

Report of the RCA Restructuring Team

Vision: Making disciples of Jesus who participate in God's reign everywhere

“The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America” (RCA Book of Church Order, Preamble, p. 1).

Imagine for a moment a re-focused Reformed Church in America (RCA). An RCA choosing to move forward together focusing on what unifies us: the mission of Jesus Christ. A denomination focused on helping one another present the gospel of Jesus Christ and the good news of God's reign in ways that are compelling and transformative for a culture too accustomed to division, distraction, and power struggles from within the church. A denomination eager to celebrate new worshipping communities, deepening discipleship in congregations of all ages and sizes, and new people learning how to follow the ways of Jesus in an increasingly post-Christian world.

Imagine a denomination that has chosen to specifically direct as many resources as possible to support the core ministry of a denomination: the local church. To that end, new middle assemblies have been created to bring together the resources of a regional synod and the relationships of a classis. Ministers' and elders' time has been freed up to focus on their local churches, ministries, and communities rather than volunteering in multiple assembly committees. These middle assemblies provide coaching and mentoring for pastors, elders, and leaders, connect churches and ministries with similar missions or contexts for accountability and shared resourcing, and a level of professional support as paid staff could step into situations of conflict, help create clear vision in churches and ministries, and competently address the numerous property and legal issues local assemblies need to address.

Rather than competing for resources, the General Synod and middle assembly staff have clearly defined roles and support one another in fostering healthy ministry in local congregations and ministries by avoiding duplication of services and coordinating their support. This is our hope—for a denomination where the focus at all levels is on supporting the full mission of church and its ministries, beginning at the congregational level.

The following are the guiding principles, goals, and the discipleship definition the restructuring team has established in order to help the RCA achieve this vision, as shared in previous drafts of our report:

Restructuring Principles and Goals

Principles

- **Reformed** – We will hold on to our Reformed distinctives going forward. This includes the centrality of Scripture with our lens of interpretation in our creeds, confessions, and liturgy.
- **Missional** – We will remain centered on God’s mission locally and globally.
- **Aligned** – We seek to be a people on a mission together all heading in the same direction, seeking to love God and others as we live into our mission.
- **Diverse** – We see God is widening our reach locally and globally and wants to embrace difference while still holding one another accountable to our shared mission.
- **Adaptive** – We believe our new structure must be able to adapt to future needs and various cultural contexts globally.
- **Efficient** – We want to reduce redundancies wherever possible to make the structure as unobtrusive to the mission of the Church as possible. We seek to remain living and loving relationally, yet efficient in our use of resources.

Goals

- Centering on God’s mission together locally and globally.
- A local focus so that our whole system supports the local church and ministries.
- Include a robust structure for pastor/leader care that includes opportunities to grow and develop as leaders as well as being cared for and caring for other leaders.
- More flexibility in credentialing our pastors and elders without lowering our standards.
- A clear system that embraces diversity while holding one another accountable.
- A new mental model on assessments and how we conduct business.
- Increased efficient communication internally and externally.

Discipleship Definitions

A disciple of Jesus is someone who is:

- Being transformed into the likeness of Jesus
- Deepening their life with God through worship, the sacraments, prayer, and the Scriptures
- Growing with other disciples in community
- Concerned to see people transformed by Jesus
- Actively serving the needs of their communities
- Responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit
- Inviting others to follow Jesus

A disciple-making community:

- Actively seeks those far from God
- Intentionally reproduces disciples who help grow other disciples of Jesus
- Cultivates wholeness in the lives of others
- Faithfully expresses the gospel in word and deed, and shares in the sacraments while spurring one another to love and good deeds
- Demonstrates radical hospitality
- Pursues peace, justice, and mercy in the world
- Equips and empowers next generation leadership
- Starts other disciple-making communities

Why Is the RCA Restructuring?

Per the directive of the General Synod of 2021, the restructuring team presents this proposal of a new structure for the RCA. We believe there is good reason to restructure the denomination at this moment. While there are some good philosophical reasons to re-examine our structures and how we do business as a denomination, we begin by highlighting four presenting factors that inform this current effort to restructure the denomination and have shaped our efforts to remain faithful relationally, missionally, and theologically.

First, from the end of 2019 through mid-February 2024, a little over one-quarter of RCA churches have left or are in the process of leaving the RCA (note that this includes churches that have filed petitions to withdraw from the denomination but have not yet left). When combined with lost membership from congregations that are getting smaller or closing, this represents 49.8 percent of the confessing membership of the denomination. This means many of our classes, regional synods, and the General Synod are adjusting to the loss of financial, relational, and leadership resources to accomplish their work.

Anticipating this outcome, the General Synod of 2021 called for a new structure and created a team—our team—with the directive to develop a “restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA’s sustained spiritual and organizational health.” This plan considered, though was not bound by, four principles identified by the Vision 2020 Team in conducting its work. These principles are:

- 1. Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically based,** with the ability of any church to choose the classis to which it belongs.
- 2. Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.**
- 3. The discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level.**
- 4. The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod are examined** considering the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains.

A significant reason we're restructuring is because we are now a notably smaller denomination. We need local bodies of churches large enough to support one another and fulfill the responsibilities currently placed on our classes.

Second, the average size of an RCA church has changed. Seventy-six percent of RCA churches now report an average worship attendance of below 100 people. This brings many financial challenges to our congregations, including affecting their ability to call and retain ministers of Word and sacrament and pay assessments to support three additional levels of church governance. Even prior to the General Synod of 2021, some of our classes struggled to fulfill the basic functions of a classis due to a lack of ministers of Word and sacrament. This challenge has only increased for our classes, regional synods, and General Synod after a quarter of our churches have left the denomination. We need to find ways to reduce the financial burden on our churches, while still offering them the support needed to live faithfully into their call.

Third, in the past, we relied on shared heritage and familial connections within our predominantly Dutch denomination to hold us together. These ties were strengthened by almost all of our ministers of Word and sacrament attending one of our two seminaries. When disagreements arose, these relational ties kept us bound to each other. These frayed ties no longer bind us together as they once did. Further, as many have noted, generally there has been a decline in trust and increasing misunderstanding and division more broadly in the United States and Canada over the past few decades. Increased secularization and polarization, as well as the decline in civil discourse, have deeply impacted our society and also our congregations. As a result, our relational connections and trust have declined. We need new ways to connect us to one another beyond a common ethnicity or educational experience.

Fourth, God seems to be doing something new in our denomination. Today, the RCA is increasingly diverse and is living into the Revelation 7:9 vision of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language gathered around God's throne in worship. Across Canada and the U.S., women and men of varying racial and ethnic identities are finding a home and belonging in the RCA, through churches with hundreds of years of history, through churches that were started in the last year, and everywhere in between. We need a structure that will allow us to keep up with the new work God is doing in making our former Dutch immigrant denomination into an ethnically diverse church or even a global church.

In addition to these presenting factors, we also recognize we are living in a time of transition. The center of Christianity has shifted from North America to the Global South (South America, Africa, and Asia). In this time of flux, we are seeing both the decline of the mainline church in North America at the same time we see the rise of the church out of the Global South. And while we face widespread disagreements in the RCA on issues, we are not restructuring around any particular issue. We know that if we were to restructure around issues, we will be in a constant state of restructuring. We believe we need a simpler, adaptive, and efficient structure that will enable us to contextualize our Reformed faith wherever we find ourselves locally

and globally. In keeping with our Reformed polity and tradition, we want to give the freedom to local ministries to be independent yet interdependent at the same time.

We seek the road in between issues that seeks unity around our common Reformed identity with the freedom to contextualize that identity. As a reformed institution that is always reforming according to the Word of God, this is the moment in history to rethink how we govern ourselves, how we meet together, and how we might free the church to participate in God's mission. Through discernment and listening to your feedback, we believe the following recommendations will take us one step closer to a structure that supports the vision of making disciples who participate in God's reign everywhere.

Process Overview

The restructuring team began meeting together in May 2022. We began our time reflecting on the story of Scripture and the broad narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. We saw passages like Revelation 7:9, Matthew 28:16-20, Matthew 22:36-40, Luke 4:18-19, Micah 6:8, and Hebrews 10:23-25 as foundational to our understanding of the nature and role of the church in God's mission. We are to be a people who love one another and our God while seeking to model for the world the justice, mercy, and diversity of God's reign. As part of this work, we also invite others to join in seeking God's reign by welcoming them into a new identity and community through baptism and disciple them by teaching them how to live according to the values of God's reign in our world today. We recognize many other Scriptures and themes also speak to the role of the church, and we have sought to listen to the whole testimony of Scripture as we discerned how the Reformed Church in America could move together in mission in the years to come.

After a time of discernment together, we broke into two sub-teams: one focused on communication and one focused on the structure proposal. The restructuring sub-team interviewed like-minded denominations to seek out different structuring ideas and to see what is and what is not working locally and globally. We met and corresponded with several commissions, councils, and agencies within our current structure. We also listened to feedback from leaders around the denomination, delegates at General Synod 2023, and three rounds of restructuring roundtable meetings conducted in more than 35 in-person and online gatherings.

From the feedback, we learned that while there is a great deal of appreciation for our current structure, we could be doing more to foster strong and healthy relationships between members of the organization. This is particularly important as we work to pursue our mission effectively and with fewer layers of governance.

