

Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” (*Minutes of General Synod 2003*, R-41, p. 159). The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 5, Section 5 [2022 edition, pp. 115-116]) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is the Commission on History’s 57th report to a General Synod.

The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, individual and collective, to see God’s faithfulness and to allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective that is not *simply* historical, but, rather, is informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.

To do this work faithfully, the commission met electronically (via Zoom) on Thursday, March 2, 2023; Thursday, February 2, 2023; Wednesday, November 16, 2022; and Thursday, August 25, 2022. It met in person (and via Zoom) at New Brunswick Theological Seminary on Friday, October 7, 2022, and communicated regularly via email and phone.

Rev. Dr. Steven D. Pierce, senior pastor of Central Reformed Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan), has served as your commission’s moderator for the last five years (2018-2023) through a number of significant transitions, including staff changes, RCA Archives expansion and growth, the retirement of our former archivist (Russell Gasero), and the leadership transition from one general editor (Rev. Dr. Donald Bruggink) of The Historical Series of Reformed Church in America to another (Rev. James Hart Brumm). We are grateful for Rev. Pierce’s administrative skills, guidance, encouragement, and ability to effectively communicate your commission’s goals and objectives. Not only was he receptive to new ideas, but he often championed them and worked hard to make sure the Commission on History received all the credit. We bless the Lord for Rev. Pierce’s good work.

Rev. Katlyn DeVries, writing assistant, Western Theological Seminary (Holland, Michigan), will serve as your commission’s next moderator beginning July 1, 2023.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 55th year, recently published the following books:

- *Rivers of Living Water: Essays in Honor of James V. Brownson*, edited by James Hart Brumm
- *Shepherding a New Generation of Leaders: Essays in Honor of Cornelis G. Kors*, edited by Bradley Lewis
- *Collecting Chronicles, Maintaining Tradition, and Preserving Acts of Disciples: Essays in Honor of Russell L. Gasero*, edited by James Hart Brumm

The following books are in process:

- *The Church Speaks, vol. 3*, edited by David Komline
- *Global Grace Café*, by Elizabeth Estes
- *The Canons of Dort: God's Freedom, Justice, and Persistence*, by Eugene P. Heideman, edited by Donald J. Bruggink

At our October 7, 2022, meeting, your commission renewed a five-year term for Rev. James Hart Brumm to serve as general editor of the Historical Series, beginning July 1, 2023. Rev. Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has served as general editor since July 1, 2018. Rev. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church (Altamont, New York) and Helderberg Reformed Church (Guilderland Center, New York), and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the Congregational History Series, a subseries of the Historical Series.

The Commission on History, working with the RCA Archives, continues to publish the Historical Series under Reformed Church Press, which allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon.

In January 2021, your commission launched the RCA 400 Series in celebration of our upcoming 400th anniversary in 2028. Rev. Steven D. Pierce serves as the general editor. Like the Congregational History Series, this is a subseries of the Historical Series. The books in this series will help educate the church on how our Reformed past *informs* the present and *grows* us into the future. Authors will draw from the deep well of our RCA Archives and attempt to answer several questions:

- What is the Reformed Church in America?
- How is it distinctive from other Christian communities?
- Which beliefs, values, and practices stand at the heart of this communion?
- What challenges has it overcome, and how is it being challenged today?
- How is it structured and governed?
- What biblical principles undergird and vitalize its ministries?
- How can its rich heritage help it move into the future?

Last year, the RCA 400 Series published two books:

- *Why Do We Have Archives? An Answer Through Illustrations from Reformed Church Footprints #1 to #25*, by Russell L. Gasero
- *Foundations of Reformed Church Polity: The Rhyme and Reason of the Order*, by Matthew J. van Maastricht

Forthcoming books in this series include:

- *Pursuing Unity in a Divided World: The History of Ecumenism in the Reformed Church in America*, by Monica Schaap Pierce
- *The Reformed Church in America and the Reign of God: The Dilemmas of a Denomination*, by Daniel J. Meeter
- *Loving God with Heart and Mind: Thinking Theologically in the Reformed Church in America*, by Dan Griswold
- *Our Reformed Church: Four Centuries of a Living Faith*, by Steven D. Pierce

Archival Staffing

The offices of the Archives are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened in 1875. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area makes the Archives not just a resource for Dutch-American history, but a wellspring of information for all of the cultural expressions that now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management. With the Archives including more than 400 years of manuscripts, careful stewardship is necessary so that the right document can be found at the right time.

The work of the Archives is mandated in the *Book of Church Order* (BCO); the BCO refers to the denominational Archives a number of times, a clear presumption that the work of the Archives must take place (e.g., Chapter 1, Part II, Article 5, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 5, Section 4; Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 5, Section 3; Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section b1). Early on, the Commission on History, the NBTS faculty, and the Sage Library staff worked together to care for the Archives. Then, in 1978, the denomination sensed that vigilant records management and the preservation of our documents would only be possible through the work of a professional archivist, and Russell Gasero was hired to fill that role. Since 1978, the Archives has grown tremendously, both in quantity of records and in scope of responsibilities, and struggled with a single staff person. In the last decade, the Archives added Matthew Gasero as an additional part-time digital archivist. The volume of materials and the scope of responsibilities continued to increase, yet, in the last three years, the staff has been cut in half. In June 2020, Russell Gasero retired from his position as archivist, and in September 2022, Matthew Gasero's employment was abruptly terminated.

The Reformed Church in America's new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, was hired on Monday, January 30, 2023. She brings a keen interest in history, experience working with rare books and manuscripts during her time as a humanities scholar, and training in archival science suitable to her recent master of information degree through Rutgers University School of Communication and Information. Most recently, Dr. Pallitto worked with refugees through the Reformed Church of Highland Park. Your commission looks forward to collaborating with our new archivist, creating opportunities for open communication and transparency, growing in trust and problem-solving together.

