

## **Report of the Commission on History**

The purpose of the Commission on History (est. 1966) is three-fold: 1) to support the work of the Archives, 2) to oversee The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, and 3) to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program” (*Book of Church Order [BCO]*, Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 5, Section 5 [2023 edition, pp.115-116]).

To accomplish this work, the commission met via Zoom on Wednesday, October 4, 2023, and Wednesday, February 7, 2024. This is the Commission on History’s 58th General Synod report.

### **The Archives**

The commission continues to celebrate the work of our archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, who began in her role in February 2023. From her office in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), Dr. Pallitto manages and maintains the denomination’s most precious documents with curiosity and determination. She has a big job before her as she acclimates to the quirks of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), establishes command over current record-keeping processes, and thinks creatively about how to preserve important documents into the future.

A denomination as historic as ours holds a wealth of records and historical documents that require significant storage space, both physical and digital. Safe preservation and clear pathways to access these documents are vital, not only to the many researchers who visit our Archives each year but to the integrity of our institution. This commission applauds Dr. Pallitto’s dedication as she supports researchers and searches for creative solutions to increase our digital storage capacity. The need is very great, and our archivist is doing very much. We celebrate her work and encourage others in the denomination to reach out to her in gratitude as well.

Since 2015, New Brunswick Theological Seminary has provided an annual grant (for ten years) of \$10,000 from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC) to expand the work of the Archives in partnership with NBTS’s Reformed Church Center. Though GSC, due to financial constraints, has been unable to match this grant, your commission has provided the matching funds each year from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. As the ten-year span of this grant draws near, it is even more important that the General Synod consider ways to support the work of the Archives into the future. Donations from individuals, churches, and classes are welcomed and appreciated.

To address the growing financial concern, in 2022, the following recommendation was adopted by the General Synod:

#### 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).

In 2023, upon recommendation from the commission and considering Dr. Pallitto's recent hiring, General Synod adopted the following:

#### 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 (*MGS 2023*, p. 200).

This commission continues to be mindful of the long-term sustainability of our Archives. Upon the archivist's recommendation at our February meeting that our commission resume the work of exploring the Historic Trust, we plan to consult with the GSC staff to develop a strategy for eventual support of the GSC, approval by the General Synod, and implementation.

### **The Historical Series**

Rev. Dr. James Hart Brumm continues as the general editor of the Historical Series. Since the last commission report to General Synod, under Rev. Dr. Brumm's leadership, the series has published *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; and *The Church Speaks*, vol. 3, edited by David Komline.

*Global Grace Café* tells the story of Interfaith-RISE and the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, in their advocacy for undocumented people in their community between 2006 and 2022. Through the lens of one family and one congregation, we see a narrative of immigration in the United States broadly. The commission is very proud to have produced this volume and commends it to the readership of all in our denomination.

*The Canons of Dort* is the last work of Gene Heideman, one of our denomination's leading theological voices, who went home to glory in 2022. This book sets the Canons in historical context, clarifies positive aspects of its theology, and offers a biblical examination of its key claims. It is an important volume for ministers and all those who confess the Canons as "historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God."

*The Church Speaks* is the third installment of collected papers of the Commission on Theology from the years 2001-2020. This commission trusts that the resource will

prove helpful as a reference guide for future generations of the church, as the previous two volumes have been.

The rise of on-demand printing has opened new opportunities for the Historical Series to adapt its strategies, saving the cost of large print runs on Historical Series volumes. This change to on-demand also means that the standing inventory of older volumes is no longer necessary and is, in fact, problematic as we consider the archival storage needs. Additionally, our partner Faith Alive Christian Resources has decided not to carry an inventory of our volumes, presenting further storage challenges. The commission has worked diligently over the past year to reduce the inventory, offering volumes back to co-publishers and organizing the shipment of any requested volumes to the faculty of our affiliated institutions. This huge project has been years in the making, and we are proud to have accomplished it this year. We are working to make all volumes of the Historical Series available digitally for on-demand printing. Many thanks to Rev. Dr. Brumm for his stick-to-it-iveness.

