

Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life, and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together, we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ's mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2021 edition, p. 73]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2021 edition, p. 110]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, refer to the Bylaws of the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2021 edition, pp. 110-111]).

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to the General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod’s 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod’s program agency.

Review of Regional Synod Minutes

The General Synod Office has received and read the 2021 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantics, and New York.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

EC 22-1

To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

The Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2021 edition, p. 107]). The general secretary will report on classes’ payments of General Synod assessments and will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the *Book of Church Order*

The General Synod of 2021 adopted and referred to the classes for approval five amendments to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. The amendments are recorded in the *2021 Minutes of the General Synod* as noted. Forty-six classes were eligible to vote on these amendments (per *BCO*, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2b [2021 edition, p. 77]). As of April 25, 2022, four classes had not reported votes to the Office of the General Synod on the questions of whether to approve the amendments. The votes of the other 42 classes, as reported in writing by the classes’ stated clerks, were as follows:

<i>Book of Church Order</i> Amendments	Disapproved	Approved
1. Formulary No. 18 (New)—Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament to Another Denomination (<i>MGS 2021</i> , CO 21-1, pp. 230-231)	0	42

<p>2. Formulary No. 9—Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament to Another Classis within the Reformed Church in America <i>(MGS 2021, CO 21-2, pp. 231-232)</i> <i>BCO, Formulary 9 (2021 edition, p. 140)</i></p>	0	42
<p>3. Sessions of General Synod <i>(MGS 2021, CO 21-4, p. 240)</i> <i>BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 1 (2021 edition, p. 71)</i></p>	2	40
<p>4. Amending the RCA Constitution at Stated Sessions <i>(MGS 2021, CO 21-5, pp. 240-241)</i> <i>BCO, Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2 (2021 edition, p. 77)</i></p>	0	42
<p>5. Discipline of a Member of a Local Church <i>(MGS 2021, CO 21-7, p. 242)</i> <i>BCO, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1 (2021 edition, pp. 81-82)</i></p>	1	41

All five amendments received the approval of the required two-thirds of classes, and so they are all presented here for final declarative action.

EC 22-2

To declare Amendment 1 to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 22-3

To declare Amendment 2 to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 22-4

To declare Amendment 3 to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 22-5

To declare Amendment 4 to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 22-6

To declare Amendment 5 to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

The 2021 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the next stated session of the General Synod the following amendments to the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod:

Committee on Emergencies—BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, new Article 10 (MGS 2021, CO 21-3, pp. 238-239)

Add Final Declarative Resolutions to Agenda of General Synod—BCO, Chapter 3, Part II, Article 1, Section 2, new subsection b (MGS 2021, CO 21-6, p. 241)

EC 22-7

To declare the amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod specified in CO 21-3, adopted in first reading by the 2021 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 22-8

To declare the amendment to the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod specified in CO 21-6, adopted in first reading by the 2021 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2022 *Book of Church Order*.

Proposed Delay in Final Implementation of Covenant Shares

General Synod 2019 approved changes to the General Synod bylaws that would allow a change in the manner in which assessments are calculated to a percentage of income method from the per-member method. Changes to the General Synod bylaws require approval by two General Synods in order to become effective. The General Synod did not meet in 2020, and the October 2021 General Synod voted to postpone that second vote, at the recommendation of the GSC.

While there are pros and cons to either delaying again or moving forward, the GSC is recommending to General Synod that it once again postpone the second vote on the General Synod bylaws change to implement covenant shares for the following reasons.

1. **Frequently changing data.** It is not possible to predict with sufficient accuracy which churches will be leaving and the impact that would have on covenant shares. Before going forward, the GSC would like finance staff to complete a full analysis of the impact of a change to covenant shares on the classes based on the churches that remain and also the impact on the denomination.
2. **Impact on classis clerks and treasurers.** Classis clerks and treasurers have a lot of work to do related to departing churches and implementing “gracious separation” measures. The addition of a change in method of assessment may be an undue burden during an already high-stress time for those serving at the classis level. In the first year of implementation of covenant shares, it is anticipated that there will be a higher number of questions than usual about completing the Consistorial Report Form (CRF), and in many cases the classis stated clerk and treasurer will need to address those questions.
3. **Membership and a per-member assessment is more predictable.** During a very uncertain time in the RCA, this is a simple, straightforward way to predict and budget denominational income and the payments due at the local level.
4. **Review committee changes.** When the covenant shares method was first passed by General Synod, the GSC appointed a review committee to evaluate the first three

years of covenant shares implementation. Some of the members of this committee have since left the denomination. New committee members need to be appointed from the pool of RCA members who are remaining in the RCA, and who are willing to commit to participating in the review committee for three years, since the committee will be most effective if its members are building on their experiences from year to year.

