

A CHURCH ORDER PRIMER

The Commission on Church Order has written and maintains the following brief primer on the church's order for delegates to General Synod in the hope that it will aid delegates in doing their work. For a more detailed orientation, the commission recommends the Preamble of the Book of Church Order [BCO] and BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, "Responsibilities of the General Synod."

Foundations. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. The RCA has a Constitution that orders its life and theology in light of God's Word. The Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, Belhar Confession), the Liturgy, and the Government and Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (found in the *Book of Church Order*). The church's order therefore is much deeper than merely a set of rules for running or organizing the church as an institution. The church's order is a set of covenants by which we agree to live out the theological beliefs we confess.

Nature and Work of Church Assemblies. Assemblies of the church, of which General Synod is one (others are consistory, classis, and regional synod), are not the same thing as *the church*. Assemblies of the church are the church's governing bodies. They are gatherings of the offices of the church (deacon, elder, and minister) for the purposes of governing the life and activity of the church and administering its affairs.

Scope and Limits of Assemblies' Responsibilities. Broader assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the more local assemblies—they do what the more local assemblies cannot do on their own—without infringing upon the responsibilities of the more local assemblies. The RCA is not a hierarchical church. Its assemblies are not arranged one over the other. Each assembly is given responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, and all functions not specifically delegated to other assemblies are given to the classis.

Office-Bearers. Church assemblies are different than legislatures of representative democracy. Because office-bearers receive their authority from Christ and are responsible first of all to the Lord of the church, they primarily represent Christ to the church and world. They can be said to represent their churches, consistories, classes, and synods in, at most, a secondary sense. Delegates' votes and consciences cannot be bound by their sending bodies.

Nature and Work of General Synod. The General Synod is the geographically broadest and most diverse assembly of the church. Its responsibilities are those that the more local assemblies cannot do on their own. General Synod's responsibilities primarily pertain to the General Synod itself, including its various agencies, boards, institutions, and commissions. It is also the highest court of appeal in the church and the assembly charged with offering to the church changes to the Constitution.

Scope and Limits of General Synod's Responsibilities. Because assemblies are not the same as the church, it is seen that General Synod speaks and acts above all for itself,

the General Synod, *within* the church and world. When General Synod determines policy, the synod instructs itself and its agents in its work and offers its wisdom to the world, to other churches, and to the other assemblies. General Synod can direct its boards, commissions, officers, and agencies. Because General Synod is the broadest assembly in the church, it alone has the authority to speak on behalf of the entire church. It speaks for the whole church frequently in areas like ecumenical relations and vis-à-vis the state and society. It can also encourage and offer wisdom to other assemblies and the local churches, such as it does through papers and resolutions. As with the other assemblies, the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. The Scriptures are understood as summarized in the Standards, which stand as the teaching of the church. As a part of the church's Constitution, the teaching of the church can only be determined by the entire church through the procedures for amending the Constitution as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*. General Synod is charged with interpreting the Scriptures and the Standards in those instances outlined in its responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, such as in judicial deliberation and in its relationship to the seminaries.

A PARLIAMENTARY AND PROCEDURAL PRIMER

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 10 of the Book of Church Order states, "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" (2023 edition, p. 127). Following is an explanation of some of the procedures and rules that the synod adheres to as it conducts its business.

1. Parliamentary procedure is intended to provide for an orderly transaction of business.
2. **The General Synod Workbook**
 - a. Contains reports of the various commissions, agencies, boards, and institutions of General Synod.
 - b. Contains reports of those agencies, boards, councils, and task forces that report to the General Synod Council (GSC).
 - c. Contains overtures from classes and regional synods.
 - d. Contains recommendations for the synod to act on.
 - e. New business is referred to the Committee of Reference before it comes to the floor.
3. **On the podium** you will find
 - a. The **president** of General Synod. He or she is the presiding officer of the meeting. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.
 - b. The **general secretary**, who is the stated clerk of General Synod and is available to the president for any assistance needed. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.

- c. The **parliamentarian**, who offers the president advice on order, procedure, and house rules.
- d. The **recording secretary**, who records the acts and proceedings of the synod.