### **On Matters of Historical Relevance**

The third task of the Commission on History is to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program.” To that end, the commission reviewed the proposals set before us by the restructuring team, asking what areas might have historical precedent. We submit the following for consideration:

#### *On RF 24-6: Changes to Commissions*

The number and structure of standing committees and commissions of the General Synod has fluctuated over the years. As an appendix to this report, you will find a short paper chronicling that history. We trust it may prove relevant as we consider the future of our commissions.

#### *On RF 24-8: Including Deacons as Delegates to “Middle Assemblies”*

The idea to include deacons in assemblies beyond their local congregations is not new. In 2011, the Commission on Theology (CoT) presented a paper to the General Synod entitled, “The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church” (*MGS 2011*, pp. 289-306), which was referred for study by the broader assemblies between 2011 and 2013. In 2013, the CoT reported the results of their discussions, which showed a nearly even split of those in favor and against including deacons in broader assemblies (see *MGS 2013*, pp. 364-366).

Presenting issues included disagreement about the language of “governance” (if deacons can be considered to have a governing role), the need for further attention to the distinction between “assemblies” and “judicatories” as expressed in the 2011 paper, and whether “voice and vote” is the best way to ensure the contribution of deacons. Their report alludes to various alternatives to “voice and vote” representation, some that would involve even fuller expression of deacons’ gifting. According to one respondent, “We could be thinking much more creatively and

radically about how to empower and receive the gifts of the deacons, for instance, through the establishment of a diaconate and the revision of denominational structures accordingly” (*MGS 2013*, p. 365). This feedback was enough that the CoT committed to further study and did not raise the issue to the General Synod again.

As we look to a radical restructuring of the denomination, this commission suggests we would do well to look to creative ideas presented in the past as possibilities to chart our future course.

#### *On RF 24-10: Experimenting with Consensus within Robert’s Rules*

The first edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order* was published in 1876 by Henry Martyn Robert after he experienced a chaotic church meeting in his own Baptist congregation. Though the RCA predates this publication by more than two centuries, it seems we have always had a penchant for conducting our business “decently and in good order.” In fact, our “Rules for the Government of General Synod in their Proceedings” from 1834 look remarkably like elements of Robert’s Rules, and, though our Rules have grown over the years, they have not changed markedly in the general flow since that time. The first mention of Robert’s Rules in the *BCO* is not until the 1980 edition. In 1979, the Commission on Church Order (CCO) brought a proposal to the General Synod to add an article to chapter 3, part 1, which stated: “The ‘Rules of Order of the General Synod’ shall be those set forth in the most recent edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order* except as is otherwise specified in the ‘Special Rules of Order of the General Synod’” (*MGS 1979*, p. 191). The language of this article remains today. The CCO in 1979 provided a reason for the adoption of this article:

Generally speaking, rules of order should as much as possible be the same for all organizations. This not only avoids parliamentary confusion but also equips persons participating in large assemblies for the first time for further participation in other similar bodies. The provision to use Robert’s Rules of Order rather than General Synod’s own is therefore a matter both of convenience and principle.

As we consider the proposal of the restructuring team to alternatives to a strict use of Robert’s Rules, we would be wise to consider the reasons for its adoption, namely to use an order of operations that aligns with common best practice and is, therefore, not cumbersome for the body’s new members to learn.

#### **Conclusion**

History tells a story. Whether recorded in minutes of past General Synod meetings, letters from missionaries to their supporting churches, photos of hospital or school openings, or the charters of the oldest churches in the United States of America, the historical records of the RCA give us clues to the stories of people who sought to follow God faithfully in all their wondering, celebrating, and even disagreeing.

An institution’s past informs its future. Especially now, as we look to a future we cannot know, we would do well to look to the stories of the past—to the story of God

in Scripture and to the stories of God's people throughout the history of the RCA. Through their triumphs and their foibles, may we learn to chart a wise course. Above all, may we see the faithfulness of God.

Respectfully submitted,

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Katlyn DeVries, moderator  
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## APPENDIX

### **We HAVEN'T Always Done Things This Way: A Brief Review of Commissions in the RCA**

*Submitted by the Commission on History in response to the restructuring team's RF 24-6, which would bring changes to standing commissions*

Institutional memory is only as long as its oldest members, unless it can be saved and accessed. This is why archives and historians are crucial to any group of people: they help us access records, which are not only facts, but clues to the stories that tell us why things are the way they are.