The new structure seeks to simplify governing models while reducing overhead without compromising our effectiveness in developing relationships as we pursue God's mission.

We have recognized the importance of fully engaging our membership and gathering a wide range of input throughout the entire process to move forward with the kind of

deep changes that are needed to adjust to the realities listed above. We have sought transparency and good communication along the way, receiving and considering input and providing updates along the way as we have moved toward proposing a faithful yet streamlined way of operating.

As a team, we recognize the first three guiding principles from the Vision 2020 team reflect our current practices in the RCA. We are not suggesting anything to change those current practices. We are not recommending discipline across assembly lines nor forcing assemblies to be either affinity- or geographically based. We believe each assembly can determine best how it ought to be organized and which churches to receive. While the team is not recommending affinity-based assemblies, we recognize the practical reality of living into diverse perspectives as congregations and assemblies discern what is best for their circumstances. Our recommendations focus primarily on the fourth principle regarding the roles and responsibilities of both the regional synods and the General Synod.

Each of the numbered recommendations below will come before the General Synod as a separate motion and will be voted upon individually.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Note: for recommendations that are expected to have a significant impact on denominational finances, the Office of Finance has endeavored to provide a financial impact statement. These are estimates at best because many of these recommendations affect one another, and the financial impacts of each will change depending on which other recommendations are or are not adopted; there are also a number of other factors that could affect the financial implications of each recommendation.

Condensing to One Level of Assembly Between the Consistory and the General Synod and Creation of New Judicial Bodies

Condensing the Regional Synod and Classis into a Single Assembly Level

The restructuring team believes that as we embrace the reality of a smaller denomination, the RCA should remove one level of governance by condensing the work of the classis and regional synod into a new assembly, which we propose naming the middle assembly. This will give the RCA a greater ability to serve local congregations and ministries to fulfill the vision of “making disciples of Jesus who actively participate in the reign of God everywhere”—the vision statement that our team discerned and presented in the first draft of our report. We see signs of this movement among us already as the Regional Synod of Albany is connecting churches served by bi-vocational pastors for support and mutual learning to more effectively live into mission. In Great Lakes City Classis, churches in similar contexts and with similar visions are encouraging and holding one another accountable to missionally engage their community, welcome people into community, and actively disciple believers of all ages.

As the RCA has become a smaller denomination, the costs of maintaining our governing structures must be supported by fewer and fewer people and fewer and fewer dollars given to local churches. Over time, this has slowly increased the financial burden on our churches and keeps money from supporting their local ministry.

Over the past 50 years, the Reformed Church in America has experienced a slow and steady decline in membership until the General Synod of 2021 when the denomination experienced a significant decline from churches choosing to disaffiliate with the RCA. Over that time the average classis size has shrunk from over 7,000 members per classis to about 1,400 members per classis today. Seventeen RCA classes report having fewer than 1,000 members; of those, 8 classes report having fewer than 500 members. These smaller classes face all sorts of challenges from a lack of financial resources to a lack of people resources to accomplish the many tasks that have been assigned to the classis.

Furthermore, half of the RCA's current regional synods have fewer members than the average classis did 50 or so years ago. Our regional synods are trying to staff the same number of committees and pay for professional staff with significantly fewer available resources. These trends do not show an organization experiencing missional health and vitality, but one experiencing a long decline. The financial reality of the Reformed Church in America must be addressed for future thriving. We must be good stewards of the resources God has provided. The *Book of Church Order (BCO)* amendments that will be proposed as a single motion in the report of the Commission on Church Order (CCO) seek to address the financial realities of this long decline and provide a middle assembly with both space and energy to support our local congregations in effective disciple-making and mission.

Our team is not the first to recognize these difficult realities. Already in 2007, the RCA's Missional Structures Task Force reported to General Synod the following "brutal trends" (their language):

- "There is growing agreement that the RCA's current structure (General Synod, regional synods, classes, congregations) inhibits communication and cooperation across assembly boundaries; indeed, that this structure mitigates against the formation of healthy relationships, reinforces mistrust, and keeps the four assemblies by and large in functional isolation from each other. This leads to diminishing accountability, little alignment of ministry and mission, and a scarcity of resources directly supporting the mission of congregations.
- Some of the assemblies of the RCA have too little time, energy, or ability to provide the kind of collegial support that will build the mutual relationships and trust on which effective structure rests.
- In many assemblies, there is growing tension between increasing requirements and decreasing ability to carry out the responsibilities mandated in the order. Often a small minority of persons bear an unfair

burden. Too often, current structures make it difficult for persons with passion and energy to be released for ministry in their areas of giftedness.

- Assemblies are making decisions for the church without looking at all like the church in age, racial-ethnic makeup, and gender. That has too often resulted in the structure becoming a barrier to welcoming other churches or persons outside the majority” (*Minutes of the General Synod [MGS] 2007*, p. 91).

These trends have only been exacerbated in the intervening years. The significant exodus of churches from the RCA in the last few years speaks to the lack of trust in one another and ongoing frustration with our governing structures.

As our team shaped our recommendations between drafts of this proposal, we realized that our work shared much of the rationale and vision of the Missional Structures Task Force from 17 years ago (*MGS 2007*, pp. 88-104); we see this synergy as a leading of the Holy Spirit. With that task force, we long to see:

congregations solidly grounded in the gospel of Christ, outwardly focused toward their communities, and able to get the essential resources they needed at the particular time they needed them; of congregations whose pastors find energy and accountability and new learnings in regular small groupings of assembly colleagues, and whose other leaders—elders, deacons, other staff, and team leaders—get similar support in similar configurations. It is a vision of 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, these new assemblies would:

- Come alongside congregations and connect them to the experiences and resources they need.
- Be proactive instead of reactive—enabling, encouraging, and empowering.
- Serve as the primary center for providing resources for congregations in their missional engagement.
- Hold the responsibility for oversight and supervision of congregations that is currently lodged with the classis (*MGS 2007*, p. 95).

We believe now is the time to act as removing a level of government will reduce some of the financial and people strain on our churches and classes at a time when our churches, classes, and regional synods are both smaller and more resource-constrained. Our team recognizes this is not a new idea in our denomination; in 2000, Allan Janssen noted in his commentary on the *BCO*, “Of late, regional synods have been considered the weakest assembly, and some have actively advocated the elimination of this ‘middle judicatory’” (Allan Janssen, *Constitutional Theology*, p. 208). The Vision 2020 Team also urged this restructuring team to consider the role of both the Regional and General Synods: “Our belief is that the best chance for

success will include a structure in which... the viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod are examined in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains” (*MGS 2021*, p. 91).

With the Missional Structures Task Force, the restructuring team urges the classes and regional synods of the RCA to consider how this new middle assembly could:

...[bring] together the functions and resources of classes and regional synods. This new middle assembly would focus on supporting Christ’s mission in the world, practicing mutual discipline, and maintaining order in settings at once both larger and smaller than current structures. Middle assemblies would be larger than current classes, receiving a significant influx of resources that would enable a permanent, continuing body functioning between stated sessions through employed professional leadership and other entities established to carry out its responsibilities. Simultaneously, they would become smaller by placing ministers, elders, deacons, and, insofar as desirable by the assembly, other professional and elected leaders of the congregations, in networks of encouragement, support, study, discipline, and prayer. Middle assemblies could continue to be organized geographically or may be gathered according to other criteria (e.g., ethnic identity, size, nature of ministry, etc.) for the purpose of supporting and encouraging congregations in ministry, and with some or all of these actions or responsibilities:

- Periodic gatherings of leaders and members, who can worship, pray, learn about, and celebrate Christ’s mission “in their bounds” and through the work of their constituent congregations locally and globally...
- Other responsibilities of current classes and regional synods as outlined in the *Book of Church Order* (2006 edition), including new support and resources to equip these assemblies in the raising up, training, ordination, and ongoing nurture of ministers of Word and sacrament (*MGS 2007*, p. 98).

Assigning this task to the regional synods in cooperation with the classes creates an opportunity for each region of the denomination to determine what size and types of middle assemblies would be most helpful to their churches at this time. The power to form and re-form classes currently lies exclusively with the regional synods, and so this team is asking them to covenant together to exercise this responsibility, working with one another and their classes to re-organize in order to help the local church be as effective as possible in their current context. This work may include classes and churches moving across regional synod lines. The restructuring team also acknowledges the need for the denomination to provide assistance to regional synods (when asked) to help them form a plan to transition from regional synods and classes to a single level of middle assemblies.

As a team, we spent a great deal of time discussing the ideal size of a middle assembly. Though we believe they would likely be larger than most classes are today, the team decided not to provide a target size for a middle assembly. The size of each middle assembly should be determined based on the needs of the churches in that assembly. The contexts of RCA churches vary and, therefore, what local churches need from a middle assembly will also vary. Following are a few examples a region and its classes may consider.

Situation A: Two neighboring classes in a region have shrunk significantly in membership over the years and are struggling to fulfill all the functions of a classis. The classes (in consultation with their regional synod) may decide it is in their best interest to combine to form one new middle assembly so they only need to maintain one finance committee, one student care committee, and so on. This also allows the churches to spread the costs of any staff or other expenses among more churches, thereby reducing every church's covenant shares assessment.

Situation B: A region may have significant divides around a particular theological issue and choose to help churches find a middle assembly where each church can live out its theological convictions with integrity. By necessity, these newly formed bodies may consider geographic proximity a second- or third-order priority in determining the body to which a church may belong.