It should be noted that the archivist's job description was revised prior to the search process. The position summary is written as follows: "The RCA Archivist is responsible for the collection, custody, and care of records of the Reformed Church in America, the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuous ministry in North America. This includes the records of the General Synod, RCA assemblies and agencies, and their respective committees, commissions, subsidiary corporations, and other similar bodies (collectively, 'Supported Bodies') where such records are necessary or appropriate for the preservation of information that is important for historical, administrative, or legal purposes. The RCA Archivist works with staff of the Supported Bodies to preserve appropriate records and to provide information for their current projects and work responsibilities."

In addition, the archivist will encourage the submission of minutes and other records and similar documents of Supported Bodies that are important for historical, administrative, or legal purposes, accept and process them, and appraise them for purposes of determining the appropriate duration of their preservation (including permanent preservation). The archivist will ensure the orderly transfer and storage of records deemed worthy of permanent preservation. In addition, the archivist will assist researchers by providing access to archival materials, giving priority to researchers from supported bodies listed above, and assist in the development of records management procedures and retention schedules for General Synod Council staff and offices and for General Synod committees, commissions, and agencies. The archivist will serve as a consultant to the General Synod's Commission on History and advise the commission on the membership of its records subcommittee.

Prior to Dr. Pallitto's hiring, the Archives was closed for five months after the termination of Matthew Gasero's employment. Research projects were immediately disrupted, delayed, or postponed; appointments were canceled; and church leaders were unable to transfer records, all of which created a backlog of archival projects. Your commission expressed concerns regarding the handling of this situation, especially since the RCA digital archivist was the one staff person managing the day-to-day operations of the Archives. The digital archivist had regularly kept your commission informed of developments within the Archives, worked closely with the Archives Advisory Committee formed of commission members, served as managing editor for the Historical Series, and helped the Commission on History take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that illuminated our present ministries. In addition, he handled all aspects of the Office of

Historical Services. We are indebted to Matthew Gasero for his good work for your commission, the RCA Archives, and our denomination.

The Archives officially reopened on Monday, February 6, 2023.

Over the years, the Archives has grown and expanded with the help of an annual grant program.

Since October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the growing needs of the Archives to be a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and Archives, the Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary pledged an annual grant of \$10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC) for each of ten years, to expand the work of the Archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and to give it a more stable and secure base into the future. Because of financial constraints, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants. Thankfully, your commission has been able to annually provide the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. These resources have helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. Your commission acknowledges the significant extra demand this has put on the Historical Series Revolving Fund, and also the significant commitment this has represented on the part of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Your commission remains grateful that the seminary, under its president, Dr. Micah McCreary, has continued to honor that commitment.

It should be noted that with the sudden termination of the RCA digital archivist, your commission temporarily suspended its match of the grant provided by New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The grant only works when the Archives can engage in expanding its program beyond what the denomination budgets for the archivist. When a new archivist was hired, the grant program resumed for continued expansion, benefiting both our denomination and the seminary.

In addition to the annual grant program, there are creative ways to help fund the work of the Archives. Donations from individuals, churches, and classes are welcomed and appreciated. For example, when the Aberdeen Reformed Church closed within North Grand Rapids Classis, the executive committee of the classis voted unanimously to tithe a significant sum of the sale of the property to the RCA Archives. By taking that action, it allayed the ever-growing expenses of transporting, storing, and preserving important church records. Your commission strongly encourages other classes to consider doing the same.

Transferring Materials

From March to August 2022, your commission worked diligently in the safe transfer of the archival collection of the Collegiate Churches of New York to the RCA Archives at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The entire Collegiate collection was entrusted to the RCA Archives and paid for by the Collegiate Churches of New

York. On Friday, October 7, 2022, a signing ceremony of the “Record and Document Maintenance Agreement” was held in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Those present included the following:

- Rev. Stan Sloan, managing director, Collegiate Churches of New York
- Rev. Dwayne Jackson, General Synod president
- Rev. Dave Zomer, member, Commission on History
- Rev. Dr. Steven D. Pierce, moderator, Commission on History
- Rev. Matthew van Maastricht, consultant, Commission on History
- Rev. James Hart Brumm, director, Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and continuing consultant, Commission on History
- Matthew Gasero, former digital archivist
- Rev. Leah Ennis, pastor, Reformed Church in America
- Dr. Patrick Milas, librarian, New Brunswick Theological Seminary
- Christina Tazelaar, chief communications officer, Reformed Church in America

This event was significant considering our long-standing relationship with the Collegiate Churches of New York. They trace their roots back to 1628 when the church was founded as The Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the City of New York. In 1696, the church was granted a royal charter from the King of England, making it the first corporation in this country (a document that is still in legal force in the State of New York). The transfer of these important records further illustrates just how important the Archives has been and continues to be as a place where people can come to gather firsthand facts, data, and evidence from letters, reports, notes, memos, sermon manuscripts, photographs, and other primary sources.

Our Archives also help us tell our story—stories of faithfulness, grace, and celebrations as well as stories of hardship, failure, and endings. Its very existence guarantees continued research on how the past informs the present and grows us into the future. With the Collegiate collection now secure, our Archives is ever-growing; it is precious and most valuable, reminding us that we are truly standing on the shoulders of giants—those men and women, chosen and called, flawed but forgiven. It is their memory and the work that lies before us that keeps us honest and courageous as we continue the ministry of our Savior, Jesus Christ, through the mission and work of the Reformed Church in America.

Your commission expresses its sincere appreciation and gratitude to our former digital archivist, Matthew Gasero, for not only recommending the idea of the signing ceremony to your commission, but for all his hard work, both seen and unseen, in ensuring that the Collegiate collection was properly and successfully transferred to the RCA Archives. Your commission also expresses its gratitude to New Brunswick Theological Seminary for hosting the signing event.

Remembering Francis J. Sypher

Your commission would be remiss if we didn't mention Dr. Francis J. Sypher. As the Collegiate Churches of New York's archivist and historian, Dr. Sypher worked behind

the scenes on preparing the Collegiate collection for its move to the RCA Archives. On March 7, 2022, Dr. Daniel Meeter and Rev. Steven Pierce spent the day with Dr. Sypher, as well as Rev. Stan Sloan, in New York City, reviewing the Collegiate collection and discussing the process for transferring records to the RCA Archives. Just a few months after the Collegiate collection was transferred to New Jersey, Dr. Sypher died peacefully at his home on December 20, 2022. He was 81. Your commission was deeply saddened to learn of his death. He authored approximately 270 scholarly articles, reviews, and books. This includes several books for the Historical Series. Dr. Sypher was a dedicated and tireless student of church history, and his contributions will be enjoyed by historians, scholars, archivists, pastors, and many others for years and years to come.