In recent years, the history of how and why the commissions of the RCA came to be has been slipping outside of our institutional memory. Amid the most sweeping restructure of our order since the one that created the *Book of Church Order*,<sup>6</sup> now is a good time to review the origins of our current scheme. We begin with the histories of the individual commissions.<sup>7</sup>

#### **The Commission on Christian Action**

The Commission on Christian Action was formed in 1955 (*MGS 1955*, pp. 189-190). Prior to that, it was known as the Social Welfare Committee, which first reported to the General Synod in 1933 (*MGS 1933*, pp. 424-426). This had replaced the Permanent Committee on Public Morals, which first reported to synod in 1919 with a special

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<sup>6</sup> The declarative act that finalized the changes making the legislative portion of the RCA Constitution into *The Government of the Reformed Church in America, Disciplinary Procedures, and the Organization and Rules of Order of the General Synod* was approved by the General Synod of 1967 (*MGS 1967*, p. 183). The title *Book of Church Order* appeared on printed copies in 1968, but there is no clear synodical warrant for this in the written record.

<sup>7</sup> The history of the individual commissions presented here is deeply indebted to the work of Russell Gasero, archivist emeritus of the RCA.

focus on temperance and Lord's Day observance (*MGS 1919*, pp. 860-864). "Public Morals" was a regular agenda item at General Synod from 1886 (*MGS 1886*, p. 156), when it replaced "Prevailing Sins," which first appeared at the synod of 1809 (*MGS 1809*, p. 408). The Social Welfare Committee also replaced the Committee on Social Service and Industrial Relations, established in 1931.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Commission on Christian Unity**

The Committee on Christian Unity was established in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, pp. 101-102), replacing the Interchurch Relations Committee, which had been the umbrella committee, since 1964, for a number of short- and long-term committees related to denominational relationships, unity, and ecumenism (*MGS 1974*, pp. 227-229). It defined its work as threefold—church to church matters, ecumenical agencies, and new developments in the Christian Church—in 1977 (*MGS 1977*, pp. 253). The 1979 General Synod referred to it both as "Committee" and "Commission," and a recommendation from the president's report used the word "Commission" (*MGS 1979*, pp. 150-162). The revision of the Bylaws and Rules of Order of the General Synod first approved in 1979 gave us the name "Commission on Christian Unity" (*MGS 1979*, p. 180).

### **The Commission on Church Order**

A Committee on the Revision of the Constitution was appointed by the General Synod of 1910 (*MGS 1910*, p. 771). Their work resulted in the following declarative statement being added to the Constitution in 1916:

Amendments to this Constitution shall be made only upon a recommendation to the Classes by the General Synod at a stated meeting and by the subsequent approval of two-thirds of the Classes to such proposed amendment. When such approval has been given the General Synod may in its discretion pass a final declarative resolution and when such declarative action has been taken, the articles thus determined and declared shall become authoritative parts of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (*MGS 1916*, p. 858).

This committee became the Permanent Committee on the Revision of the Constitution and all proposed amendments were now referred to it (*MGS 1918*, pp. 476-477). In 1955, the committee recommended that it make a careful study of the constitution for the purpose of re-arrangement and clarification of obscure sections (*MGS 1955*, p. 117). At this point, the committee had a more active role in the ongoing changes to the constitution. The Rules of Order of General Synod were integrated with the constitution in 1963 and this part came under the committee as well; at this point, the name was changed to the Permanent Committee on the Revision of the

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<sup>8</sup> The committee was established by the General Synod of 1931 (*MGS 1931*, pp. 1125-1126). The very next synod, responding to multiple overtures to economize the administration of the synod, merged the two committees (*MGS 1932*, p. 158).

Constitution and Rules of Order (*MGS 1963*, p. 136). In 1965, a recommendation was adopted that all amendments coming up at synod be referred to the Committee on the Revision of the Constitution for study and presentation at the next synod (*MGS 1965*, pp. 167-168).