4. Terms

- a. **Regular (or voting) delegates** fully participate in General Synod, have privilege of the floor, vote, make motions, and are elected to office.
- b. **Corresponding delegates** have privilege of the floor but cannot vote, make motions, or be elected to office.
- c. A **recommendation** is a call for the General Synod to act. Recommendations from General Synod committees, commissions, and agencies are motions that do not need to be seconded.
- d. An **overture** is a request that comes from a classis or regional synod. It is not a recommendation but will be addressed by a special advisory group.
- e. The General Synod has **advisory committees** to which delegates are assigned. Special advisory committees are assigned certain technically related recommendations in the workbook and the overtures. The special advisory committees may form recommendations of their own in response to the business assigned to them. They also form recommendations based on the overtures.
- f. A **motion to amend** can take the form of striking out words or phrases of the text of the motion being considered, inserting new words or phrases into the text of the motion being considered, or a combination of both striking out and inserting words or phrases. The passage of a motion to amend only puts the amended motion before the house; it does not approve the contents of the newly amended motion.
- g. A **motion to substitute** (a form of amendment that involves striking out and inserting a full paragraph, multiple paragraphs, or the entirety of the text of a motion with new text) must be germane to the question being amended. The passage of a motion to substitute only puts the substitute before the house; it does not approve the contents of the motion to substitute. No independent, new questions may be introduced through a motion to substitute.
- h. **Calling the question** or **moving to cease debate** or **moving the previous question** is a motion to end debate. It is therefore a suspension of the right to free and full debate. Because debate is a basic right of an assembly, it should be curtailed only when the group's welfare is furthered, and approval of such a motion requires a two-thirds vote of the assembly.
- i. When there is a question about the validity of something within the order, a **point of order** is raised. The president will decide whether or not order is being maintained.

5. Procedure for addressing the synod

- a. Delegates seeking the floor should approach a microphone. After being recognized by the presiding officer, delegates should give their name and the name of their sending body.

- b. Delegates desiring action by the General Synod should offer motions. General Synod does not act on suggestions.
- c. Motions must be written prior to coming to the microphone and must be given *in writing* (preferably sent via email to motions@rca.org) to the staff at the back table. If an amendment to the motion currently before the assembly is being proposed, the written amendment must indicate what changes are being proposed (striking out deletions and underlining additions), not simply how the delegate proposing the amendment would like the motion to read if it is amended.
- d. Delegates may not speak more than twice to a single motion unless given special permission by the General Synod.
- e. Delegates address the presiding officer, not the assembly.

FUNCTION OF GENERAL SYNOD COMMITTEES

The annual meeting of the General Synod carries out much of its work on the floor of General Synod during plenary, but it also does work through committees of various kinds. This explanation highlights ways the work is accomplished.

Committee of Reference

The Committee of Reference is made up of the members of the General Synod Council—the body elected by the synod to serve throughout the year to oversee the implementation of the mission and ministry of the RCA, to serve as the synod’s executive committee, and to serve as its board of trustees. The Committee of Reference receives proposed new business that comes before the synod, recommends to the synod whether or not to accept it as new business, and, if accepted, determines its placement on the agenda.

The Committee of Reference also receives recommendations for the establishment of special committees and task forces. It evaluates the request, determines whether the work falls within the responsibility of an existing commission, committee, or agency, and makes a recommendation to the synod to either establish the proposed committee—including clear reasons for doing so, its manner of appointment, length of service, source of funding, and means of reporting to the General Synod—or to assign the work to an existing entity. If funding is not available in existing budgets, it is the responsibility of the Committee of Reference to inform the delegates and to propose an adjustment in the covenant shares budget to secure funds for the new task.

The agenda of the General Synod is set by the General Synod Council (GSC), which also approves the placement of reports and the schedule. Some recommendations will be assigned to a special advisory committee on order and governance, or a special advisory committee on overtures and new business, or another named special advisory committee.