May Dr. Francis J. Sypher rest in peace and rise in glory!

Current and Future Archival Projects

Looking ahead, the Commission on History has much work to do.

In October 2022, the Commission for Women (CfW) invited this commission's involvement in planning a celebration honoring the five decades of women's ordination in the RCA as elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and sacrament. We have been honored to partner with the CfW to mark this momentous occasion, which has included collecting stories of women throughout the history of our denomination. We look forward to keeping this conversation alive and partnering with the CfW and the RCA's Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership to share these stories as we are able.

At the February 2, 2023, meeting, your commission approved the digitization of the Rev. Samuel Marinus Zwemer Arabian Mission diaries. As a Protestant missionary in the RCA, Rev. Zwemer made his home in Arabia and Egypt for most of 38 years (1890-1929). As a man with strong, unflinching convictions, steeped in the Calvinist tradition, he maintained a high Christology and stressed the unique work of Christ in the atonement and resurrection. His knowledge of Islam was most impressive, and while he wasn't a perfect man, he endeavored to love Muslim people through relationship building and yearned to see them gathered to Christ. Your commission will also work with the new archivist to provide for digitizing the *Christian Intelligencer*, *The Mission Field*, and *Mission Gleaner* as approved at the commission meeting in February 2022. The goal is to produce quality, legible digital copies of these publications that are searchable. Your commission will also seek the help of the General Synod Council to assist with funding for this project. In addition, your commission has requested that the RCA Archives procure Quark Express to prepare PDF versions of the *Church Herald*. As an invaluable resource, it is our hope these PDF versions will bless and enrich church leaders.

As we approach our denomination's 400th anniversary in 2028, your commission will work with Dr. Jaap Jacobs of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and other interested international scholars to prepare scholarly publications and seminars to mark our quadricentennial. Dr. Daniel Meeter will consult with Dr. Jacobs and others

on this matter, including members of your commission, our new archivist, and leaders from the Collegiate Churches of New York. Prospective partners may also include the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, the Roosevelt Institute (Middelburg, Zeeland), and the New Netherland Institute. Potential outcomes could be a conference with pre-circulated papers in 2025 and 2026 or a conference in 2028 with subsequent publication. The gathering could be held in the United States or in the Netherlands.

Supervisory Structure

As was reported to General Synod 2022, the RCA Archives program began with the hiring of Russell Gasero in 1978 to be archivist on a part-time trial basis for three years. He transitioned to full-time as the RCA struggled to find funding for a permanent program. Originally, the archivist reported directly to the general secretary and was part of the General Synod Office. With the restructure from the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) and General Program Council (GPC) to the General Synod Council (GSC), the archives shifted both in supervision and placement, but always reported to the Commission on History twice a year. While the Archives was accepted as a vital and essential responsibility for the General Synod, it was always underfunded and understaffed as the workload grew.

With the renovation of Sage Library from 1984-1985, the RCA Archives received increased storage room and better climate control as it began to lease the needed space and pay rent to New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In 1997, further expansion was made in the basement of Sage Library with the installation of nine movable storage units. As the RCA entered the twenty-first century, it leased underground storage space at Information Managers & Associates in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as the Archives began receiving more congregational records from both disbanded and active congregations.

For the last four decades, the Archives has struggled with changing supervisory leadership, structural rearrangements, and increased responsibilities. The Archives receives records from around the world: from congregations, classes, regional synods, General Synod Council staff, mission areas, and RCA boards and agencies. Its policy and procedures statement from June 1980 requires all official RCA records to be reviewed by the Archives prior to disposition. In recent years, this has become more difficult as the Archives is often ignored.

Your commission has insisted that all assemblies and current staff assure compliance with the policy and procedures statement to assure the long-term legal, financial, and administrative well-being of the denomination—especially during a time of rapid change and restructuring and potential litigation. Last year, your commission recommended to place supervision and authority for the RCA Archives and its staff directly under an Archives Supervision Subcommittee consisting of members from the Commission on History as well as the General Synod Council. [For more information, please read our 2022 report, which can be found in *Minutes of General Synod (MGS) 2022*, pp. 210-218.] Your commission has discussed this recommendation with members of the Commission on Church Order and has considered their friendly suggestions. We will revisit this possibility in a year.

Reformed Church Historic Trust

Last year, General Synod 2022 adopted the following recommendation:

H 22-2

To explore the establishment and incorporation of a Reformed Church Historic Trust as a 501(c)(3) organization to support and benefit the RCA Archives, and that the structure will be determined by the Commission on History in consultation with the RCA's general counsel, the RCA's chief financial officer, and others as needed, and reported to the 2023 General Synod (*MGS 2022*, p. 218).

At the February 2, 2023, meeting, your commission unanimously approved making the following recommendation to this synod:

H 23-1

That the General Synod hold in abeyance the proposal to develop a Historic Trust to support the Archives until such time as the denominational archivist should recommend that work be resumed on it.

Reasons:

- With all the staff changes over the last year, especially in the Archives, the work on this proposal has been significantly delayed.
- Once the new archivist has settled into her new position, she will be able to contribute to this conversation as we work to permanently guard that which is committed to our trust.

With the Archives holding almost 400 years of our history, heritage, denominational identity, and detailed agency records, your commission believes it is still a good time to make permanent its foundation and to provide for its growth. That said, it is exigent that our new archivist be a part of this process and serve as a key consultant.

Honoring Russell L. Gasero

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, General Synod 2020 did not convene. At that gathering, your commission had planned to honor Russell Gasero for his more than four decades of service as our RCA archivist. We bring that resolution to this General Synod to be acted on.