In 1969, that committee became the Permanent Committee on Church Government (*MGS 1969*, p. 210), which was formalized with the new Rules of Order adopted the following year (*MGS 1970*, p. 149). In 1979, a first reading of the “Bylaws and Rules of Order of the General Synod” introduced the name “Commission on Church Order” (*MGS 1979*, p. 180), which was approved on second reading in 1980 (*MGS 1980*, p. 41).<sup>9</sup>

### **The Commission on History**

The roots of the Commission on History are with the Committee on History and Research. This was proposed by the Progress Council in 1928 for a committee so that “the facts concerning the origin of the General Synod, Particular Synods, Classes, Consistories, Congregations, Pastors, etc., may be gathered, preserved, and published, if important” (*MGS 1928*, p. 875). This committee was discontinued in 1958 and replaced the following year by an Advisory Committee on History and Research that was to work with the stated clerk (*MGS 1959*, p. 387). Beginning in 1960, that group busied itself “with the gathering, preservation and use of historical materials of the Reformed Church in America ... which had accumulated over a period of more than a century, in the synodical archives, located at Gardner A. Sage Library, New Brunswick Theological Seminary” (*MGS 1963*, p. 334). In 1963, the committee was named “The Permanent Committee on History and Research” and the feasibility of publishing an update of Corwin’s *Manual of the Reformed Church in America* was discussed (*MGS 1963*, pp. 335-336). The name was changed to the Commission on History in 1966 (*MGS 1966*, pp. 315-316) and the launch of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America was announced in 1968 (*MGS 1968*, pp. 307-308).<sup>10</sup>

### **The Commission on Judicial Business**

Judicial Business was given a regular place in the agenda of the General Synod going back into the nineteenth century, but Corwin’s *Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1906) has no mention of any committees for the work. The first indexed reference to a Standing Committee on Judicial Business is in 1906 (*MGS 1906*, pp. 491-498). In 1934, the committee refers to itself as the “Permanent Committee on Judicial Business” (*MGS 1934*, p. 713) and that name seems to have stuck. The revisions to the Bylaws of the General Synod made it the Committee on Judicial Business in 1970, with much the same duties as it has now

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<sup>9</sup> This regularized most of the commission names we now know.

<sup>10</sup> The report insists that the General Synod of 1967 approved this action, but there is no mention of it in those minutes.

(*MGS 1970*, p. 146), and the revisions of 1979, mentioned above, changed the name to “The Commission on Judicial Business” (*MGS 1979*, p. 180).

### **The Commission on Race and Ethnicity**

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity was formed in response to a report from the Commission on Christian Action to the General Synod of 1998.<sup>11</sup> That commission had recommended a task force on race and ethnicity to be formed as the RCA sought to begin a decade freed from racism. The advisory committee presenting the Commission on Christian Action report to the synod amended the recommendation to create a Commission on Race and Ethnicity (*MGS 1998*, p. 131), which had as its responsibilities to “advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism,” “serve as an advocate for transformation,” “recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies,” and “monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives” (*BCO Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 5, Section 7b [2023 edition, p. 117]*).

This was not the first time the RCA created a commission for this issue. The General Synod of 1964 formed a Commission on Race (*MGS 1964*, pp. 99-100), which sought to spur dialogue and awareness in the denomination until it was discontinued upon recommendation of the General Program Council in 1970 (*MGS 1970*, pp. 182-183). In its final report, this earlier commission powerfully called upon the RCA to address its own institutional racism (*MGS 1969*, pp. 84-86). The term “institutional racism” did not appear in official church documents again until the Board of Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary took it up in 2009.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Commission on Nominations**

The first Standing Committee on Nominations was formed by the General Synod of 1842 (*MGS 1842*, p. 52); it was dropped in 1885 then restored in 1886 (*MGS 1886*, p. 205). Nominating committees came and went, mostly on an *ad hoc* basis, until a Standing Committee on Nominations was reestablished in 1940 (*MGS 1940*, pp. 673-675). That became a Permanent Committee on Nominations in 1966 (*MGS 1966*, pp. 359-362), then a Review and Permanent Committee in 1970 to review the function of all commissions and committees (*MGS 1970*, pp. 146-148). It settled into its current name and basic form with the Rules of Order revisions of 1979 (*MGS 1979*, pp. 180).

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<sup>11</sup> This report was called “Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism” (*MGS 1998*, pp. 119-134).