Advisory Committees

Order and Governance Advisory Committee. The president has appointed a small advisory committee to review all matters pertaining to church order and governance issues, including any proposed changes in the bylaws of General Synod institutions, agencies, and corporations. The committee will receive and review the reports and recommendations, prepare advice on specific recommendations, and provide additional recommendations if necessary.

Overtures and New Business Advisory Committee. The president has appointed a small advisory committee to receive and review all overtures from classes and regional synods and any new business that may be brought before the synod in its opening sessions. This committee will also look at business coming from commissions.

Additional specialized committees may be formed by the Committee of Reference after a final review of the business coming before the assembly and will be announced in the opening session and materials.

Plenary Discussion

Reports addressed only in plenary session may be discussed at tables. Delegates will have opportunity for questions and to address concerns to the reporting body. Recommendations for action will be addressed directly in plenary sessions.

ELECTION OF PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF GENERAL SYNOD

Each General Synod elects a president and a vice president to serve the following term. The newly elected president and vice president begin their terms upon installation at the worship service the last day of General Synod.

Procedures for Election

The president and vice president are elected by ballot. Only regular delegates to the General Synod may vote. (Corresponding delegates do not vote.) A two-thirds majority of the ballots cast is required for election on a nominating ballot; a simple majority is required for election on an electing ballot. Tellers are responsible for distributing, collecting, and counting the ballots.

Election of the President

The first ballot cast will be an electing ballot. The current vice president will be the sole nominee. If the vote is affirmative, the vice president will be declared elected.

If the vote is not affirmative, the election for president will follow the process prescribed below for the election for the vice president.

Election of the Vice President

The first ballot cast will be a nominating ballot. Only regular delegates to this General Synod may be nominated. (Corresponding delegates may not be nominated.) If any delegate receives at least two-thirds of the votes cast, such delegate will be declared elected.

If there is no election on the nominating ballot, every delegate receiving at least ten votes will be considered in nomination and will be introduced to the General Synod. The General Synod will then proceed to an electing ballot. If there is no election, the General Synod will proceed to a second electing ballot limited to the two persons receiving the largest number of votes on the first electing ballot.

Duties of the President and Vice President

Election to the office of vice president of the General Synod implies a three-year commitment to the General Synod Council, which meets three times a year; to the Board of Benefits Services, which meets two times a year; as well as to the work of their committees and other responsibilities.

The vice president serves at the pleasure of or in the absence of the president. If elected to the office of president the following year, the person then assumes the duties of the president.

The president and vice president of General Synod have traditionally traveled in order to listen for the joys and concerns of the church and ascertain the gifts and needs of the world through the RCA mission program. It is expected that the president will visit at least seven or eight geographically diverse classes and one of the RCA's mission areas, and that the vice president will visit at least four geographically diverse classes. Special attention will be given to those areas of the denomination that have not been visited recently and to those areas that are not familiar to the president and vice president.

The president of the General Synod performs a listening function, seeking to discover the concerns and aspirations of the church. Possibilities for fulfilling this function include attendance at meetings of the church's assemblies, boards, agencies, committees, commissions, and special meetings, as well as visits to various areas of the church. The president also represents the denomination at public, ecumenical, and denominational functions.

The president gives a report of activities at each meeting of the General Synod Council and makes a final report to the General Synod.

The president arranges for all opening and closing prayers and worship services, including the closing communion service at General Synod.

As presiding officer of the General Synod, the president must be familiar with the *Book of Church Order* and the basic rules of parliamentary procedure so that decorum and dignity are maintained in the church of Jesus Christ.

THE BYLAWS AND SPECIAL RULES OF ORDER

Chapter 3 of the Book of Church Order provides the bylaws of the General Synod and explains the special rules of order that are in use at the synod meeting. Here you can find information on the seating of delegates and required attendance as well as information about the election of a president and vice president of synod. If you are wondering about the executive committee of the synod, look for Article 3, General Synod Council; Article 8 covers advisory committees, and Article 9 is about corresponding delegates. The special rules of order in Part II discuss the order, presentation, and transaction of business at synod. You can click on the link below to access the online Book of Church Order.

www.rca.org/bco

THE FORMATION OF GENERAL SYNOD

Before the synod can act on the business brought before it in the General Synod Workbook, the synod must be “formed.”