Situation C: A region may have several large churches or even a few small megachurches and then many other churches worshipping with 150-250 people. This region may choose to create two or three larger middle assemblies that would have the resources to hire multiple part-time or maybe even full-time staff to support the work of their churches by ensuring that each middle assembly has at least 5,000 confessing members or annual contributions of \$10-\$20 million.

Situation D: A region may have many small churches with limited resources. Rather than trying to create a middle assembly with 5,000 members and maybe 100 churches, they may choose to group 30 to 40 churches based predominantly on geographic proximity. While these middle assemblies may not have the resources for full-time staff, the region would consider the new middle assembly's ability to hire a part-time staff member to support the churches and ensure the body can fulfill its responsibilities well. This may be one way a pastor at a small church can serve bi-vocationally.

Situation E: In consultation with its classes, a region may decide the best way to support its respective churches is to dissolve the current classes and have the region become the new middle assembly.

The regional synod segment of the *BCO* (Chapter 1, Part III) is much shorter than the classis segment (Chapter 1, Part II), and thus the Commission on Church Order has determined the simplest way to accomplish this change within the current *BCO* is to

eliminate the regional synod segment and redistribute that assembly's responsibilities to other assemblies. The regional synod has five responsibilities outlined in the *BCO*:

1. To oversee the churches within its bounds. This work would be given to each middle assembly as it is also already done by classes in our current structure.
2. To serve as an appellate body over the acts of its classes. This work would be sent up to the General Synod. And, not wanting to remove a layer of appeals from the RCA's current judicial system, the restructuring team (through the Commission on Church Order) is also recommending the creation of new smaller judicatories for both local governing bodies and the General Synod to handle these issues initially, while still preserving the opportunity for an appeal from the decisions of these judicial commissions. This is further explained in the "Creation of New Judicial Bodies" section below.
3. To both form and disband classes. This work would be given to the General Synod.
4. To transfer churches between classes. This work would be shared between the General Synod and the middle assemblies.
5. To create whatever organization it needs to further the work of the gospel within its bounds. This work will be done by both the middle assembly and the General Synod.

While this reorganizing of classes and regional synods will incur some costs initially, the long-term savings of reducing a level of government and in general creating larger middle assemblies could be significant for local congregations. As just one example, Holland Classis could see an annual cost savings of a little under \$100,000 per year.

This team's proposal is to remove one level of government between the consistory and the General Synod, and to rename the new assembly the "middle assembly." In order to do this, this team has worked with the Commission on Church Order to come up with *BCO* changes, and urges the approval of CO 24-4, which is part of the report of the Commission on Church Order (see pp. 246-281 in this workbook). Note: CO 24-4 also includes *BCO* amendments that create new judicial bodies, as addressed in the section below; these changes are proposed in a single motion because they are so closely intertwined that adoption of one without the other would create significant problems.

In alignment with the timeline for adoption of the required *BCO* changes (which, if adopted at this General Synod, need to receive approval from two-thirds of the classes and then a declarative vote by another General Synod), if CO 24-4 is adopted, each current regional synod is asked to work together with all of its classes to develop a plan by June 2025 to re-form into one or more middle assemblies. This way, assuming that the *BCO* changes receive the approval of two-thirds of the classes and come before General Synod 2025 for a final declarative vote, plans will be in place to re-form into new middle assemblies once the *BCO* changes become effective.

In an effort to help regional synods anticipate a process to evaluate and form middle assemblies, and since feedback to the team continues to include requests for guidance, the team has prepared a resource as an appendix to our report, entitled “Potential Process Ideas for Forming Middle Assemblies.” Part of this guidance includes some suggested minimum requirements to function well, as well as a recommended size that we believe will enable a middle assembly to fully support its churches and ministries and complete the work that is assigned to the assembly by the BCO. This information offered in this resource is intended to provide guidance and is not intended to mandate any decision or action taken by regional synods in consultation with their classes. We acknowledge and celebrate the range of ministry and mission contexts within each regional synod of the RCA.

**Note: the following recommendation, RF 24-1, is dependent upon CO 24-4, and will only be considered by the General Synod if CO 24-4 is approved. The proposed BCO amendments in CO 24-4 use the name “classis”; RF 24-1, if adopted, would affect both existing and pending references in the BCO, including those in CO 24-4.*

If CO 24-4 is adopted but RF 24-1 is NOT adopted, the name of the new local governing body will remain “classis,” since that is how the BCO currently reads.

The remainder of this report will reference “middle assemblies” when referring to the future; if RF 24-1 is not adopted, then every reference to “middle assembly” in the rest of this report can be assumed to refer to the classis.

RF 24-1

To adopt the following global amendment to the *Book of Church Order* as well as to any pending amendments, for recommendation to the classes for approval:

Replace every reference to versions of the word “classis” with “middle assembly” as follows:

classis	is replaced with	middle assembly
classis’s	is replaced with	middle assembly’s
classes	is replaced with	middle assemblies
classes’	is replaced with	middle assemblies’

and further, to adopt two instances of the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Sections 1b and c [2023 ed., p. 108]):

“...regular ~~classical~~ delegates from the middle assemblies...”

and further, to adopt the following addition to the BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1 (addition is underlined; existing text would become Section 1):

(new) Sec. 2. A middle assembly may retain its designation as a classis or a regional or particular synod for its legal documents.

Summarized rationale:

- Living into a new structure will take time and much adjustment; therefore, a new name will reinforce the vision and proposed changes we are seeking to live into, instead of confusing structure and losing vision by using terms that were previously used.
- The term “middle assembly” is descriptive and yet meaningful in our system. We maintain that our polity supports governance by assembly.
- We recognize intentional agency and autonomy given to current regional synods, classes, and consistories in the proposed creation of new bodies. Middle assembly as a term will still apply regardless of whether the assemblies are, in fact, “regional.”
- While we acknowledge that the term “classis,” with its imagery of a fleet of ships sailing together, has deep historical meaning for the RCA, we are no longer a waterway-bound, ship-focused people. We are also no longer a solely Dutch denomination, and while we honor our history, the team feels that “middle assembly” is a term that may be more inviting in our increasingly diverse denomination.

Creation of New Judicial Bodies

As an outgrowth of the elimination of a level of assembly, the restructuring team, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, is proposing the creation of new judicial bodies in order to preserve the number of appeals available in our current system. To do this, this team has asked the Commission on Church Order to develop possible BCO changes. As referenced above, these amendments are part of the same recommendation (CO 24-4) as the amendments to eliminate a level of assembly, since it would cause significant problems if one were adopted without the other.

The General Synod has considered the creation of new judicial bodies in the past. The previous reports and actions of General Synod and the Commission on Church Order (CCO) regarding the creation of judicial bodies can be found in the *Minutes of General Synod (MGS) 2007*, pp. 291-301; *MGS 2008*, p. 40; *MGS 2009*, pp. 243-245; and *MGS 2010*, p. 323. (*Minutes of the General Synod* can be found at www.rca.org/minutes.) In 2007, the CCO recommended to General Synod amendments to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that proposed significant changes in how judicial business would be conducted in the RCA. The CCO proposed that in most assemblies, when functioning as a judiciary, the work of the judiciary would be facilitated by a new judicial body of that assembly called a Commission on Judicial

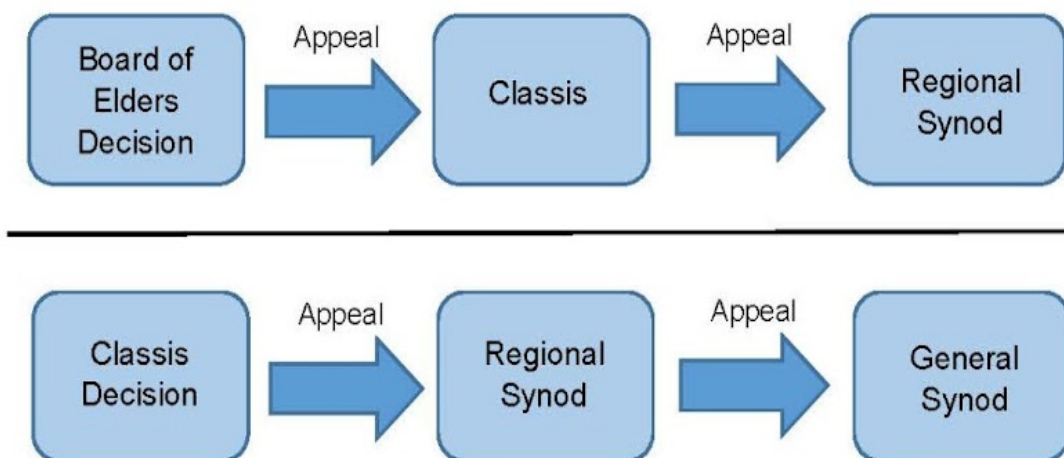
Business. While the amendments were adopted by the 2007 General Synod, they failed to receive approval from the required two-thirds of the classes.

There are several advantages to the creation of new judicial bodies, including freeing full assemblies to focus on the rest of the work of the church and allowing for a timelier response to charges, appeals, and complaints. It would also be a structure that provides more discretion and confidentiality in sensitive matters that may need to be heard, as opposed to a case being heard in front of a large body of middle assembly or General Synod delegates.