5. **Covenant shares was approved at the 2019 General Synod nearly three years ago.** Because so much time has passed, do classis and church leaders need to be educated on the new method prior to the second vote? We need time to educate those at the local level again on how the new method works.

One of the arguments for moving forward with covenant shares is that General Synod approved the adoption of the new method because proportional assessments is a better system—more fair, balanced, and even—and keeping the old system just to avoid change may end up putting more strain on local churches. This is a valid concern; however, due to the concerns above, the GSC believes it will be most prudent to delay the vote and the implementation of the covenant shares method one more time.

Thus, the GSC recommends the following to the 2022 General Synod:

EC 22-9

To delay the second vote on the change to the General Synod bylaws in *Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c (2021 edition, p. 110) to make Covenant Shares effective until the next stated session of General Synod.

Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

EC 22-10

To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

General Synod Meeting Location

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2023 is Central College in Pella, Iowa. The 2023 meeting of the General Synod is planned to take place on June 8–13. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

Land Use Acknowledgement

The 2021 General Synod, in its adoption of CA 21-1, instructed the GSC to “annually state a land acknowledgement for any location in which General Synod meets” (*MGS 2021*, p. 203). The Commission on Christian Action assisted in the preparation of this acknowledgement.

We respectfully acknowledge that the land we gather on this year is part of the traditional land of the Osakiwug and Meskwaki peoples, who were removed from this place, often by government entities, and usually by violent means. We acknowledge the history of their people in this place, and lament any role the Reformed Church in America or her members may have played in their displacement.

OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The General Synod Council (GSC) operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, Transformed & Transforming. Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through polices concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.

RCA Salary Structure for Fiscal Year 2021 (October 2021–September 2022)

The GSC policy (EL-8) pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market.”

The GSC compensation program allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the supervisor, employee, and Human Resources. As responsibilities change or when there is an open position, the job description is reviewed, updated as needed, and reevaluated to ensure that it is still classified in the correct range. The program incorporates geographic differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions. This has become more important as we have more and more employees working remotely. Positions are benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors.

There are thirteen salary ranges that span between 11 and 23. Grade 11 represents the most entry-level positions and Grade 23 represents the highest level, held by the general secretary. The majority of positions fall within the middle ranges (14 to 17).

Staff are evaluated annually by their supervisors. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod

Council. Executive staff who are accountable to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following table represents the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2021. The ranges are utilized to establish beginning wages and annual salaries and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee. Most employees' salaries fall in the mid-range of the table. The following table represents Grand Rapids-based staff; this table is adjusted for cost-of-living differences for staff who live and work in other areas.

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN					
2021–2022					
ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE					
GRADE	LOW	25%	MID	75%	HIGH
11	\$24,960	\$27,620	\$30,280	\$32,940	\$35,600
12	\$32,240	\$35,880	\$39,520	\$43,160	\$46,800
13	\$35,200	\$38,975	\$42,750	\$46,525	\$50,300
14	\$41,800	\$46,950	\$52,100	\$57,250	\$62,400
15	\$47,000	\$52,800	\$58,600	\$64,400	\$70,200
16	\$56,000	\$62,900	\$69,800	\$76,700	\$83,600
17	\$61,000	\$68,510	\$76,020	\$83,530	\$91,040
18	\$66,500	\$74,688	\$82,875	\$91,063	\$99,250
19	\$79,000	\$89,625	\$100,250	\$110,875	\$121,500
20	\$89,500	\$101,550	\$113,600	\$125,650	\$137,700
21	\$101,376	\$118,257	\$135,138	\$152,019	\$168,900
22	\$115,983	\$135,237	\$154,492	\$173,746	\$193,000
23	\$144,662	\$168,697	\$192,731	\$216,766	\$240,800

Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years. As BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2021 edition, p. 111) says, one of the GSC's responsibilities is:

To review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that the necessity of continuation shall not be assumed.