A. Seating of Delegates

Irregularities—The general secretary will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

Limits of the House—Delegates have been assigned seats at tables. Rights of participation are restricted to those within the limits of the house, which extend only to the area of the delegates’ tables. Guests or visitors may sit in the gallery of chairs to the side of the plenary space or may watch the General Synod video stream on the RCA website, but may not be on the floor of synod among the delegate tables.

Privilege of the Floor—All regular (voting) and corresponding delegates have the privilege of the floor (privilege to address the assembly).

Voting Rights and Motions—Although corresponding delegates do have the privilege of the floor, they do not have the right to vote, make motions, or be elected to office. Only regular delegates may vote or make motions. Staff, visitors, and guests may not address the assembly unless granted privilege of the floor by action of the assembly.

- B. Declaration Concerning a Quorum—As of April 4, the possible membership of General Synod is 202, and the enrolled membership is 174. The general secretary will declare whether a quorum is present.
- C. Reading the Minutes by Title—The general secretary will read the minutes of the preceding session by title. The minutes from 1771 to 2023 can be found online at www.rca.org/minutes for use throughout the week.
- D. Procedure for Approving the Journal—A record of General Synod actions will be posted on the General Synod page of the RCA website at www.rca.org/journals for information and review by delegates. Any corrections to the journal should be given to one of the recording secretaries (Angela Worthley, Terri Boven, or Gael Uwera) or to Paul Karssen (seated at the operations platform at the back of the plenary room). The General Synod will be asked to authorize its officers to approve the journal for the meetings on Friday through Tuesday.
- E. Presentation of the Rules of Order—The Bylaws and the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod may be found by accessing Chapter 3 of the *Book of Church Order* at www.rca.org/bco.
- F. Selection of Parliamentarian—Russell Paarlberg was selected to serve as parliamentarian at the 2024 General Synod.
- G. Appointment of Tellers—The president has appointed as temporary clerks and tellers for the sessions of the 2024 General Synod: participants in the Seminarian Seminar; Committee of Reference members Linda Cline and Dwayne Jackson, and representing the Commission on Nominations, Patricia Sealy.
- H. Approval of the Agenda and Schedule—The general secretary will call attention to the agenda and schedule in the workbook. Synod will be asked to approve the agenda and schedule.
- I. New Business—The general secretary will call attention to the schedule and procedure for presentation of new business and will read the appropriate rule of order (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 8 [2023 edition, p. 132]).

GUIDE TO COMMON RCA ACRONYMS

AABC	African American Black Council
AAR	Approved Alternate Route
<i>BCO</i>	<i>Book of Church Order</i>
BOBS	Board of Benefits Services
CCA	Commission on Christian Action
CCDE	Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
CCO	Commission on Church Order
CCT	Christian Churches Together in the USA
CCU	Commission on Christian Unity
CCW	Commission on Christian Worship
CFW	Commission for Women
CGF	The RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc.
CJB	Commission on Judicial Business
COH	Commission on History
CON	Commission on Nominations
CORE	Commission on Race and Ethnicity
COT	Commission on Theology
CPAAM	Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries
CPAT	Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Church in North America
CRE	Certificate of Readiness for Examination
GCF	Global Christian Forum
GCHM	Global Council for Hispanic Ministries
GSC	General Synod Council
MFCA	Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
<i>MGS</i>	<i>Minutes of General Synod</i>
NBTS	New Brunswick Theological Seminary
NAIM	Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council
NCCC	National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
PFOB	Pastoral Formation Oversight Board
RBA	Reformed Benefits Association
RCSC	Reformed Candidates' Supervision and Care
RSA	Regional Synod of Albany
RSC	Regional Synod of Canada
RSFW	Regional Synod of the Far West
RSGL	Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
RSH	Regional Synod of the Heartland
RSMAm	Regional Synod of Mid-America
RSMAt	Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic
RSNY	Regional Synod of New York
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRC	World Communion of Reformed Churches
WTS	Western Theological Seminary