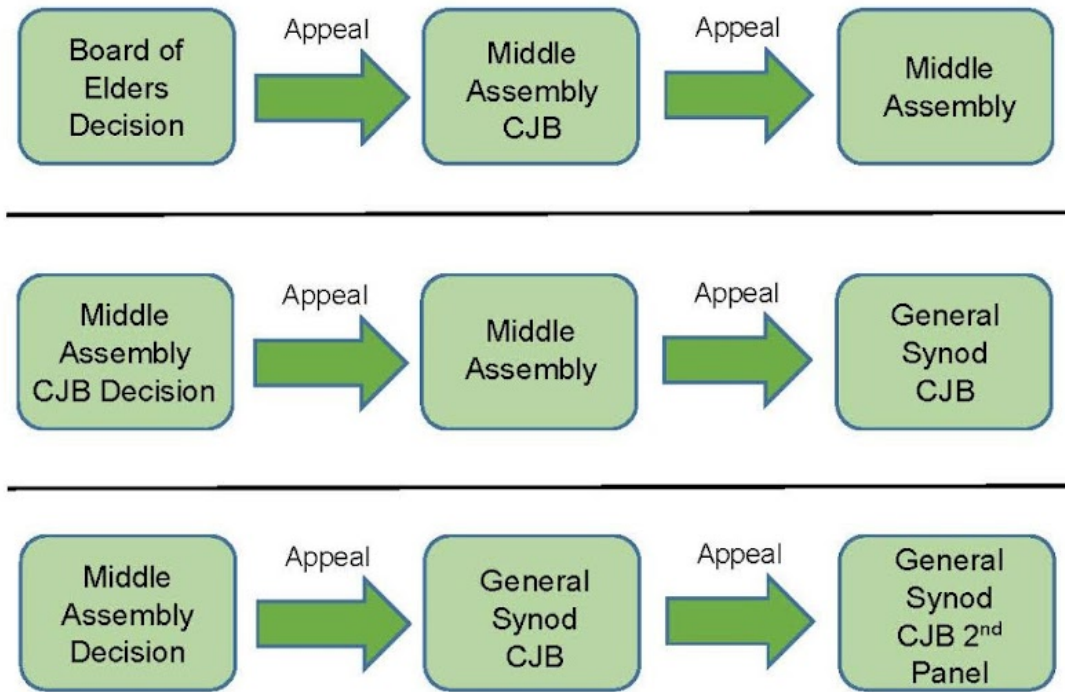
Currently, when someone objects to a decision by a classis (whether it is a decision on a complaint or a charge), the appeal is heard by the regional synod. In the new proposed structure, both the middle assembly (classis) and General Synod will establish a Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) that will serve as the first judicatory for each body for both charges and complaints, and will also serve as the first body to hear an appeal from a narrower assembly. This restructure is designed to reduce the demands of the judicatory process on an entire middle assembly (classis) and General Synod, commissioning a trained small group to focus on this work so the rest of the body can focus on supporting its churches in their local missions. If a decision of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business is appealed, a second panel will be selected with new members that have been nominated by the middle assemblies.

The diagrams below show our current appeal process and the new proposed appeal process.

Current Appeal Process



Proposed Appeal Process



These changes would not affect how the board of elders would function in a church. The board of elders is empowered to act in matters of discipline on behalf of the local church without the involvement of the consistory, which serves as the governing body (assembly) of the church. Appeals from the actions of the board of elders would continue to be considered at the middle assembly (classis) level, first by a commission on judicial business, and, on appeal, by the whole middle assembly (classis).

In short, these changes will maintain our current disciplinary and judicial procedures while adding new commissions on judicial business to account for the condensing of our governance structure into only one middle assembly.

The restructuring team urges the adoption of the proposed *BCO* changes that will be found in the Commission on Church Order's report in CO 24-4. While the *BCO* amendments are still in development by the commission at this time, they will be included in the commission's report to this General Synod as a recommendation.

Size of Middle Assembly Delegations to General Synod

As the denomination's membership has gotten smaller, especially in the last few years as many churches have left at once, the disparity in representation at the General Synod level has become apparent. Further, the General Synod meeting continues to be the largest denominational cost covered by the GSC covenant shares assessment. This recommendation seeks to both rebalance representation at General

Synod and reduce some of the costs of holding this important event, while maintaining our Reformed value of democratic representation.

Perhaps a little history may be helpful in considering this recommendation. The RCA has not always used the current formula for determining classis delegations to General Synod. In 1792, each minister brought one elder to the General Synod meeting so every church had representatives at the meeting. In 1812, this rule was changed to allow each classis to send 3 minister and 3 elder delegates, but these delegates were chosen by the regional synod (Janssen, *Constitutional Theology*, p. 224). Prior to 1984, delegates were awarded using a ratio of 4 delegates for the first 3,000 members and 3 delegates for each additional 3,000 members or portion thereof beyond 3,000 members (*MGS 1984*, p. 173). (Please note that throughout this section, the word “member” should be understood to mean “confessing member,” as that is the basis upon which General Synod delegations are calculated.) Only since 1984 have we assigned 4 delegates to each classis for the first 4,000 members in the classis and 2 additional delegates for each 2,000 members or portion thereof above 4,000 members.

As Allan Janssen rightly notes,

The apportionment of the delegates among classes is intended to provide fair representation for those sections of the church that enjoy larger numbers of members. At the same time, the allotment protects smaller classes, recognizing the full ecclesiastical standing of all the classes within the church (Janssen, *Constitutional Theology*, p. 224).

When the current formula was approved in 1984, only four classes had fewer than 2,000 members, and 26 classes had more than 4,000 members. Today, 38 classes have fewer than 2,000 members, and only two classes have more than 4,000 members. In 1984, there was an average of 773 communicant members (the term used in 1984; today the *BCO* uses the term “confessing member”) for every General Synod delegate; today there is an average of only 374 members per General Synod delegate. In several classes, there is one delegate per 100 members or fewer. Meanwhile, in the two largest classes, there is one delegate per 900 members or more. Over time, the average classis size in the RCA has gotten smaller but the formula for determining General Synod delegations has not changed. This has had the effect of skewing the General Synod delegation to increasingly over-represent the smallest classes and under-represent the largest classes. While RCA theology and polity seek to give value to the voices of all assemblies, regardless of size, and to value minority voices, the skewing of our current system of representation could be seen as encouraging classes to remain small in order to retain voting power.

In addition, as the denomination has declined in size, the number of delegates at General Synod has remained nearly the same because the current formula for allotting delegates sets the baseline representation at 4,000 members, even as most current classes are well under that number. This drives up the cost of General Synod for each of our churches. Changing the formula will bring General Synod costs more into alignment with the RCA’s current size by making the delegation smaller. Making

this change will allow us to keep more resources closer to local RCA churches to support local ministry.

In proposing a new formula for determining representation at General Synod, our team sought to rebalance the representation, while still protecting the voice of all of our assemblies, regardless of size. We also tried to reduce any perceived incentive provided by the current formula for assemblies to remain small in order to maintain their political or voting influence at General Synod. We believe all classes need to take time to resize and re-form into middle assemblies (in conjunction with their regional synod) based on their own criteria to best reach the mission and mutual flourishing among their ministries, not based on representation at General Synod.

The chart below shows the current number of churches, members, and delegates for each classis arranged by their regional synods. The new International Classis of Texas was formed near the end of 2023 and thus is not yet represented in Consistorial Report Form data. The last three columns present three alternative ways of determining delegates considered by the restructuring team. *(Remember that this report is assuming the adoption of the BCO changes explained above that will condense the classis and regional synod into a single level of assembly called a middle assembly. As mentioned before, if those amendments are not adopted, all references to “middle assembly” below will refer to the current classis.)*

The restructuring team is recommending allotting 1 elder and 1 minister delegate for every 2,000 members or portion thereof in a middle assembly. This is similar to the current formula, but halves the baseline representation from 4 delegates for the first 4,000 members in each middle assembly to 2 delegates for the first 2,000 members in each middle assembly. This formula helps right-size our General Synod delegation—in a denomination with significantly fewer members, it makes sense to have a General Synod with fewer delegates—while also helping to rebalance representation to ensure each middle assembly has a more fair, proportional number of delegates at General Synod relative to the number of confessing members in the middle assembly. This proposal reduces the number of middle assembly delegates to General Synod from 184 to 108. (Please note that these numbers are examples based on the membership of our current classes and would likely shift if CO 24-4 is adopted and classes and regional synods reorganize into middle assemblies.) Even with 108 delegates, there would be 1 delegate on average for every 593 members, which is still a greater percentage of representation than the 1984 formula provided of 1 delegate for every 773 members.