H 23-2

That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:

WHEREAS Russell Louis Gasero grew up in Steinway Reformed Church in Queens, New York, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, in 1973, and

worked in the Archives of the United Nations in New York City for five years, doing distinguished work in one of the world's elite archival programs, and

WHEREAS, in 1977, the Commission on History, seeking to preserve the heritage and properly manage the records of the Reformed Church in America, which had been stored in the library of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America since it had removed to New Brunswick, New Jersey, some 160 years earlier, and which had never received professional attention, received the approval of the General Synod to begin a professionally managed archival program and then proceeded to recruit and hire Russell Gasero to be the first archivist of the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS in the ensuing forty-two years Russell Gasero built the Archives of the Reformed Church in America from a collection of documents kept in closets at Gardner A. Sage Library into a comprehensive, fully accessible collection of documents, video media, and other artifacts, including over one-half mile of paper records stored in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, collecting and preserving the acts of apostles who make up the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS, during that time, he earned a master's degree from the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1981, and continuously partnered with denominational staff, classes, synods, and consistories to faithfully preserve and catalogue their records, saving the Reformed Church in America and its agencies hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses—and even saving the acronym “RCA” for us—through timely accession of needed records that were anywhere from months to centuries old, and saving congregations untold thousands of dollars through such storage, and

WHEREAS he has partnered with RCA colleges to create internship opportunities, partnered with denominational staff members to create volunteer service opportunities, and visited scores of congregations and church groups, expanding the awareness of the whole church in the preservation of its history, and distinguished himself in the membership and leadership of professional groups and historical associations, including the Society of American Archivists, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, the American Association for State and Local History, the Dutch Cousins, and Beardslee Press, all

helping to secure a bright future for professional archival work in the RCA and all of North America, and

WHEREAS he served the Commission on History not only as consultant but as staff and as production editor for The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, helping make possible over 100 volumes in that series which enlighten and edify the entire church and scholars far beyond us and saving tens of thousands of dollars in that mission, and

WHEREAS he worked with the faculty and administration of New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create a partnership with the Reformed Church Center, whereby scholarship is expanded, local congregations and classes are supported in their work, and a ten-year grant program was established that is helping the Archives expand its work, digitizing records to make them more easily accessible well into the future and expanding its program at no expense to the assessment budget of the Reformed Church, and

WHEREAS he has attended more consecutive General Synods than any other person in the history of the Reformed Church in America, often driving countless items across the country to the meetings not only for the Office of Historical Services and the Historical Series but also for other programs and agencies of the church, and bringing his wife, Maria, to many synod sessions to pitch in as volunteer labor, and

WHEREAS he has been a supportive presence to his staff colleagues for decades and has become the living institutional memory of the RCA,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 216th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in stated session at Central College in Pella, Iowa, the eighth through thirteenth days of June in the year of our Lord two-thousand-twenty-three, gives thanks to God for the life and ministry of Russell Louis Gasero on the occasion of his retirement and pray God's richest blessings on Russ and his wife, Maria, for the many years of their life ahead,

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the 216th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America declares Russell Louis Gasero to be archivist emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, and that the synod rise, in body or in spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Your commission celebrates the continuation of this important ministry and is glad to be working with our new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto.

Closing Remarks: Our History-Moored Faith and Its Humbling Effect

In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes that “biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously.”¹ History is so important to God, according to Buechner, that God initiated it, entered it, and has promised to one day “bring it to a serious close.” In order to understand our past, which informs our present, the study of history becomes paramount. This is certainly true of Christian history as well as denominational history. The past affects the present, and ultimately the future, confirming the age-old wisdom that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”²

Your commission acknowledges that not everyone enjoys reading history. Depending on the subject, it can feel distant, tedious, and irrelevant. Yet Christianity is a history-moored faith, instructing us and helping us gain perspective. Buechner, contrasting Christian faith with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, says, “History is not an absurdity to be endured or an illusion to be dispelled or an endlessly repeating cycle to be escaped. Instead it is for each of us a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere.”³

While the “somewhere” has been debated over the centuries, Christian history points to God’s unbending faithfulness and the reality that life has a direction—one where we are being led back to God, to our life’s source, and ultimately to wholeness. Life and faith are rooted in the mystery of God’s love in Jesus Christ, merging in surprising ways throughout history. What’s needed are eyes that see and ears that hear.

Historically, ours is a faith that’s more interrogative and less doctrinaire.⁴ In the Reformed tradition, we’ve grown accustomed to dancing with our doubts, and we attempt to tackle those nagging existential questions that encompass a wide range of subjects. This work is always done best in community. Together we accomplish these things while also affirming those tenets that have traditionally united us as a Reformed Church, as the body of Christ in North America:

- The wonder of creation;

¹ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 38.

² George Santayana. *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), p. 284.

³ Buechner, p. 38. He adds, “True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people, including the one whose soul is at stake, are looking the other way.”

⁴ Daniel L. Migliorie. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 2.

- The humility of God in Jesus Christ;
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit;
- The miracle of forgiveness of sins;
- The gift of new life in communion;
- The call to the ministry of reconciliation;
- The promise of the consummation of God's reign.⁵

We are confessional Protestants who adhere to a Trinitarian theology, and since the Protestant Reformation, we have stressed the belief that salvation is by grace through faith alone. When someone comes to faith, it is God who initiates that saving work. In addition, our churches are, and have been, non-hierarchical, self-governing congregations. The decision-making power resides primarily in the local church, in various times and places of relative autonomy. Our common beliefs and shared practices far outweigh the things that seek to divide us.

Your commission is fully aware of what's at stake as we consider our future as a Christian denomination. The fracturing of the Reformed Church in America is just one more ecclesial tragedy among many throughout history. It is troubling to witness churches and pastors leave our denomination. Some churches claim they can no longer function effectively in the RCA because of our ineffective structure (such as dependence on synod action and/or two-thirds of classes), which they claim has stalled the church's mission and its ability to correct wayward pastors, churches, classes, synods, and professors of theology who have differing interpretations of Scripture. Some have even claimed that those who remain in the RCA have outright rejected the authority of Scripture and that our churches are no longer gospel-centered.

