

Overtures

Reconsider Method of Covenant Shares Calculation

- 1. The Classis of North Grand Rapids respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council, in collaboration with the RCA's chief financial officer, to reconsider the covenant share assessment equation, particularly the use of Total Gifted Revenue rather than General Fund Gifted Revenue or Operating Gifted Revenue.**

Additionally, the Classis of North Grand Rapids requests a recommendation be made to the 2025 General Synod changing the method for how covenant shares are calculated.

In our opinion, a much fairer calculation basis would be General Fund Gifted Revenue. This would mean that only unrestricted revenue would be used to calculate a church's share, meaning that gifts that have been designated to only be used on one specific reason would not over-inflate the amount of share needed.

Reasons:

1. The inclusion of restricted revenue into the covenant shares calculation will have a detrimental effect on many churches, particularly those who have significant outreach programs such as food pantries that may receive donations specifically for these programs, or other gifts that can only be used for a specific purpose or reason. When restricted revenue increases the amount of covenant shares "tax" to be paid, but the restricted revenue itself cannot be used to pay the increased "tax" amount needed, other church programming will suffer. In addition, use of Total Gifted Revenue opens the door for "double taxation" in that some churches receive donated amounts directly from other RCA churches, creating a situation where the money is "taxed" when it is first received by Church 1, and then "taxed" again when it is then gifted to Church 2 (usually in support of a specific outreach program).
2. Servant's Community Church (RCA), a small ministry in the west side of Grand Rapids, operates a food pantry that is heavily utilized by the neighborhood in which it resides. Servant's Community Church ("Servant's") receives numerous donations that are earmarked for the pantry, and many of these donations come from other RCA churches. In the years surrounding the pandemic, when other outreach opportunities were limited, Central Reformed Church gave over \$30,000 to Servant's specifically for use operating its pantry. Under the current equation, these funds would be "taxed" twice, once when they are received as donations at Central, and then again when they are received by Servant's, even though they were designated as pantry-specific funds and thus these specific monies cannot be used to pay the covenant shares "tax" Servant's must now pay. \$30,000 of Central Reformed Church's income given as a gift to Servant's would have resulted in a General Synod covenant share paid by each church of \$810. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes covenant

share payment would have been \$225. The combined extra cost of income-based funding would have been \$1,035 paid by Servant's Community Church. These calculations are based on the current formula for 2024 covenant shares. Both Servants Community Church and Central Reformed Church operate a pantry as well as a community outreach diner. Both were churches that had their covenant shares amount increase significantly under the new calculation equation.

3. Another concerning example of "taxing" restricted revenue would be when a church has a building/facilities emergency and undergoes a capital campaign to raise funds to pay for the emergency. When a church has the misfortune to have its boiler fail at the beginning of the heating season, or have its well be condemned by county authorities, or have a load-bearing building wall collapse unexpectedly, the last thing they need to be thinking about is if the money they manage to raise to deal with the crisis will then increase their covenant shares! And when a church member gives extra amounts to mitigate the emergency, they shouldn't need to consider adding yet an additional amount on top to pay the resulting "tax increase," so that something from the normal church operating budget won't be decreased to instead route extra money to shares.
4. A "real world" or secular example of the principle of not "taxing" restricted income would be found in the IRS treatment of employer contributions to Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). HSAs can only be used to pay for qualified health care expenses. Amounts contributed to an HSA by an employer are excluded from an employee's adjusted gross income and do not increase the amount of overall tax that an employee would owe. The IRS made the determination that a source of income that can only be used to pay a specific thing (healthcare expenses) should not increase the amount of tax owed in general, since HSA funds cannot be used to pay taxes. This reasonable IRS ruling should serve as a guide to changing the way covenant shares are calculated by removing restricted revenue from the equation.

2. The Reverend Classis of Schenectady respectfully overtures the 2024 General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council and its covenant shares review committee to reconsider the congregational funds that are used to calculate covenant shares, specifically considering the removal of designated pass-through mission offerings and funds sent to churches from other bodies for pension contributions.