**Chart data on churches and confessing members is from 2022 Consistorial Report Form data, and thus reflects classis membership as it was as of December 31, 2022. Membership numbers have continued to change, and thus this chart is simply an example based upon the most current CRF data available as of the time this report was written.*

	# of Organized Churches	Confessing Members (% of RCA)	Current Delegates (% of Delegates)	2 per 2000 mbrs (% of delegates)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK				
Brooklyn	12	293	4	2
Mid-Hudson	29	1637	4	2
Nassau-Suffolk	12	513	4	2
New York	17	2244	4	4
Orange	20	729	4	2
Queens	27	1331	4	2
Rockland-Westchester	16	1660	4	2
Totals	133	8407 (13%)	28 (15%)	16 (15%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY				
Albany	20	1181	4	2
Columbia-Greene	18	439	4	2
Montgomery	11	486	4	2
Rochester	11	1142	4	2
Schenectady	18	1697	4	2
Schoharie	15	441	4	2
Totals	93	5386 (8%)	24 (13%)	12 (11%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA				
British Columbia	6	391	4	2
Canadian Prairies	6	296	4	2
Ontario	20	1736	4	2
Totals	32	2423 (4%)	12 (7%)	6 (6%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA				
Classis de las Naciones	18	774	4	2
Chicago	5	571	4	2
Illiana	12	1035	4	2
Illinois	14	980	4	2
Wisconsin	9	1464	4	2
Totals	58	4824 (8%)	20 (11%)	10 (9%)

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST				
California	6	212	4	2
Cascades	6	470	4	2
Central California	10	574	4	2
Rocky Mountain	4	574	4	2
the Americas	2	114	4	2
the Southwest	7	723	4	2
Totals	35	2667 (4%)	24 (13%)	12 (11%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES				
Great Lakes City	26	5673	6	6
Holland	15	5390	6	6
Muskegon	17	2686	4	4
North Grand Rapids	10	1386	4	2
Northern Michigan	12	1597	4	2
Southwest Michigan	12	1378	4	2
Zeeland	9	1986	4	2
Totals	101	20096 (31%)	32 (17%)	24 (22%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND				
Central Iowa	7	1736	4	2
Central Plains	11	1189	4	2
East Sioux	9	2357	4	4
Minnesota	13	1755	4	2
Pleasant Prairie	15	2432	4	4
West Sioux	13	2796	4	4
Totals	69	12265 (19%)	24 (13%)	18 (17%)
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS				
Delaware-Raritan	26	1683	4	2
Greater Palisades	41	1641	4	2
New Brunswick	26	1736	4	2
Passaic Valley	35	1711	4	2
the City	10	1274	4	2
Totals	138	8045 (13%)	20 (11%)	10 (9%)

Grand Total	659	64113	184	108
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This proposal would not alter the number of corresponding delegates to the General Synod. Furthermore, if the *BCO* changes to condense the classis and regional synod into a single middle assembly are not adopted, this proposal would also not affect the number of voting and corresponding delegates sent by each of the regional synods.

RF 24-2

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose amendments to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to change the method of calculation for middle assembly [classis] delegations to the General Synod in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, so that each middle assembly [classis] receives one minister delegate and one elder delegate for each 2,000 confessing members or fraction thereof, for report to the General Synod in 2025.

Summarized rationale:

1. Fewer overall delegates equals a reduced cost for General Synod.
2. Rebalancing representation to General Synod more accurately represents our larger middle assemblies, while also protecting the voice of our smaller middle assemblies.
3. Taking steps to create more equity in General Synod representation will create more trust in the system of government of the RCA.

Denominational Financial Impact Statement: *Given significant inflation, especially in airfare costs, and additional costs associated with holding synod in a conference center setting, which is now necessary given the significant reduction in GSC staff, the cost per voting delegate at synod this year, including travel, lodging, and meals, is approximately \$2,000. An overall reduction in the delegation by 76 people would represent a cost savings of \$152,000 per in-person synod. (Remember that this estimate is based on current classis arrangements, and the change in the overall number of delegates would change based on the reorganization into middle assemblies. In addition, note that this savings would be for a synod held in-person, so if RF 24-4 is adopted and synod meets in person once every three years, this savings would be realized once every three years.) It is also possible that a smaller delegation and lesser space requirements would open more venue options for the synod meeting, giving meeting planners more negotiating power.*

**Note: "Classis" remains in brackets in this recommendation at this time because if either CO 24-4 or RF 24-1 are not adopted by this Synod, then the assembly would retain the designation of "classis," and General Synod will vote on the recommendation with the "classis" language. The same is true for RF 24-3, RF 24-5, and RF 24-8 later in this report.*

Change to Requirements for Amending the RCA Constitution

The *Book of Church Order* seeks to strike a balance between respecting the will of the majority while also protecting the rights of the minority. One of the ways it protects the rights of the minority is by requiring a two-thirds majority of the classes to approve any change to the *BCO* in addition to the two General Synods that must also approve the change. This is an important value the restructuring team wants to uphold.

At the same time, the team believes it is possible to go so far in protecting the voice of the minority that it is possible for a small minority (significantly less than a third of the denomination) to block something that is supported by a supermajority. Because the current approval process for amendments to the RCA Constitution gives each classis a single vote, regardless of the relative size of each classis, the required supermajority of classes needed to approve a constitutional amendment (in other words, two-thirds of RCA classes, or at least 31 of the RCA's 46 current classes) can be a much higher threshold than a supermajority of the confessing membership of the denomination. Put another way, with the current number of 46 classes, a constitutional amendment requires the approval of at least 31 classes to pass. If 16 classes vote against a constitutional change, it will fail. It is possible, given the current distribution of classis sizes, for 16 classes representing approximately 12 percent of the overall confessing membership of the denomination to vote against a constitutional change, which would cause the proposed amendment to fail. In this example, the 30 classes that voted in favor of the change could represent 88 percent of the overall membership of the denomination (significantly more than the required two-thirds supermajority, at least in terms of confessing membership), and yet the constitutional amendment would not pass under the current system. To the team and to many who are still considering if they should stay in the denomination, this has the impact of potentially encouraging middle assemblies to stay small in order to preserve voting power and contributes toward mistrust across regions. As a restructuring team, we desire the denomination to live into a future of mutual trust, encouragement, and respect for all voices while all work to fulfill the mission.

The team recommends keeping the two-thirds requirement for any changes to the *BCO* and the approval of two General Synods because we also value the slow deliberative nature of changing our polity and want to protect the minority voices in our denomination. As all assemblies are encouraged to reconsider their best configuration in size and bounds to best fulfill the mission in their own context, the restructuring team recognizes that emerging assemblies may still look very different from each other. To provide adequate voice in larger middle assemblies, the team recommends weighting the middle assembly votes for any changes to the constitution by the number of representatives that middle assembly was eligible to send to the prior General Synod. For example, if a middle assembly voted to approve a change to the Constitution and they were eligible to send four delegates to General Synod the prior year, their vote for the change would count as four votes of approval. A proposed amendment to the *BCO* would still require a two-thirds majority of votes cast to be approved.

This method would still give significant voice to the smallest middle assemblies as they would continue to have more votes per confessing members in the middle assembly than would the larger middle assemblies. In some cases (if the distribution of current classes were to stay exactly the same) the smallest middle assemblies could have three times or more the influence per member as would the largest middle assembly.

While the restructuring team acknowledges with the Commission on Theology that every delegate represents Christ and that every classis is equally the church, we also recognize the practical realities of our present system that encourages churches and assemblies to make decisions not based on what will best serve the mission of God and honor the name of Christ, but on what will preserve their voice or influence in the denomination. We believe removing or greatly reducing this incentive will encourage every assembly to focus on supporting the work of their respective churches regardless of any potential impact those decisions may have on General Synod delegations or votes for constitutional changes. This may also allow all of us to truly seek to represent Christ in our assemblies rather than playing the political games and vote counting that have become all too common in our work together.

Following is a silly example based on the General Synod delegation using the formula proposed in RF 24-2, if all middle assemblies were to stay the same as the current classes, showing how this proposal might work moving forward. In this example, a *BCO* amendment has been approved at General Synod that requires every church to sing “Jesus Loves Me” every week in worship, and has now been forwarded to the middle assemblies for ratification. Assuming that the *BCO* changes required to change the method of calculation of General Synod delegations requested in RF 24-2 are made, the total number of possible votes for the amendment at the middle assembly level would be 108 (the number of middle assembly delegates to General Synod). In the example tally below, the proposed amendment to require singing “Jesus Loves Me” every week would fail 64 to 44 because it did not achieve a two-thirds majority.

Following is a more detailed explanation of how to read the following chart. Take the first line representing a middle assembly as an example. The Middle Assembly of Brooklyn has 293 confessing members, which means that under the new delegation sizes proposed in RF 24-2, it was eligible to send two delegates to the General Synod at which this theoretical proposed amendment was first adopted. In this example, the Middle Assembly of Brooklyn has voted “yes” on this proposed amendment. Since it was eligible to send two delegates to the previous General Synod, its “yes” vote counts for two votes toward the total needed to reach two-thirds approval at the middle assembly level. A few rows further down, the Middle Assembly of New York has voted “no” on this theoretical proposed amendment. Since it has 2,244 confessing members and was thus eligible to send four delegates to the previous General Synod, its “no” vote counts for four votes toward the total middle assembly vote count.