Your commission would point out that these reasons and statements are often far from "grace-filled." We may have our differences, but those differences pale in comparison to what has united us over these many years. We endured quarrels during some very tense moments in the course of our denomination's history. While some left for new adventures, others stayed the course, recommitting to "walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."⁶

Unity is at the heart of God's purpose for the church. The psalmist sang, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity ... For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore" (Psalm 133:1, 4b). Jesus prayed that his church would live in unity (John 17:20-23). The apostle Paul said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:13). God blesses the church when it lives in unity.

⁵ Migliorie, p. 3.

⁶ *Book of Church Order*, Appendix: The Formularies, 3., p. 132.

A strict adherence to uniformity makes no allowance for differences. No deviations are tolerated, and the effort to eliminate differences becomes standard, creating an environment of sameness. Throughout the years, totalitarian governments have strongly enforced uniformity. Cults coerce uniformity. That is not who we are, have ever been, or will ever be. The RCA is driven by those tenets that have traditionally united us (refer to list above). We strive to invite everyone to sit at the table so they can “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). This takes a rigorous effort as we will continue to struggle to put our prejudices aside.

While we have a long way to go, your commission remains optimistic about our future together. For 395 years we have had a continuous ministerial presence in North America—148 years before the colonies gained independence from Great Britain. That is a remarkable fact. It means we remain the oldest operating Protestant ministry in this country, without any interruptions since 1628. We are standing on the shoulders of giants and will continue to build on this incredible Reformed foundation.

Because we are people of a story, and because history is critical to our survival, your commission has included a paper on the history of regional synods. It is our hope that synod delegates find the following paper illuminating. No matter what shape our denomination takes after some reasonable restructuring, your commission will continue to tell our story.

A SHORT HISTORY OF REGIONAL SYNODS, ESPECIALLY THEIR RESTRUCTURING

*Drafted by the Commission on History of the Reformed Church in America
for the occasion of General Synod 2023*

During this time of restructuring, the General Synod is paying particular attention to the role and purpose of regional synods. Do we need them? Why do we have them? What are they for? Would we be better off without them? This paper gives historical context to our deliberations.

What follows is 1) the purpose of regional synods as they originally developed and 2) an exposition on three times that the General Synod examined whether to keep them. We note that, for most of our history, the regional synods were known as “particular synods” and, before that, as “provincial synods.” In what follows we use the three terms interchangeably—regional, particular, provincial. In all cases, this body is that “middle judicatory” between classis and general synod.

Our First Regional Synods

It may come as a surprise that our Reformed Church in America was originally considered a regional synod. Before forming our own denominational structure in the Americas, we met as the particular synod of North America. To understand this, we look back at our roots in the Netherlands.

Our ancestral Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands was never formally a national church. It was legally established province by province, and each province

had its own provincial synod. The first synod of any kind in the Netherlands was the Provincial Synod of Holland and Zeeland, convened in 1574.⁷ As each province joined the Reformation, each one established, by law, its own provincial synod. For the next 242 years, until 1816, the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands was a federation of provincial synods, and for two-and-a-half centuries, these provincial synods met annually to conduct their proper business. By contrast, for a quarter of a millennium, Dutch general synods only met four times!

The first National (general) Synod met in Dordrecht in 1578. A second one met in Middelburg in 1581 and a third at The Hague in 1586. It was 32 years before another general synod met; this was the famous Synod of Dordt in 1618. After that, no general synod met again for two centuries, after the Napoleonic revolutions.

The provincial synods did all the synodical work. They supervised the state of religion and the interests of the churches within their provinces. They monitored doctrine and liturgy and supervised the classes' supervision of pastors. They oversaw the professors of theology, and they (not the classes) supervised the students and candidates for ministry. They corresponded ecumenically with other Reformed bodies. They witnessed to their provincial governments. For two centuries, if you said "synod," what you meant was "regional synod."

With no convened general synod for generations of living memory, it was only natural that our first synod in North America, in 1785, was a particular synod.⁸ We saw ourselves as a new self-standing province of the Dutch Church, to which we had belonged in a lesser status for our first 150 years. Previously, we had been only a collection of congregations under the Classis of Amsterdam, and only in 1771 did we finally have a plan for an orderly organization. But effecting this plan was interrupted by the American Revolution. In 1783, when the revolutionary dust had settled, our leaders began a "weighty and impartial discussion" of our denomination's future in America, its legal standing in the new republic, and how it should be organized and governed.

As this particular synod met regularly, they began to realize that they were quickly evolving from a branch of the Netherlands church to an independent ecclesiastical body, and that they were necessarily approaching the status of a national synod. And so, upon the adoption and publication of the Constitution, the synod of 1794 declared itself to be a general synod. This was audacious, considering that it was the

⁷ For the early synods see F. L. Rutgers, ed., *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der Zestiende Eeuw*, second ed. (Dordrecht: Van den Tol, 1980).

⁸ For the early North American synods, see Edward Tanjore Corwin, *A Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: The Board of Publications of the Reformed Church in America, 1906), 483-490, and Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America no. 24, Donald J. Bruggink, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 34-43.

first general synod in the whole Dutch Reformed world since the Synod of Dordt, and on foreign soil, no less.

The particular synod continued to meet annually, and in 1800, it divided into the Particular Synods of Albany and New York. The general synod met only every three years. To serve the critical decisions of denominational formation, its earliest meetings were conventions of ministers and elders from every congregation, but in 1800 its membership reverted to the Church Order's requirement of delegates from the particular synods (not the classes) of eight ministers and eight elders each.

Three events followed that tended to reduce the importance of the particular synods. First, their responsibility for theological education was removed by the Constitution, which assigned the theological professorate to the general synod and the supervision and examination of students normally to the classes. Second, in 1812, the membership of the general synod was changed from delegates from the particular synods to delegates from the classes, three ministers and three elders each.⁹ Also in 1812, the general synod began to meet annually. Clearly, we had begun to expect from general synods what, for the previous 238 years, we had expected from particular synods.¹⁰

It should not surprise, then, that in 1820, the Particular Synod of Albany proposed abolishing particular synods, as did the Classis of Poughkeepsie a year later (for different reasons), but these proposals were outvoted. In 1848, a general synod report stated that church extension required particular synods. The Particular Synod of Chicago was organized in 1856 and, in 1869, the Particular Synod of New Brunswick. The new concern of particular synods was church extension and new church development, and this continued to be the case until the 1970s (when regional synod executives were still called "field secretaries").

