

Regional Synod Overtures

Clarify the Role of the Regional Synods

- 6. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order in dialogue with the RCA Restructure Team to recommend amendments to the RCA *Book of Church Order* that will clarify the responsibilities of the regional synods within the Reformed Church in America.**

Reasons:

1. As the RCA considers restructuring, this is the right time to clarify the role and purpose of the regional synods.
2. The current responsibilities of the regional synod in the *Book of Church Order* lack clarity: “The regional synod shall exercise a general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the classes within its bounds.” And “The regional synod shall create whatever organization it desires for the furtherance of the work of the gospel within its bounds...” RCA *Book of Church Order* (BCO), Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Sections 1 and 5 (2022 edition, pp. 65-66).
3. The current system creates “structural traps” which undermine our ability to produce constructive change. Structural traps occur as leaders of each governmental unit (classis, regional synod, and the General Synod) take overlapping responsibility and make uncoordinated efforts to effect change. As organizational leadership shifts from a more hierarchical, top-down style to a more flattened, collaborative style this issue will intensify unless we clarify the responsibilities of each assembly.
4. “General superintendence” is ambiguous. The only clear superintendence of the regional synod is judicial.

Additional Instructions for the Restructuring Team

- 7. The Synod of New York overtures the General Synod to instruct the Restructuring Team to commit to a more open, transparent, and communicative conversation, inviting and welcoming input not only responsive to its own proposals, especially from the classes and regional synods who will be affected by its proposals, and expanding its “one voice” policy to allow for minority voices.**

Reasons:

1. It seems only fitting that the assemblies most likely to be affected by restructuring should have free input into the conversation about their restructuring.
 2. The RCA is called to “a multi-ethnic future freed from racism.” This requires minority voices to be fully heard and empowered, and that minority opinions of all sorts should be welcomed, encouraged, and supported, not only in conversation and debate, but also in minority reports, recommendations, and proposals.
- 8. The Synod of New York overtures the General Synod to instruct the Restructuring Team that any new structure must increase, rather than decrease, the opportunities and spaces for shared work by “volunteers” and delegates, in**

order to develop relationships, understanding, and trust, and that these opportunities include commissions, boards, and other committees decentralized from the GSC and given access to staff for conversation and consultation.

Reasons:

1. The RCA has seen a general shrinkage of spaces, occasions, and media for conversation and relationship-building. We no longer have a *Church Herald*. Our pastors no longer have studied at the same seminaries nor read the same theology. Whereas the RCA used to have a number of responsible boards with delegates from all the regions of the denomination (World Missions, Domestic Missions, Education, Women's Work, Publications, etc.), our church business is now handled by paid program staff who communicate only to the GSC. General Synod is now the only place the denomination gets to talk, and that space is severely restricted.
2. Whenever the RCA has appointed task forces and teams for special work, they report positive fellowship and mutual regard across divergent viewpoints. Such working groups used to be a matter of course throughout the denomination when it was less centralized.
3. The down-sizing of the General Synod Council in 2002 resulted in substantial reductions in volunteer participation and in contacts with denominational staff.

9. The Synod of New York overtures the General Synod to advise the Restructuring Team that many RCA office-bearers consider our structures and polity not merely as "form to follow function," but as our practical theology, and as the formal expression of our doctrinal convictions of how our covenantal God speaks to our congregations through Biblical officers in Word and sacrament.

Reasons:

1. Our doctrine of the Word God leads us to believe that God's will for the Reformed Church is discerned through the regular, weekly preaching of the Word in congregations, together with our experience of that Word in the Sacraments, worship, mission, and service. Our lived and local experience of God's Word is then shared and tested in our classes and synods, by means of which, in candid conversation and Biblical and theological study, we hold each other accountable.
2. We do not believe that God's will for the Reformed Church is revealed privately to denominational staff persons or to selected groups of leaders, to be then, "top-down," shared with the assemblies and churches.

Commission on Church Order to Evaluate GSC's Use of the Policy Governance Model (a.k.a. Carver Governance)

10. The Synod of New York overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to review the apparent conflict between the two systems of government at work in the RCA, viz. the centralized and directed government of the General Synod Council and the widely conversational and bottom-up government of our historic polity, to include:

- **Re-examining the Carver model for Policy Governance, its principles in comparison and contrast to those of our polity, its costs and benefits after two decades of use, its critique from outside the GSC, with attention to its restrictions on interaction with the staff and on communication in general, and its effect on the organizational health of the RCA,**
- **Consulting the officers and stated clerks of all the classes and regional synods, as well as other General Synod commissions,**
- **Investigating the governance policies of our partner denominations in Full Communion; such as the more open governance of the ELCA,**
- **And reporting to the General Synod of 2025.**

Reasons:

1. There is increasing discontent with the Carver model within the RCA and a growing worry that its use has lessened our organizational health and might even have aggravated our denominational dysfunction and division.
2. Our Full Communion partners do not use the Carver model, and the ELCA, for example, has a very open governance and communication system.
3. The Carver model was designed and is appropriate for corporations unlike the RCA. While it may be great for driving a truck, it is not designed for driving a bus. The second “Key Theme” of the Vision 2020 report suggests that the RCA needs to keep shifting away from a “product delivery” model directed by “headquarters.”
4. The Carver model might well be appropriate for Board-organized ministries that report to or are accountable to the General Synod, but it is a different matter whether it is appropriate to the General Synod’s executive committee, when the General Synod itself is a meeting of the classes and regional synods.
5. As the commissions are regularly reviewed, the General Synod Council should be as well, especially with a view towards how it might be “transformed and transforming.”
6. It has been twenty years since the General Synod Council adopted the Carver model in November of 2003. It is time to review the RCA’s experience of its costs and benefits.
7. The Church Order Commission advised the General Synod of 2005 on some “cautions” about the Carver model, and after twenty years it is worth reviewing how those cautions have panned out.