Reasons:

1. The 2024 amount that was used to calculate covenant shares included all income, even pass-through amounts that were specifically designated and not available for churches to discern the use of.
2. Global Mission often sends out appeal letters for specific disasters and needs. Congregations take up special offerings for these causes and send the amounts collected to Mission Services. If these offerings are going to be subject to assessment, it will discourage congregations from offering to facilitate the giving to these disaster relief appeals for their members.

3. New provisions require that stated clerks and other classis or regional synod staff who are ordained ministers must have contributions to their retirement account made by the body that employs them. Since each minister can only have one employer making contributions, the classis (or other body) has been instructed to send the funds to the church to be added with the church's contributions. This will cause additional funds to be added to the church's accounts for assessment.
4. If we wish to have churches report honestly and completely on their annual reports so the classis has an honest picture of their congregational health, we should not be setting policies that would encourage a congregation to find ways to begin to be less than honest in their reporting or disincentivize giving to mission needs.

3. The Reverend Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the 2024 General Synod to instruct the GSC and its covenant shares review committee to reconsider the congregational funds that are used to calculate covenant shares, specifically considering the removal of designated pass-through mission offerings and funds sent to churches from other bodies for retirement fund contributions.

Reasons:

1. The 2024 amount that was used to calculate covenant shares included all income, even pass-through amounts that were specifically designated and not available for churches to discern the use of.
2. Global Mission often sends out appeal letters for specific disasters and needs. Congregations take up special offerings for these causes and send the amounts collected to Mission Services. If these offerings are going to be subject to assessment, it will discourage congregations from offering to facilitate the giving to these disaster relief appeals for their members.
3. New provisions require that stated clerks and other classis or regional synod staff who are ordained ministers must have contributions to their retirement account made by the body that employs them. Since each minister can only have one employer making contributions, the classis (or other body) has been instructed to send the funds to the church to be added with the church's contributions. This will cause additional funds to be added to the church's accounts for assessment.
4. Many ministers are currently serving more than one church. Benefits and retirement funds allow only one employer. Monies exchanged between the churches to pay these responsibilities will cause additional, designated funds to be assessed, causing an imbalance between the congregations.
5. If we wish to have churches report honestly and completely on their annual reports so the classis has an honest picture of their congregational health, we should not be setting policies that would encourage a congregation to find ways to begin to be less than honest in their reporting or disincentivize giving to mission needs.

Change Book of Church Order Provision Regarding Synod Travel Expenses

- 4. The International Classis of Texas overtures the General Synod to update the current policy for General Synod travel expenses for delegates who live outside the U.S. and Canada to be equal to those who live within those two countries.**

Reasons:

1. The current policy for travel expenses is based on a delegate's home address. This worked when the churches of the Reformed Church were based in the United States and Canada. Given the changing current reality, we believe the policy should be updated. If these delegates' congregations are paying their assessments, we find it unfair to limit participation for RCA ministers and elders from other countries.
2. This new inequality raises the issue of fair representation for each one of our churches and classes. As a denomination we should be sending the message that we are flexible and that we value every church and every classis within our denomination. This change would be a clear statement of equality.
3. Updating this policy would be a clear sign of support for the work of those classes who are planting and working with churches outside the U.S. and Canada. Failure to do so could be construed as a lack of support for this new denominational thrust.

Amend Restructuring Team Recommendation Regarding General Synod Delegation Size

- 5. The International Classis of Texas overtures General Synod to adopt the metric of delegates in the restructuring team's proposal at 2 delegates (1 minister and 1 elder) per every 500 members rather than 2,000.**

Reasons:

1. We believe that the lower number better reflects our new reality as a small denomination.
2. We believe that the 500 member number leads to more equal representation rather than 2,000 members, a number we feel many assemblies will struggle to reach.