The GSC adopted a new commission review process in March 2017 and has completed several annual cycles of review under the new process. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process was put on hold while in-person meetings were paused. Though a limited number of in-person meetings have been starting up again, many meetings continue to be conducted electronically. While meeting solely electronically is not ideal from a relational standpoint, given decreasing budgets and the increased functionality and practicality of electronic meeting

platforms, it seems likely that a larger percentage of RCA meetings may be held electronically going forward. This has led to a shift in the timing and frequency of meetings.

Because the timelines laid out in commission review process developed by the GSC relies on the traditional in-person meeting schedule followed by most commissions and the GSC in the past, it seems prudent for the GSC to take this opportunity to review and update the process to function better within the new meeting rhythm that has been evolving.

The GSC moderator has appointed a small team of GSC members to review the process and bring any proposed changes to the fall 2022 meeting of the GSC.

Change to Publication Schedule of GSC Minutes

It has been a longstanding practice of the GSC to wait to publicly post minutes of its meetings until the minutes have been formally approved at a future meeting of the GSC (typically the next stated session) in case corrections need to be made by the GSC before the minutes are approved. In practice, this creates a delay of multiple months between the date of GSC meetings and the publication of minutes of those meetings. While the reason for this is logistical—ensuring that the GSC has the opportunity to correct any errors in its minutes before they become public—this has at times created a perception in parts of the wider RCA that the GSC is reluctant to share information about its decisions.

The GSC decided at its March 2022 meeting to make a change to the publication schedule for its meeting minutes in order to make them publicly available earlier, approving the following motion:

GSC 22-11

To make minutes of General Synod Council meetings publicly available in a provisional form within 15 business days following the close of each meeting (following circulation via email to the full GSC for any necessary corrections), to be replaced with the final approved copy once formal approval has been obtained at the next stated GSC meeting.

While GSC minutes do need to receive official, formal approval at a subsequent meeting of the GSC, beginning with the March 2022 minutes, the GSC will do an informal review process via email once the recorder has finished writing the minutes in order to give GSC members a chance to catch potential errors, then staff will post provisional versions of the minutes until they receive final, formal adoption via a vote at the next stated session.

At this time in the life of the RCA, tensions and disagreements have caused rising levels of mistrust and misunderstanding, exacerbated by an ongoing pandemic. Publishing GSC minutes sooner is intended to be a good faith effort on the GSC's part to increase transparency and trust.

This process will make GSC minutes publicly available several months earlier than they are under the current practice of posting minutes once they have been officially approved at the GSC's next stated meeting.

Discontinuation of Joint Fall GSC/Commissions Meeting

In 2002, the Task Force to Study the Relationship between the General Synod and the General Synod Council brought a report to General Synod that listed several recommendations for changes to the structure and function of the GSC, some of which were approved by the General Synod by means of adopting changes to the *Book of Church Order*. Part of the report read:

...Fourth, it is proposed that all the commissions of the General Synod and the General Synod Council meet together each fall in the same venue and at the same time. It is hoped that this coordinated meeting will not only receive a common report of the previous General Synod, but will develop a style of leadership and consultation in service of the priorities, mission, and ministry of the church...(*MGS 2002*, p. 240).

While the language used in the report was “it is proposed,” this proposal was not presented to the General Synod as an actionable recommendation and so the General Synod did not vote to approve it. As such, it is not officially a General Synod mandate; however, it has been treated as one for years.

Starting in the fall of 2003, the GSC and the commissions met together in October or early November each year; participation in the joint meeting was required, with the exception of the Commission on Judicial Business due to the case-by-case nature of its work.

This meeting continued annually up until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, resulting in the cancellation of the 2020 joint meeting. A joint meeting did not take place in 2021, largely because of the October timing of the General Synod meeting. A joint meeting is not being planned for 2022, for a number of logistical reasons.

The idea behind the joint meeting, that of fostering communication, collaboration, and relationship building, is an excellent one, and in the early years of this meeting, it likely did meet that need. Communication and collaboration among the GSC and the General Synod commissions is very important, and the suggestion to discontinue meeting together in person each fall is not meant to suggest that the RCA, the GSC, or the commissions do not value that communication and collaboration. However, in more recent years, it has become clearer that there are more efficient and effective ways for commissions and/or the GSC to do collaborative work than requiring them all to meet in person at the same time and location every year.