	Confessing Members (% of RCA)	Delegation size: 2 per 2000 mbrs (% of delegates)	Yes Votes	No Votes
REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK				
Brooklyn	293	2	2	
Mid-Hudson	1637	2	2	
Nassau-Suffolk	513	2		2
New York	2244	4		4
Orange	729	2	2	
Queens	1331	2	2	
Rockland-Westchester	1660	2		2
Totals	8407 (13%)	16 (15%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY				
Albany	1181	2		2
Columbia-Greene	439	2		2
Montgomery	486	2		2
Rochester	1142	2		2
Schenectady	1697	2	2	
Schoharie	441	2	2	
Totals	5386 (8%)	12 (11%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA				
British Columbia	391	2	2	
Canadian Prairies	296	2	2	
Ontario	1736	2	2	
Totals	2423 (4%)	6 (6%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA				
Classis de las Naciones	774	2	2	
Chicago	571	2	2	
Illiana	1035	2	2	
Illinois	980	2		2
Wisconsin	1464	2		2
Totals	4824 (8%)	10 (9%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST				
California	212	2	2	
Cascades	470	2	2	

Central California	574	2	2	
Rocky Mountain	574	2	2	
the Americas	114	2	2	
the Southwest	723	2		2
Totals	2667 (4%)	12 (11%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES				
Great Lakes City	5673	6	6	
Holland	5390	6	6	
Muskegon	2686	4	4	
North Grand Rapids	1386	2	2	
Northern Michigan	1597	2	2	
Southwest Michigan	1378	2		2
Zeeland	1986	2	2	
Totals	20096 (31%)	24 (22%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND				
Central Iowa	1736	2	2	
Central Plains	1189	2		2
East Sioux	2357	4		4
Minnesota	1755	2		2
Pleasant Prairie	2432	4		4
West Sioux	2796	4		4
Totals	12265 (19%)	18 (17%)		
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS				
Delaware-Raritan	1683	2	2	
Greater Palisades	1641	2		2
New Brunswick	1736	2		2
Passaic Valley	1711	2	2	
the City	1274	2	2	
Totals	8045 (13%)	10 (9%)		
Grand Total	64113	108	64	44

The team also considered whether votes should be divided within a classis based upon the portion of the classis that supported the amendment. Dividing the votes of each classis based on the proportion of support within the classis would make

passing any changes to the *Book of Church Order* even more difficult than our current practice.

RF 24-3

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare amendments to the “Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures” (page 77 of the 2023 edition of the *Book of Church Order*) in order to weight middle assembly [classical] votes on amendments to the RCA Constitution based on the number of delegates each middle assembly [classis] was eligible to send to the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted, while preserving the requirement that any amendments to the Constitution require support of two-thirds of the votes cast, for report to the General Synod in 2025.

Summarized rationale:

1. Rebalancing representation in amending the Constitution will more accurately represent larger middle assemblies, while also protecting the voice of smaller middle assemblies.
2. Taking steps to create more equity in terms of membership sizes in the ratification of constitutional changes will create more trust in the system of government of the RCA.

Frequency of In-Person General Synod Meetings

After consulting other denominations, reviewing the RCA’s fiscal reality, and listening to the feedback from roundtables, the restructuring team is recommending the denomination move toward a triennial in-person General Synod gathering, with shorter virtual annual meetings in the intervening years.

The *Minutes of General Synod 2014* read:

The RCA has discussed a biennial synod for more than one hundred years; it has been on the General Synod agenda twenty-four times, and as of 2012, fifteen special committees had been formed to consider the issue. The idea was raised once again in an overture in 2011. After more work groups, legal consultations, reports from the General Synod Council and from the Commission on Church Order, a task force met in January (p. 96, underlining added).

This resulted in all-synod advisory committees focusing on two detailed recommendations (R-12 and R-13) of *Book of Church Order* changes to move to a biennial General Synod. The all-synod advisory committees met, listened to each other, sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and created reports including artwork. An all-synod advisory committee summarizing team then created a detailed report of what was heard in the advisory committee meetings. This detailed report can be

found on pages 96-100 of the *Minutes of General Synod 2014* (see www.rca.org/minutes) and is an excellent summary of the concerns and conversations that are still relevant today as the restructuring team has suggested a triennial General Synod, listened, and heard feedback in 2023 into 2024.

In 2014, the all-synod advisory committee summarizing team concluded its report with a modified recommendation, R-14:

To instruct the General Synod Council to create an ad-hoc committee of no more than eight persons, half of whom are delegates to the 2014 General Synod, for the purpose of preparing a concrete plan for a two-year cycle of General Synod that incorporates clearly both a revised means for doing business and provisions for learning and visioning around mission and ministry, using the values and feedback expressed by the all-synod advisory committees of the 2014 General Synod to guide its work, and further,

to bring to the 2015 General Synod a specific plan, the costs and impact on the budget and assessment, and the changes needed in the *Book of Church Order*, and further,

to refer R-12 and R-13 to the ad-hoc committee (*MGS 2014*, p. 100).

The desire to change the way we do business, and continuing to focus on our relationships with one another while also learning and visioning around mission and ministry together, is an important summary that the restructuring team still feels is very relevant in 2024 and is in line with the goals and vision that this team has presented. While this recommendation from 2014 was ultimately amended to remove both the size of the committee and the “two-year cycle” before it was passed, the restructuring team believes for all of the above reasons now is the time to move forward with not meeting in person every year as a General Synod.

If these changes are ultimately passed, the team encourages the General Synod Council to evaluate this shift six years after the first triennial gathering. The purpose of the evaluation will be to assess the financial effects of reducing the frequency of General Synod meetings and the impact that the change in meeting frequency has on our denomination’s mission, operations, and relationships. Those findings should then be used to adjust the process and procedures of the meetings.

The restructuring team’s recommendation calls for *BCO* amendments that would provide for shorter virtual annual meetings between the triennial in-person meetings. There are a number of questions regarding the content and agenda determination of a virtual meeting that the requested proposal will need to address. The restructuring team recommends that the Commission on Church Order consider the following as it develops the requested constitutional changes:

- Continue to hold elections of officers every year, which would mean some officers would only facilitate online General Synods while others would facilitate in-person General Synod meetings. Continuing the rotation may help

with maintaining a balance of power and some may be willing to serve as officers for a briefer online General Synod who might otherwise not consider serving.

- The General Synod Council (GSC), in consultation with the commissions, agencies, and staff, could filter potential business for online General Synods based on urgency and time availability. Commissions and agencies may be asked to submit shorter reports, highlighting any items of an urgent nature to request time at an online General Synod. As the GSC reviews reports at its March meeting, GSC—acting as a representative body of the General Synod surveying the full scope of the known business and requests—could determine whether all requests may be granted or some may be asked to hold their business for the next year.
- The Rules of Order for General Synod may need to be updated to include Rules of Order for virtual sessions, or there may need to be a separate set of Rules of Order for a virtual session. This may include the ability of any delegate to request items of business that are deemed unnecessary to the operation of General Synod and are felt to be too complex for online deliberations to be tabled for discussion in person by a two-thirds vote of delegates, as an example.

The restructuring team suggests synod planners consider the importance of relationship building and the potentials for such even in online sessions of General Synod, potentially using break out rooms as small group conversations for relationship building and furthering our joint sharing and learning around our mission and vision. Perhaps commissions could suggest questions or discussion topics related to their report for conversation in online break out rooms. New technology and more familiarity with technology open us to more possibilities that may be considered as we seek to live into our vision together. While the restructuring team acknowledges technology can be a barrier for some, it also opens up opportunities for participation by those who may not be able to attend in-person General Synod meetings.

RF 24-4

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose amendments to the *Book of Church Order* and other necessary governing documents of the Reformed Church in America that would change the General Synod's meeting schedule so that it meets in person once every three years, with a shorter virtual annual meeting each year in which it does not meet in person, for report to the 2025 General Synod.

Summarized rationale:

1. Meeting less frequently in person as a General Synod will encourage more attention at the local and regional ministry levels.
2. Meeting in person less frequently as a General Synod will save on cost. This saving is necessary given the fiscal reality of the denomination. Other organizations and denominations have successfully shifted to less frequent in-

person annual meetings and more online annual meetings. These denominations are reporting significant cost savings and feasibility.

3. The nonprofit laws of New York State (in which the RCA is incorporated) allow fully virtual annual meetings for nonprofits as long as electronic meetings are permitted in the organization's bylaws.
4. Changes in technology platforms and general familiarity with video conferencing since 2020 now allow efficient and effective electronic business meetings.
5. Moving to conducting some General Synod business in online forums would make it possible for some members to attend General Synod who otherwise may not be able to attend the current in-person format.

Denominational Financial Impact Statement: *Given the rapidly rising cost of air travel as well as the additional costs associated with meeting in a conference facility, the cost of holding an in-person General Synod at this time, at our current delegation size, is approximately \$730,000 (this does not include associated staff time). If the General Synod were to meet in person once every three years, meeting virtually the other two years, this could potentially represent a savings for the denomination of \$1,460,000 over three years. There would be some costs associated with a virtual meeting that would offset a small portion of this savings, especially in the initial years, as systems would need to be developed to handle virtual business in a way that follows the RCA's Book of Church Order and Rules of Order, but staff does not have an estimate of those costs at this time.*

Equity in Ordination

Over the last several years the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has experienced an increase of candidates for the ministry coming from different parts of the world whose primary language is not English and whose theological training does not precisely parallel an American or Canadian theological education. In many parts of the world, such as Latin America and Africa, a master's of divinity does not exist. There are still high standards in their theological training; it simply looks different than a theological education obtained in the United States or Canada.