<sup>12</sup> “Anti-Racism Statement from the New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees,” as found in James Hart Brumm, ed., *An RCA Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in Seventy-Five Documents*, number 104 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2022), 545.



## **The Commission on Theology**

This commission was first suggested as part of a “Supplemental Report on Approaches to Unity” to the General Synod of 1958, “to make a long term study looking toward the production of a document that will give expression to our Christian Faith...in the light of present day needs and experiences” (*MGS 1958*, p. 355). At the following General Synod, both an overture from the Classis of Raritan and a recommendation by the Committee on Confessional Interpretation led to the commission being established (*MGS 1959*, p. 123).

## **The Commission for Women**

In 1978, even as issues surrounding women being ordained to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament were being decided, General Synod president Albertus G. Bossenbroek recommended:

That the General Synod constitute a Committee on Women for the purpose of ministering to the needs of women in Christian ministry and that this action be referred to the Executive Committee for implementation (*MGS 1978*, p. 31).

The Ad Hoc Committee on Women was formed and reported to the 1979 General Synod, at which time the General Synod Executive Committee endorsed their recommendation that they be constituted as a Commission on Women (*MGS 1979*, p. 52). This commission gave its first report to the General Synod of 1981 (*MGS 1981*, pp. 80-84).<sup>13</sup>

## **The Commission on Christian Worship**

A five-member Permanent Committee on Doctrine and Standards was created by the General Synod of 1926 in response to an overture from the Classis of Rochester (*MGS 1926*, p. 178); at the next synod, after the committee made a recommendation that responded to that overture, the synod agreed “that said Committee be herewith considered discharged with thanks” (*MGS 1927*, pp. 442-443). Four years later, the president appointed a Committee on the Revision of the Liturgy (*MGS 1931*, p. 961), which was first referred to as the Permanent Committee on the Revision of the Liturgy in 1963, the year it first presented revised orders for consideration (*MGS 1963*, pp. 218-219).<sup>14</sup> “Because the Committee [saw] its future in larger terms than mere revision of the Liturgy but [intended] to be involved in both liturgical and musical activities on a broader scale,” the 1974 General Synod changed its name to the Committee on Worship (*MGS 1974*, p. 211). This became the Commission on Worship

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<sup>13</sup> In 1994, perhaps realizing that the commission’s acronym was unfortunate, the name quietly changed to “Commission for Women.”

<sup>14</sup> *Liturgy and Psalms* was published in April 1968 (*MGS 1968*, p. 199).

with the Bylaws and Rules of Order revisions of 1979 (*MGS 1979*, p. 180), and it reported as the Commission on Christian Worship in 1989 (*MGS 1989*, p. 179).<sup>15</sup>

### **The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education**

Prior to 2002, Christian education was the responsibility of the Board of Education, which was merged into the General Program Council (GPC) in 1968 (*MGS 1968*, p. 141). It was one of the major responsibilities of GPC staff. There was neither a committee nor a commission that would report to the General Synod; reports and actions came through the GPC report. The Commission on Discipleship and Education was established by General Synod in 2002 (*MGS 2002*, pp. 213-214).

### **Why Commissions?**

The minutes of General Synod do not reveal just why the name “Commission” won the day, but the apparent impetus behind the creation of the *Book of Church Order* as we know it was to bring some order and consistency to the various terms used by the General Synod (*MGS 1966*, pp. 200-201). As this paper indicates, the General Synod itself, while having approved the concept, resisted the use of consistent terms well into the 1970s. The entire matter was finally settled by the revision of the Rules of Order of the General Synod completed by the Commission on Church Order and presented to the General Synod of 1979 (*MGS 1979*, pp. 179-195).

One chief takeaway from this brief review is that we have not always done what we have always done, nor used the terms we have always used. The bulk of what we now do has been in place for 45 years, less than one-fifth of the time we have been operating as a denomination with this basic Constitution.<sup>16</sup> Some of our practices and terminology are more recent than that. While the essentials of our order date back to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and even back to Scripture, the particulars are and have always been more fluid.

The Spirit blows where it will, and we are called, now and always, to change with it.

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the heading “Reports on Christian Worship” was being used in the *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod* as early as 1978.

<sup>16</sup> The *Explanatory Articles* were adopted by the Provisional Synod of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America, predecessor to our General Synod, in 1792.