The General Synod Report of 1899: Communal Superintendence

A generation later the question of particular synods came up again, and the General Synod of 1898 appointed a committee to examine "the origin, connections relating to our Church polity and government, and the uses, past, present and future, of the Particular Synods," and, "if possible, to devise some plan of adjustment, which will be more efficient and satisfactory to the whole Church than the plan at present existing."¹¹

⁹ Corwin, *Digest*, 307.

¹⁰ See the Commission on History's 2007 report to the General Synod, "A Historical Examination of the Relationship among RCA Assemblies," *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 310-312. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf>

¹¹ Corwin, *Digest*, 488-490.

The small but high-powered committee reported a year later, in 1899. The full report is worth reading, as it is remarkably relevant to the restructuring inquiry of 2023.¹² The report succinctly reviews the “origins” and “connections” of particular synods. It notes that particular synods solve the problem of “remoteness between and separating the whole, the *national*, and its minor, individual parts, the *Classes*, which had its difficulties and was a weakness.” In other words, the general synod is too broad an assembly to adequately govern and care for all the classes. No doubt this was the same motivation that had led to the creation of the Particular Synod of Chicago in 1856, after the rapid church growth arising from the Dutch and German immigration to the Midwest.

The report goes on to address the particular synods’ “uses.” It surveys their occasional constitutional uses in forming classes, transferring congregations, and serving as the “Court of final appeal” in most judicial cases. But when it comes to their main use, which is the ongoing “superintendence over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several *Classes*,” it notes that typically “the whole business sinks down into a matter of mere routine,” and “evidently the purpose and main ‘use’ of the Particular Synod is nullified,” and “it becomes a perfunctory affair.”

In the problem, the report finds an opportunity, and its language gets visionary, creative, and even, in modern terms, almost missional. In the report’s own words:

Your Committee deem that...what the present case demands; in short, [is] a better understanding of the place, purpose, and “uses” of the Particular Synod. It is contained in the words: “superintendence over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several *Classes* within its bounds.” With this made prominent, once a year for their delegates to meet and consider such a subject—the religious condition of each all concerned should not be, would not be, held a useless “expense” to be complained of or avoided, but a helpful gathering, full of interest to all. If, for instance, one *Classis* reported revivals, accessions, growth, there is the opening of a topic, perchance helpful to all; the germ, it may be, of a new impulse, new life, a new spirit. If, on the other hand, and year after year, one reports within its bounds “nothing done,” no life, no spirituality in its churches, to the Particular Synod has been assigned the responsibility, the duty, of looking into it—of “devising,” if possible, joint means of help and remedy. What is or may be done within or without the Synod, all depends on the spirit and faithfulness to duty of the Synod itself, and the “several *Classes*” with whose “spiritual interests and concerns” it has to do.

¹² For the full text of the report, see James Hart Brumm, ed., *An RCA Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in Seventy-Five Documents*, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America no. 104, James Hart Brumm gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformed Church Press, 2022), 341-346. The three-member committee included a former General Synod president and the senior minister of the Collegiate Church in New York.

Resolved, that to increase the interest and effectiveness of the Particular Synods, and to give them more fully the place they were designed to occupy in our denominational system, the “superintendence” (assigned to them in the Constitution) “over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several Classes within their bounds” is of the utmost importance, and should be carried out, not as a matter of routine or formal report, but in the spirit of mutual helpfulness and desire for the spiritual growth and prosperity of each and all; and their attention is hereby earnestly called to the matter, and the devising of means to the end.”¹³

The committee’s report displays not only a sober intimacy with the working realities of classes and synods, but also, by zeroing in on “superintendence,” reveals an implicit understanding of Reformed polity in its nature and ideals. According to Professor Leon van den Broeke, the core of Reformed polity is the dynamic interplay between two New Testament imperatives, *episkopè* and *koinonia*, or “oversight” and “community.”¹⁴ In our Constitution, “oversight” is “superintendence.” The primary task of our assemblies, which are communities of office-bearers, is oversight. The community of the general synod oversees the regional synods, the community of the regional synod oversees the classes, and the community of the classis oversees the congregations. If we compare Reformed polity to other Protestant polities, we can say that Congregational polities are communal, but their assemblies have little responsibility for oversight, while Episcopal polities practice oversight, but they do this through hierarchies, not assemblies. Reformed polity seeks an idealistic middle way that balances the two biblical imperatives, and this dynamic balance is not easy to maintain.

The 1899 report envisions particular synods as assemblies with real and implicitly vulnerable fellowship (*koinonia*) for the purpose of superintendence (*episkopè*). It envisions a spiritual government of “mutual helpfulness” in order to enhance new life, revival, and spirituality. It envisions this as having necessarily to be done by provincial synods because general synods are too large and too broad in scope to provide the space and occasion for active mutual helpfulness among the classes.

The next year, in 1900, the General Synod’s Standing Committee on the State of the Church made further proposals that particular synods should host annual public meetings to hear presentations by representatives of the seminaries and colleges of the denomination’s educational and missionary work, the women’s departments, the Christian Endeavor Societies, and the Brotherhood of Andrew and Philip,¹⁵ as this “would do much to stimulate interest in denominational work.”¹⁶ Here we see what we now call denominational “program,” and how particular synods could support it.

¹³ Brumm, *RCA Reader*, 344-345.

¹⁴ Leon van den Broeke, *Classis in Crisis: Om de Classicale Toekomst* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2009), 78-84.

¹⁵ The Brotherhood of Andrew and Philip was a fraternal evangelical religious organization founded in 1888 by Rufus W. Miller.

¹⁶ Corwin, *Digest*, 490.

