannot adequately pursue its mission where it is. The guidelines specifically call for a regional synod to accept that the church can no longer function effectively in its present relationship (*MGS 2021*, p. 105). Even before any radical restructuring that might eventually flow from the Vision 2020 process, this support for transferring churches effectively opens the way for a grassroots migration toward affinity classes and regional synods.

Additionally, the Vision 2020 Team shared four recommended principles concerning possible restructuring to General Synod. In passing RF 21-1, General Synod tasked a new group with “the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination.” This team “should consider these principles” outlined by the Vision 2020 Team (*MGS 2021*, p. 94). The first of these principles concerns affinity classes: “Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based, with the ability of any church to choose the classis to which it belongs.”<sup>31</sup> No longer would classes be organized around geographical region, but classes would “have the ability to align themselves around shared values, understanding, and practices.”<sup>32</sup> Another of these principles calls for considering the long-term need and viability of the regional synods, examining their “viability, responsibility, and effectiveness ... in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains.”<sup>33</sup> In the discussion stemming from Vision 2020, a proposal to immediately rearrange the regional synods in the United States into two affinity-based synods (ONB 21-10) sparked a lengthy and intense discussion. While this proposal did not pass, it did prompt the motion that eventually led to the writing of this paper.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *MGS 2021*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> In ONB 21-10, General Synod 2021 tasked the Commission on Theology to report on one specific way that the RCA might reorganize, instructing “the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology to study the structure and implications of affinity synods, with a report to General Synod in 2022.”



Having first established the fundamental importance of the unity of the church, and then explored how our structure of assemblies, and especially the regional synod, has emphasized sometimes unity and sometimes mission (ideally in concert, but not always), we now turn to consider again the question of assemblies based on affinity, this time from a more theological angle.

### **Affinity Classis and Mutual Belonging**

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession is helpful as we discuss the matter of affinity or non-geographic classes. It can be interpreted to say that the obligations of church members is to gather together and not to withdraw; encourage unity, serve, and build up—via our God-given gifts. We must be cognizant to preserve this unity, duty, and assembly according to God’s ordinance (Belgic Confession, Article 32). Additionally, Article 29 of the Belgic Confession appeals for members of the true church to not separate from it. According to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, church order is established “for maintaining the body of the church,” and we should guard against deviating from Christ’s command.<sup>35</sup> The body of Christ should be helped and not harmed by how we structure and govern ourselves under the authority of Christ and his word. Being united to and belonging to Christ, we in the church now belong as members of one another. **Any proposed restructuring of classes and regional synods should be aimed at deepening our mutual belonging in Christ.**

How do these principles relate to the question of affinity? If the RCA chooses to restructure around affinity, then “affinity” will need to be carefully defined in ways that deepen mutual belonging in Christ. Not every way of considering “shared values, understanding, and practices”<sup>36</sup> serves to build up the body of Christ. In this light, the commission will offer three potential dangers of particular forms of affinity as a structuring principle before offering suggestions on what might deepen our mutual belonging in Christ.

First, there is the danger of affinity being a form of self-belonging. As Answer 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism proclaims, we belong not to ourselves, but to Jesus Christ. Consequently, we belong to one another in Christ. When every church can choose for itself how it wants to be aligned and connected to other churches, we must beware of living as if we belong to ourselves. It would be well to ask how affinity promotes and affirms unity. How does affinity strengthen rather than weaken our bond of unity? If affinity groups exist only to serve shared values, interests, and practices, are they a benefit or a danger to our unity? Relationships of affinity can be long-lasting but also fragile. They exist only as long as the shared values, interests, and practices out of which they initially arose continue to exist. If a church changes its values or even its commitment to particular practices, it no longer truly belongs in that “affinity group” and would likely need to leave for another. While some might see this flexibility as a positive trait, it ultimately undermines our mutual belonging in Christ. Any version of affinity must avoid the danger of creating fraction and fragility in search of flexibility. We as a church must strive for stability that encourages mutual belonging in Christ.