Because of these differences, many classes in the RCA struggle to address the challenges of cultivating and assimilating candidates from outside the United States and Canada. Many of these candidates have received their theological training and/or were ordained to the ministry by institutions or denominations in other countries without a traditional North American master of divinity degree from an institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the U.S. and Canada. It is understandable that, for most classes, evaluating a candidate's education from outside of their context and determining equivalency is challenging. Because of this lack of clarity, a number of these candidates end up directed to the commissioned pastor process rather than being ordained as ministers of Word and sacrament. This has caused significant hurt, misunderstanding, and financial inequities.

The restructuring team believes that we need to support middle assemblies (classes) by developing and providing clearer guidelines around how to determine equivalency of theological training. This will help to ensure an equitable ordination process for RCA candidates and ministers coming from other countries seeking to serve as ministers of Word and sacrament in RCA churches and ministries.

Having clear, equitable guidelines around the ordination of candidates and reception of ministers will assist middle assemblies (classes) in welcoming those who are eager to join the RCA. It will also assist candidates and ministers as they faithfully seek ordination in the RCA. Currently, each consistory, classis, and General Synod agent (Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary) have their own methodology, which often leaves students, ministers, consistories, and classes confused and frustrated. Our team is calling for the General Synod to direct the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board to develop and provide this guidance in order to create consistency across all RCA agencies and assemblies.

The restructuring team understands that each agent and each current classis has its own role in the Certificate of Readiness for Examination, seminary preparation, Clinical Pastoral Education preparation, personality evaluation, and the classis examination process. Based on our interviews and evaluation with the Commission on Theology, the General Synod professorate, the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team, and the theological agents of the RCA, the restructuring team has concluded the development of consistent guidance should be the work of the PFOB. Article III of the PFOB's bylaws include several mandates that relate directly to this work, including Section B, "Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among consistories and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process" and Section E, "Foster engagement with the ever-changing and increasingly diverse North American context and collaborate to form leaders capable of doing effective ministry in increasingly multicultural contexts."

RF 24-5

To direct the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology, to develop guidelines for middle assemblies [classes] related to BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Articles 11-14, for report to the General Synod in 2025. These guidelines should:

- Clarify how the existing processes for ordination of candidates and reception of ordained ministers from other denominations apply to candidates and ministers coming from institutions of theological education and other denominations both inside the U.S. and Canada and outside the U.S. and Canada.**

- **Ensure the ordination and reception process in the RCA is equitable and just across languages, cultures, and ministry experiences.**
- **Include a process for the determination of equivalency of degrees, especially for candidates coming from areas of the world where the master of divinity degree does not exist.**

Summarized rationale:

- The RCA has an influx of ministers and candidates for ministry coming into the denomination who received their theological training outside of the U.S. or Canada, and middle assemblies (classes) do not currently have the tools to assess the equivalency of that training.
- Providing more clarity on standards for reception of candidates and ministers will provide more equitable treatment for candidates and ministers entering the RCA from outside the United States and Canada.
- Provision of the requested guidelines falls under the PFOB's mandate as stated in its bylaws (Article III, Sections B and E).

Adjusting the Size of Commissions

General Synod commissions are standing committees of the General Synod established to advise the General Synod body in particular areas of the life of the church. Currently, there are 11 General Synod commissions. The roles and responsibilities of the RCA commissions can be found in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5 of the *BCO* (see www.rca.org/bco), and more information can also be found at www.rca.org/commissions.

Commissions report to the General Synod. Every year, each commission provides a written report on its activities along with any recommendation(s) for action it wishes General Synod to consider. Commissions also receive assignments from the General Synod by means of recommendations approved by General Synod that are assigned to them for action.

In the early years, the General Synod was not large, so business could be done as a committee of the whole. This was especially helpful when nominating members to various roles; members were chosen from the body as it met, and business was conducted on-site during the meeting. As General Synod grew larger, committees were appointed to study business and report to the General Synod at a later date. Present commissions have their roots in a variety of different committees, but by the early 1960s, the present commission style of organization was in place.

Originally, the restructuring team planned to propose a reduction in the number of commissions; however, after much discernment and listening to feedback from the numerous roundtable gatherings, we have changed direction from our previous proposal. The restructuring team continues to acknowledge the value and contributions and influence the commissions have made to the denomination and in

the wider church. The team thinks the commissions should remain in the RCA's structure, but that the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Church Order, should review each commission's composition and specific membership requirements to accommodate the fact that the denomination has fewer members from which to draw the required number of volunteers to fill roles on commissions and boards.

Further, the team suggests reducing the cost of commissions by eliminating travel budgets and having commissions meet virtually. Currently, a portion of covenant shares fund the General Synod budget, which allocates funding to commissions for travel, accommodations, meals, and RCA staff administrative support. Virtual meetings could also broaden the volunteer pool by allowing RCA members who may not be able to commit to travel to serve on commissions.

In the course of our work, the restructuring team has learned that filling all of the volunteer roles available in the RCA is increasingly difficult. This reality exists not only at the denominational level but also in local congregations and ministries. With the rise of two-income families and growing numbers of single parents and aging congregations, many congregations struggle to find the volunteers they used to have to support the many important ministries within the local congregation. These challenges are compounded by a shrinking membership base in the local church and in the denomination as a whole.

Filling every volunteer role on all 11 General Synod commissions requires 90 RCA members, who need to dedicate volunteer time and energy to commission meetings and the work of the commission. The Commission on Nominations has experienced increasing difficulty in filling the number of openings required each year, many of which also have specific qualifications attached.

When the number of people serving on the General Synod Council, the racial and ethnic council executive committees, various boards, and other areas within the RCA are also considered, at least one volunteer is required for every 400 confessing members of the RCA, just at the denominational level. That does not include all the volunteers required by local assemblies or congregations to run their own ministries. The General Synod needs to right-size the volunteer commitments required for its commissions to reflect present reality.

Examining the work of the commissions is a responsibility of the General Synod Council (GSC). According to the *Book of Church Order*, the GSC is to conduct a review of General Synod commissions once every five years and report back to the General Synod with a recommendation for continuation, reconstitution, or discontinuation (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 3, Section 6g).

In October 2022, the GSC updated the process it had previously adopted in March 2017 to fulfill this responsibility. You can learn more about the GSC's updated commission review process at www.rca.org/gsc, in the minutes of the GSC's October 2022 meeting.

It seems appropriate for the Commission on Nominations (CoN) to be involved in this evaluation because this commission best understands the current reality of trying to fill the multitude of very specific requirements on commissions from a volunteer pool that has grown much more limited. The Commission on Church Order (CCO) should be involved because changes to the composition of the commissions will require changes to Chapter 3 of the *Book of Church Order*.

The restructuring team offers the following suggestions for consideration for the work that this recommendation would delegate to the GSC, CoN, and CCO:

- Require commissions to meet virtually. This would reduce budget expenses, provide flexibility, and increase frequency for scheduling meetings.
- Reduce RCA staff support to the commissions to provide administrative support. While a much smaller denominational staff does not have the capacity to provide a dedicated staff person to each commission who attends all meetings, it is important to continue administrative support to provide access to expertise, relationships and resources, and maintain the denominational link.
- Require all commissions except the Commission on History, Commission on Church Order, Commission on Judicial Business, and Commission on Nominations to include in the focus of their work the goals of Transformed & Transforming, in partnership with the work toward these goals that is now being carried out through the RCA's Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. (Transformed & Transforming is the 15-year vision adopted by the General Synod in 2013; it is set to guide the denomination's work until 2028 see www.rca.org/about/vision).
- Change the *BCO* commission review requirement from once every five years to once every three years.

RF 24-6

To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Church Order, to consider the size and membership requirements of the General Synod's commissions to reduce the number of members on commissions and simplify the requirements for commission representation in order to right-size the volunteer requirements for a smaller denomination, and to bring suggested revisions to the General Synod bylaws (*Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5 [2023 edition, pp. 112-121]) to the General Synod of 2025.

Summarized rationale:

- The current commission composition requires a large number of volunteers, which can no longer be supported by the smaller number of members in the RCA.

- Changes in technology platforms and general familiarity with using video conferencing since 2020 now allow efficient and effective electronic business meetings, which will result in significant cost savings for the denomination.
- Moving to conducting commission business virtually could make it possible for some members to participate who otherwise may not be able to serve on a commission if travel were required.

Denominational Financial Impact Statement: *If in-person commission meetings were eliminated and commissions met solely virtually, this would eliminate approximately \$90,000 annually from the GSC budget. While the budgets of the eleven General Synod commissions represent approximately \$100,000 of the 2024 budget, a small portion of funds would still need to be reserved for commissions' corresponding delegate travel to General Synod, as each commission receives at least one corresponding delegate as provided for in the Bylaws of the General Synod (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Sections 8 and 14 [2023 edition, pp. 124 and 125]).*

Embracing Parity of Office by Increasing the Roles of Elders and Deacons

Expanding the Role of Church Supervisor to Include Gifted Elders

Listening to numerous reports to the General Synod over the years, including the Missional Structures Task Force report as well as the report and feedback offered through the Vision 2020 Team, the restructuring team notes the need to work together at this critical juncture in the life of the church for the flourishing of all congregations and assemblies. This can only happen as all of our offices are empowered to understand and act within their roles to support, encourage, supervise, and equip congregations.