Although General Synod did not officially adopt the original joint meeting format, because it has been treated essentially as a General Synod mandate for years, it seems most prudent to have General Synod make the decision to discontinue it, upon recommendation of the GSC.

For the following reasons, GSC is recommending to the General Synod the discontinuation of the joint meeting:

- **The location and dates of a joint meeting are not ideal for all commissions.** Meeting simultaneously means that commissions do not have the opportunity to select the fall meeting dates that work best for their individual members and, as a result, some commissions have found that they are often missing a number of members in the fall, and their fall meeting was much less efficient as a result. In addition, the location of the meeting had to be chosen based on the most economical overall location that could accommodate a large meeting with the unique space requirements of the joint meeting, and that location was not necessarily the most economical location for individual

commissions. In past years, this has placed a strain on commission budgets, which are modest. Survey comments from participants at past years' joint meetings have expressed some of these frustrations.

- **A joint meeting with mandatory plenary sessions reduces the amount of time that commissions and the GSC have to complete the work of their specific mandates.** Traditionally, at the Friday–Saturday joint meeting, the majority of both mornings was taken up by corporate worship and joint sessions in which all attendees were required to participate. Survey comments for a number of years indicated that a number of attendees found limited value in those joint meetings (the topics were typically chosen by the GSC or by the general secretary, and commissions did not always find them helpful). They were not necessarily focused on facilitating or giving space for collaborative work between several commissions, but on workshops or presentations that were attended by all commissions and the GSC.
- **Electronic meeting technology has become much more available and useful.** In 2002, when the joint meeting was proposed, popular videoconferencing programs such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype didn't yet exist yet. While videoconferencing technology existed in 2002, it was not widely used or accessible, and so in-person meetings were a much more practical way of providing opportunities for collaboration. In 2022, it is much more efficient and effective for commission representatives to schedule a Zoom meeting to work on a joint project with another commission. Especially over the past two years in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have grown increasingly comfortable and familiar with videoconferencing technology, and the technology itself has become increasingly accessible and supportive.
- **GSC staff capacity is more limited than it was pre-pandemic.** An in-person joint meeting with the GSC and ten commissions takes a significantly larger amount of staff planning time than smaller, individual meetings; there are simply a lot more moving parts and logistical considerations involved in putting together a meeting for over a hundred participants than in putting together a meeting for ten. At this point in time, as the RCA has experienced a decline in membership, we also have fewer denominational staff members.

Accordingly, GSC offers the following recommendation:

EC 22-11

To discontinue the practice of the annual joint in-person GSC and commissions meeting each fall in order to better conserve both budget and individual commission meeting time, but to continue to encourage commissions and GSC to pursue opportunities for collaboration and connection.

Creation of Board-Designated Endowment Fund

In recent years, the GSC has been mindful of the impact of denominational assessments on the local church and has chosen not to ask for increases to the GSC per-member assessment rate in order to make up for the decline in revenue from departing churches. Instead, GSC staff have made significant budget cuts. As indicated in the report from the Office of Finance, the requested \$1 per member increase to the GSC assessment this year follows years of no increases to assessments and only partially offsets the cost of inflation. It is not intended to make up for assessments from departing churches.

In addition to significant budget reductions, the GSC has been seeking alternate sources of revenue to replace some of the lost assessment income. One additional source of income that the GSC has approved is utilizing a portion of the GSC's reserves to establish a board-designated endowment that will generate annual income to the GSC.

According to GSC policy, the GSC must retain six months of operating expenses in reserves; anything above this amount is excess reserves. The excess reserves have grown in recent years due to a decision to invest more in equities, which has provided an investment return that was greater than budgeted, and due to underspending on travel, events, and personnel.

At its March meeting, the GSC voted to utilize a portion of excess reserves to create a board-designated Operations Endowment Fund. This newly created endowment fund will generate annual income to the GSC that will help offset declining revenue due to departing churches and help limit increases in future assessments to congregations who remain in the RCA. If invested in perpetuity, the principal in the fund will grow and will generate more income annually for years to come.