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<sup>35</sup> Belgic Confession, Article 32

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Second, there is the danger of affinity being used to rend the bonds of love that are a visible demonstration of our mutual belonging in Christ. Like the family in the opening example, there is the possibility that appeals to shared values and interests could be used as a way of avoiding loving our fellow brothers and sisters (and congregations) in the RCA. We could stay together as a family but no longer have to do the hard work of living together and loving in communion. This result would be just as unhealthy for a denomination as for a family. Particularly when classis realignment will take place without churches physically moving locations, there is the possibility that we could use “affinity” as an excuse to avoid being in relationship with churches in our own town or the next town over. Such division could severely damage our public witness in the world. The RCA is already divided on many issues, but we must beware of how enshrining divisions into our polity could damage the missional work of the RCA. While we might be able to state positively all the benefits of these new classis relationships, we must beware of the sinful human tendency to self-deception.

Additionally, we have been created as embodied creatures. Relationships grow best face-to-face. Not only could certain forms of affinity prevent us from being in functional relationship with our nearest neighbors, they could also leave many congregations feeling isolated when most in need of classical assistance, such as when churches are without a pastor or are being formed. Moreover, the classis gathers for stated sessions, but also for special sessions, such as installations and ordinations. Technology may aid in overcoming physical distance for some meetings, but it may also create limitations for the classis doing its work with local congregations. Insofar as church structures organized around affinity abandon geography as a significant constituting factor, they open themselves up to becoming structures that fail to foster the type of relationships that can flourish only with significant face-to-face contact.

Third, there is the danger of “affinity” being used to break the bonds of true faith. In addition to mutual love, a shared confession of faith is part of the visible unity of the body of Christ. We must beware of defining “affinity” so broadly that classes and congregations could have functionally (or explicitly) different confessions of the Christian faith. Such theological realignment would sacrifice the genuine unity of the church on the altar of peace. If the RCA is to remain as a denomination, the centrality of the Standards of Unity as a unifying confession of faith should be upheld.

How might a restructuring in the RCA deepen the RCA’s mutual belonging in Christ? One possibility is to think about mutual belonging among classes and among regional synods. How can classes belong to each other and not simply to their regional synod? How can the regional synods manifest their belonging to each other and not simply to the General Synod? In a healthy family system, brothers and sisters talk to one another, and not only when mom and dad gather them around the table. They can call for mom and dad (or grandma and grandpa) to deal with their problems, but they also communicate well enough with each other to build up one another and to hold each other accountable to living well together as a family and to living faithfully into what it means to be part of this family. In a similar way, fostering and structuring relationships between classes and between regional synods would deepen the bonds of the RCA.

Our Constitution from 1793 noted, “Every synod shall be at liberty to solicit, and hold *correspondence* with its neighboring synod, or synods, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to general edification” (Article 48). What if regional synods today went beyond correspondence to something deeper? Congregations in Holland Classis belong to

congregations in Nassau-Suffolk. Congregations in British Columbia belong to congregations in Wisconsin. What might it look like for these classes to invest more deeply in relationship with each other, to move beyond having delegates sit in the same auditorium at General Synod?

## **Conclusion**

Why is the RCA together as the people of God? Christ has gathered his church. We belong to Christ. As a result, we belong to one another. How we structure our life as a denomination and how we think about affinity as a structuring principle must be aimed toward deepening and making more visible our mutual belonging in Christ. In this paper, the Commission on Theology has put forward several dangers to avoid as well as points for the General Synod and the Restructuring Team to consider as they discern how to move forward in the RCA.

### **TH 22-1**

**To commend “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” as a resource for congregations, classes, regional synods, and the Restructuring Team for discussion on what it means to be part of the RCA; and further,**

**to instruct the general secretary to make available “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” as a resource for congregations, classes, regional synods, and the Restructuring Team.**