Change Denominational Method of Collecting Gender-Related Data

- 6. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures the 2024 General Synod to instruct the chief operating officer to inventory the communications of the denomination and its agencies in order to identify fields which require a mandatory, binary choice of male or female for gender-related data; and further,**

To develop a denomination-wide policy for the collection of gender data and honorifics that enables users to self-select from a range of options that include values such as male, female, non-binary, as well as an option not to disclose this information; and further,

To ensure all outgoing communications reflect the choices of people who provided their contact information; and further,

To report the findings of the inventory and the RCA data policy to 2025 General Synod; to provide 2026 General Synod an implementation plan to be completed by and reported to 2027 General Synod; and finally, to report the completion of the implementation to 2027 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. We believe people, including ordained leaders in our churches, who report that their gender falls somewhere along a spectrum of male and female and who are not exclusively male or female. This accords with our literal reading of Genesis 1:27, that God creates all people male and female, and not, as this verse is often misquoted, male or female. This also accords with the apostle Paul's emphasis that "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29).
2. We desire that community members learn about and connect with the RCA. However, when the RCA's technology forces them to self-identify in ways that contradict their own, God-given identities, and when the RCA deliberately mis-identifies genders and honorifics for visitors, inquirers, adherents, donors, members, seminarians, and ordained leaders, the RCA alienates people and discredits the beautiful diversity in which God has created us in God's image.
3. Members of our churches are not exclusively male or female, so when we ordain them we are not able to enter their contact information, since the Consistorial Report Form states, "because the General Synod requires that gender statistics of ordained officeholders be reported (*MGS 2002*, R-32, p. 54), use the check box to convey that information." A checkbox is a data field that requires a mandatory, binary choice, in this case, male or female, and employing a checkbox field is an error since some people, including those born intersex, are not male or female. Instead, replacing checkboxes with data fields called radio buttons enables users to select only one option among several such as male, female, non-binary, as well as an option not to disclose this information, which is more respectful of the diversity of God's creation.
4. Collecting gender information encourages accountability for diversity across the denomination, as stated by 2002 General Synod in *MGS 2002*, R-32, and we support collecting gender information when people are able both to self-identify and to have an option not to disclose their gender.
5. In situations where one person, such as a clerk or leader, is authorized to input contact data on behalf of others, a range of choices encourages respectful conversations among siblings in Christ.
6. An option not to disclose gender information is important both for those who are questioning their identity as well as for those who do not feel safe sharing their identity.

7. This overture accords with the 2023 statement of the chief operating officer: “Even as the RCA looks different, and as we become more beautifully diverse, I’m confident that we, the RCA, will keep following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God. I’m really eager to be part of that and to see how that unfolds in the next season” (see www.rca.org/christina-tazelaar-appointed-chief-operating-officer-of-the-rca).

Extend End Date for Mutually Generous Separation Regulations Adopted in RF 21-3

- 7. The Classis of Central Plains overtures the General Synod to extend the Mutually Generous Separation recommendation of the Vision 2020 Team’s work that was adopted at General Synod 2021 (MGS 2021, RF 21-3, pp. 98-108) so that the “sunset clause” is changed from June 1, 2026, to December 31, 2030. This overture assumes that the same method of original implementation (a majority vote from General Synod 2021) can be used as a mechanism to extend the end date (i.e., a majority vote of General Synod 2024), therefore a vote on this matter during the “Overtures and New Business” portion of General Synod 2024 is requested.**

Reasons:

1. The purpose of the original end date set for mutually generous separation was to give churches considering a departure from the RCA ample time to experience the full ramifications of the Vision 2020 Team’s work, and was thus set for June 1, 2026. However, the restructuring team’s recommendations presented at General Synod 2024 will not be finalized until at least General Synod 2025, and it has become clear that the implementation of any potential restructure will likely take significant additional time after that before its realities are fully felt and understood by RCA congregations.
2. Given that reality, a June 1, 2026, “sunset clause” on the approved mutually generous separation recommendation may put undue pressure on churches considering a departure from the RCA, undermining a thorough, prayerful discernment process.
3. An extension to December 31, 2030, may help RCA congregations make wiser decisions with less undue pressure regarding their future in the RCA, thus fulfilling the original purpose of the end date that was set in October 2021 at the original adoption of the mutually generous separation recommendation.