Although the next five decades would bring traumatic changes in the world—including World War I (1914-1918) and the dreaded rise of fascism that led to World War II (1939-1945)—the RCA held relatively stable in structure and program. In the 1950s, the RCA enjoyed Protestantism's general prosperity, while in the 1960s the RCA was preoccupied with liturgical change, ecumenical controversies, the Civil Rights movement (1954-1968), and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), not to mention a recasting of the Church Order. At the same time, the particular synods began to develop programs beyond superintendence and church extension. In the 1980s the particular synods of New York and Michigan, for example, began to act like mini-denominations within their bounds, with their own cadres of staff for education and social witness. The overlap and redundancy of responsibilities for program would inevitably need to be addressed.

The General Synod Report of 2000: From Superintendence to Program

In 1996, a classis overture from within the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics requested “a full review of the purpose and responsibilities of regional synods.” The impetus was stress between a classis and a regional synod, especially over funding. The overture triggered an enormous effort that resulted in an extensive report to the General Synod of 2000.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that, while the 1899 report occupied just three committee members for one year, the 2000 report was presented by a nine-member task force that had conducted a four-year consultation with denominational staff and unit directors, regional synod staff and officers, and classis stated clerks. Halfway through its work the task force had to adjust to the new statement on mission and vision for the RCA.

Over the course of the four years, the task force reviewed virtually everything, including the bylaws of every classis and regional synod as well as all the consistorial reports of 1998. The task force developed a chart comparing the respective ministries and needs of each of the four levels of government, as well as a list of the five values that are shared throughout. The task force also noted a “conversational breakdown” between the staff at the various levels of government.

As a result of its thorough homework,

The task force has learned that the specific function of regional synods has been questioned throughout the whole history of their existence. Their presence as a middle judicatory (and the terminal judicatory for cases that arise from discipline imposed by a board of elders) has never been doubted. Beyond that, the regional synods have changed significantly over the life of the RCA. In recent years significant resources of the regional synods have been dedicated to programmatic functions. To some extent, the regional

¹⁷ For the full report, see the *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 429-437.
<http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2000MGS-complete.pdf>

synods have initiated such programs; to a large degree, the regional synods have been assigned such roles by the General Synod.¹⁸

After studying all the bylaws, the task force concluded that the main purpose of the classes was superintendence and supervision. But unlike the 1899 report, superintendence is not mentioned as the main purpose of the regional synods. It is rather program (“ministries”). The report states that even with an emphasis on denominational programs, regional synod programming remains essential, as congregations often find it closer to their needs. But this (and the competition for funds) requires the program staffs of the regional and general synods more intentionally to communicate and, where possible, collaborate, especially when competing for funds. Both levels of staff convened in 1999 and adopted a “Covenant of Response” to pledge their communication and collaboration. And a year later, the task force reported:

In sum, the task force, having conducted reviews of the responsibilities and purposes of the regional synods and classes, affirms the positive roles that regional synods play in the RCA today. Classes and regional synods need to be in constant conversation so that synods do not infringe upon the prerogatives of the several classes or churches within their bounds. As to the relationships between regional synods and the General Synod, the task force notes that what is most needed is regular conversation around strategic planning and a shared sense of vision for the ministry of the RCA. Thus, the task force has chosen not to present to the General Synod a comprehensive “organizational plan with implementation steps and a timeline for deployment of RCA staff” because several conversations have been taking place that have significant potential to lead the RCA in a positive direction.¹⁹

The report concludes with six recommendations, five of which were adopted. One was a *BCO* amendment requiring regional synods to consult with the classes before working with a consistory (which the Commission on Church Order declined to move forward in 2001). The other four affirm the “Covenant of Response” and direct the General Synod Council and urge the regional synods intentionally to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate, especially on leading ministries, sharing resources, and planning strategy.

The General Synod Report of 2007: Restructuring Regional Synods Away

Despite the results of four years of work and the endorsement of regional synods, only five years later the general secretary, in his report to the General Synod of 2005, again called into question the fourfold structure of congregation, classis, regional synod, and general synod. He argued that the officers and staffs at all levels had tried to carry out the directions of five years earlier,

¹⁸ *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 432.

¹⁹ *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 434.

But overall, the structural problems remain and seem clear. We've talked about this often, and at meetings this year with leaders throughout the RCA, including all our regional synod executives, we agreed together on the need for a missiological reflection on our present structures and organization. We don't have answers, nor do we want to see an inordinate focus on internal structures. But as we work and live in response to our mission and vision, the dysfunctions of our present organizational structure and resource allocation become more obvious.²⁰

To address this dysfunction, he called for a new study of the same ground, now with a "missional" emphasis. The synod adopted his recommendation:

To instruct the officers of General Synod to initiate a denomination-wide conversation of "missional reflection" on the structure of our present four assemblies, in wide consultation with those from regional synods, classes, and consistories as well as the Commission on Church Order and other bodies; and further, to give attention to "best practices" of emerging cooperation between regional synods and classes in carrying out the task of equipping congregations for mission and ministry; and further, to gather suggestions, ideas, and models of how our present structure and relationship of assemblies might be adapted to more effectively carry out the mission of the church; and further, to share the results of this reflection with the General Synod no later than 2007, and with the church at-large along the way, in order to determine what future steps, if any, might be undertaken.²¹

To address "the structure of our present four assemblies" was in the nature of the case essentially to address the middle two, the classis and the regional synod. It is evident in the general secretary's report that regional synods, unlike classes, were viewed in terms of program and program-delivery, without regard to superintendence as the 1899 report understood it.

A Missional Structures Task Force was appointed, and it reported to the General Synod of 2007.²² It consisted of eight members plus two staff, including the general secretary. As part of its work, the task force consulted widely, with "pastors and consistories, classes and regional synods, classis clerks, and individual classes or regional synods experimenting with new practices," in order "to know the present reality of the church." And it reported to the General Synod as follows:

After a year and a half of listening, to the church and to God's Spirit and to each other, and in measuring some of the fruit from Our Call, the task force has firmly reached this conclusion: that if the RCA continues in its present

²⁰ *Minutes of General Synod 2005*, 41-42. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2005MGS-complete.pdf>

²¹ *Minutes of General Synod 2005*, 141.

²² For the report and its outcome, see *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 88-104. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf>

missionally-focused direction, the current structure of the Reformed Church in America will not be able to sustain the missional imperatives of God's call upon the Reformed Church in America.²³

The task force appealed to the purpose of the church as given in the Preamble to the Government in the *Book of Church Order*, as well as the mission and vision statements and Our Call, which the present structure had become unable to fulfill because of “brutal facts” and “brutal trends.” The task force report is worth reading as a compelling description and analysis of the challenges facing the church at the time and its frustrations in meeting those challenges.

The task force proposed that in order to approach the “preferred future” of the RCA, the solution would be combining the classes and regional synods into “new middle assemblies, with greater resources than our current classes and with stronger, more direct connections to congregations than our current regional synods,” “taking the best of both regional synods and classes.” It also proposed that the professional staff of these middle assemblies would be accountable not only within their assemblies but also to the General Synod (which would have to be the General Synod Council staff).

The task force predicted major funding implications, and that “eventual staffing at the middle assembly level might require resources currently lodged at the GSC level; it most certainly will involve some form of mutual accountability of staff and will require a deep collaboration between GSC and middle assembly staff that goes well beyond the current, and growing, number of joint efforts.” The task force proposed an “open space” of three years for experimentation toward the new structure, under the supervision of the General Synod Council.

The task force offered six recommendations in order to implement these major changes. They are as follows:

1. Create the “open space.”
2. Combine and realign the classes and regional synods as new middle assemblies.
3. Continue the denomination-wide dialogue with data collection.
4. Bring deacons into full voting participation in the assemblies.
5. Have General Synod meet every two years instead of annually.
6. Add a fourth “mark” to the church, that of individual members being missional themselves.

Not one of the recommendations was adopted. The first, second, and fifth were simply defeated. A substitute for the third was adopted after amendments. The fourth was referred to the Commission on Theology. The sixth was substituted by a programmatic incentive for members to be missional.

²³ *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 88.

Why this result? General Synod minutes do not by nature include the debate on the floor or the opposing arguments. Apparently, for the majority, the task force either failed to make its case or did not tell the whole story. It could be that the majority did not accept the idea that keeping both classes and regional synods was an impediment to being missional. Or was it rather the case that the majority did not dare to move from maintenance to mission? Did they not want to give up the ancient heirlooms of their polity or the freedom of their local staffs from centralized direction?

Observations, Possible Implications, and Questions for Consideration

While the inner workings that led to the written reports and decisions of the general synod are a matter of speculation, a number of observations, possible implications, and questions arise that may be instructive as we consider the current RCA structure conversations.

Regarding the 2007 task force report, did the task force anticipate the result? How open was the “year and a half of listening”? Were voices that disagreed with the motivating assessment of the general secretary considered in full? If a process has a foregone conclusion among its leadership, that process cannot be as truly open as it desires or professes. That is an important question for all task forces whose memberships are appointed by general synod officers instead of being delegated by the “lower” assemblies themselves.

Observation #1

Though regional synods have lost their original purpose of superintendence in favor of program, which is redundant to the general synod, there is general resistance to restructuring them away. What the reports of both 2000 and 2007 lack is a deep and objective study of what regional synods offer, apart from program, that makes many in the RCA want to keep them. Is it true anymore that, as 1899 suggests, they offer an important “space” between the national (actually bi-national) and the local assemblies? The Regional Synod of Canada offers the obvious example (and at this moment the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which has no regional synods, is developing a parallel “space” for its Canadian congregations). The Regional Synod of New York provides a cultural space and a pattern of relationships that is very different than the rest of the RCA in both mission and experience. The Regional Synod of the Far West is just as “indigenous” to its local culture as are Albany and Great Lakes. Might these cultural differences be dealt with better in a different way than within the spaces of the regional synods?

Observation #2

Since the original vision for regional synods was cast in 1899, it seems there has always been difficulty in performing active and regular communal superintendence. If the reports of 2000 and 2007 both see the regional synods as program bodies, without regard to missional superintendence, we might conclude that regional synods do not do this, or at least they do not do it very well. If it is difficult, is it

unlikely? Impossible? Can oversight happen in community, without bishops? (Even episcopal churches find this challenging.) Is the Reformed ideal of the dynamic interplay of *episkopè* and *koinonia* a lost cause? How does a body that is meant to be “conversational” rather than “hierarchical” exert any necessary authority?²⁴

Observation #3

Regional synods are the least necessary assembly in the four-level structure, and therefore always open to question, as they have been in the RCA since 1820. There needs to be some assembly for the whole, like a general synod. There need to be classes in order to ordain and install and hold pastors and consistories accountable, as well as to assess money. There need to be classes as our “corporate bishops.” But do we need regional synods as corporate archbishops? That is not merely a joke. It suggests the regional synod’s purpose is only *derived*, indirect, and without any “original” functions. It is the least necessary of our assemblies, and thus always suspect.

Observation #4

As the reports above show, it is easy to blame the regional synods for infringements on the classes, as in 2000, or for being redundant impediments to mission, as in 2007. This has happened again in the last five years, as various reports to General Synod have attributed some large part of the dissent, dysfunction, and division in the RCA to the four-level structure, for which the first solution remains discarding the regional synod. And yet, while regional synods certainly suffer the symptoms of this dysfunction, these reports have not yet demonstrated how the regional synods are a cause of it. Indeed, a similar dissent and division is developing in denominations without our four-level structure, like the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Undoubtedly, there are other observations and lessons to be learned, but with this history, your commission offers the General Synod context for your deliberations. We are an eschatological people, called to the future, not the past, and our history is to be neither a monument nor a prison. The Holy Spirit is always calling us to new visions and new realities. But this same Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, who turns the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. In that Spirit, we present this work to the glory of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Respectfully submitted,

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²⁴ For this terminology see the Commission on History’s 2007 report, “A Historical Examination,” *op. cit.*

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