The restructuring team notes that many classes are already practicing creative forms of supervision and oversight of churches, including more than solely ministers of Word and sacrament in the role of supervisor. The restructuring team encourages experimentation and creativity at this critical time in the life of the church, while maintaining oversight and discernment of God's leadership. Theologically, meetings of a consistory are required to represent the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and sacrament. And, many classes are already asking what meetings are church committee meetings versus what meetings are official consistory meetings requiring the presence of a pastor. The restructuring team encourages creative thinking and experimental practice in utilizing virtual or digital presence; this has been done for many years in some places where ministers have remained "on call," either actually on the phone during a meeting or in consultation with leaders before or after a meeting. In other places, teams of elders and ministers have supervised together very successfully.

The restructuring team notes the likely continuing decrease in the numbers of full-time ministers of Word and sacrament with the decline of the mainline church and the inability of smaller and smaller churches to afford and support one or more full-time professional clergy positions. Burnout of clergy is on the rise as clergy continue to be asked to take on more and more roles in classes and congregations that have

fewer and fewer resources. To combat these trends, face this reality, and adequately support congregations, governing bodies will need all office bearers to work together and other gifted individuals to step into assisting the roles where previously ministers of Word and sacrament may have worked alone.

Because of these factors, some of our current classes find it difficult to provide supervisors for every church without an installed minister, since currently the *BCO* requires the supervisor to be a minister of Word and sacrament. The restructuring team therefore recommends the adoption of the following *BCO* changes allowing middle assemblies to be given the flexibility to consider the appointment of a gifted elder to supervise a church without an installed minister.

RF 24-7

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 3 (2023 edition, p. 36), for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 3. The classis shall appoint a minister or elder as supervisor of all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister. If the minister or elder to be appointed as supervisor is a member of another classis, then the classis shall consult with the ~~minister's other classis of membership~~ prior to making such appointment. The classis shall determine the appropriate responsibilities for the supervisor.

Summarized rationale:

1. Given the overall decline of membership, decline in the number of full-time ministers of Word and sacrament positions that Reformed Church in America churches can adequately support, and growing need for supervision, middle assemblies (classes) need greater flexibility to assign supervisors.
2. Many regions have already been utilizing elders in supervision; this change would reflect a growing reality.
3. All offices need to work together for the mutual flourishing of congregations and assemblies.

Considering Deacons as Delegates to Middle Assemblies

The Report of the Missional Structures Task Force in 2007 called the denomination to more fully recognize the office of deacon in the higher assemblies for a number of reasons, noting, "More fundamental change in the RCA's structure is necessary for one clear reason: the ability to respond more faithfully and more fruitfully to God's mission in the world" (*MGS 2007*, p. 93).

The task force sought to name areas in our structure and practice that currently do not serve the church well and to which corrections should be made. Current structures do not free up people to do those things for which they are most gifted.

Deacons, for example, carry out important ministries of the church, but are excluded from RCA assembly structures (*MGS 2007*, p. 94).

The task force noted that deacons should be included in what the task force was recommending as a newly formed “middle assembly” because deacons “have in the last two decades reclaimed their biblical and missional identity and ... bring enormous gifts to any missional structure” (*MGS 2007*, p. 98). The task force recommendation to give immediate full inclusion to deacons in every assembly was not adopted, with a General Synod advisory committee noting, “There is a clearly expressed desire to look again at the role of deacons in higher assemblies... [However,] questions of theology and implementation need to be discussed prior to the preparation of specific *Book of Church Order* changes” (*MGS 2007*, p. 102). Instead, R-18 was adopted, directing the Commission on Theology to prepare a study on whether there is a theological basis within a reformed and missional ecclesiology for the inclusion of deacons as full members of classes, regional synods, and the General Synod, for report to the 2009 General Synod (*MGS 2007*, p. 103).

The Commission on Theology sent a report titled “The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church” to the 2011 General Synod (*MGS 2011*, pp. 289-304; see images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2011MGS-Complete.pdf). The restructuring team encourages delegates to read this report, as it contains valuable background information, especially for those who may be hesitant about the inclusion of deacons in broader assemblies for theological reasons. The following are a few excerpts from this report:

This paper ... will argue that there are compelling reasons to move toward full inclusion of the office of deacon in all the assemblies of the church (*MGS 2011*, p. 289).

Beginning in 1923, General Synod has considered multiple overtures calling for the inclusion of deacons in the broader assemblies of the RCA, theological study papers that explore the office of deacon in relation to the other offices and assemblies, initiatives, and programs designed to recover and develop a solid theological understanding of the office of deacons, as well as practical proposals for how the inclusion of deacons in assemblies beyond the consistory might be implemented. And yet, the matter remains unresolved. A brief review of this nearly 100-year history provides a frame within which to place the argument made here that a missional understanding of the offices and assemblies of the church requires that deacons be included in all the assemblies of the church (*MGS 2011*, p. 290).

We have argued that the office of the deacon is the quintessentially missional office, intended to work in parity and complementarity with the other offices through the church’s several assemblies (*MGS 2011*, p. 298).

The report concluded that there was no theological reason not to include deacons in assemblies and many reasons to include deacons. The report details concerns raised historically with the difference between the role of deacon, elder, and minister of

Word and sacrament, arguing that the assemblies of the church address matters of mercy, service, and financial oversight, all of which are the purview of the office of deacon, and that deacons should be included in higher assemblies as they can only assist in these matters. The one area of caution and concern in naming spiritual oversight as the difference between the office of deacon and elder was that deacons should not serve on committees specifically related to matters of judicial business.

On the basis of a Reformed missional ecclesiology we have established the necessity of including deacons in all the assemblies of the church. We have shown that this missional ecclesiology is reflected in the *BCO* and places the *BCO* at odds with itself in limiting deacons to participation in only one of the RCA's assemblies, the consistory. However, in urging the RCA to welcome deacons with voice and vote into the work of classes, regional synods, and the General Synod, the commission believes it is important to keep faith with the *BCO*'s distinction between the legislative and judicial functions of church government, that is, between the church meeting as an assembly versus its meeting as a judicatory. This distinction is related to the specific responsibilities of the individual offices in RCA order that the commission judges should not be blurred.

Thus the commission believes that on those occasions when classes, regional synods, and General Synod enter judicial session, participation in that work must be limited to elders and ministers (*MGS 2011*, p. 299).

Having studied and discussed full inclusion of deacons for over 100 years, given the decline in the church and the necessity of the church to reclaim the parity of offices as all work together toward the flourishing of the church in every assembly, the restructuring team believes that now is the time for deacons to be included in the middle assemblies.

Depending on the formula used, adding deacons as delegates to middle assemblies could expand the size of the assembly meeting, which may cause challenges in some of our middle assemblies. The restructuring team recommends that the Commission on Church Order work with the Commission on Theology and the General Synod professorate to discuss roles and appropriate representation of each of the offices in middle assemblies and bring back recommendations to General Synod 2025.

RF 24-8

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology and the General Synod professorate, to propose amendments to the *Book of Church Order* to enable deacons to serve as voting delegates to middle assemblies [classes], for report to General Synod 2025.

Summarized rationale:

- The RCA has discussed this issue for many years, and the inclusion of deacons in assemblies has been recommended multiple times.

- While time is needed to develop the *BCO* amendments in the RCA’s current context, the team still feels it is important to move this forward.

Reducing Covenant Shares

Rising costs over recent years due to inflation have placed increasing financial strain on local congregations as well as our broader assemblies. For many congregations, this is compounded by the fact that attendance levels have not fully rebounded to pre-COVID numbers. Lower attendance often affects giving levels as well, further straining congregational budgets.

The shift to a percentage-of-income model of paying denominational assessments, known as covenant shares, rather than the former model of paying a flat amount per confessing member, is a move toward making assessments proportional to actual congregational income. (For more information and background on the covenant shares model, see [MGS 2019, pp. 47-53.](#)) However, the restructuring team feels that the current (2024) percentage rate for denominational covenant shares of 2.7 percent of contributions received is too high a burden for our congregations and middle assemblies and is not sustainable.

The team believes that in order to keep more resources available at the local level, over the next three years, the General Synod’s covenant shares percentage should be reduced to no more than 2.0 percent of contributions received (with a goal of reducing the percentage to 1.75 percent). While the second draft of the restructuring team’s proposal included a plan to reduce covenant shares to 1.5 percent of contributions received, after further consultation with the finance department, it was determined that such a significant reduction would likely result in cuts that could cripple the essential functions of the General Synod.

The following chart shows the impact of reducing the covenant shares percentage to General Synod revenues for the current fiscal year.

Hypothetical 2024 Covenant Share Revenue			
	2.7%	2.0%	1.75%
10% cap	\$3,050,146 (actual)	\$2,878,506	\$2,838,136
Long Range Projection	\$3,502,167	\$2,594,198	\$2,269,923

The “10% cap” row shows the revenue impact of various covenant share percentages including the 10 percent limitation that is in effect. (General Synod covenant shares for a congregation cannot increase or decrease by more than 10 percent in a single year over the amount of the congregation’s assessments/covenant shares from the previous year - *MGS 2019, EC 19-9, pp. 51-52.*) Due to the limitation that a congregation’s assessment/covenant shares cannot change by more than 10 percent over their previous year’s covenant shares/assessment amount, it will take a number of years for every congregation to be paying the actual percentage. The more the

overall covenant shares rate is lowered, the longer it will take for the actual rate to be realized due to the 10 percent cap. Therefore, the “long range projection” row shows what General Synod covenant shares revenues would be years from now if all other factors were to remain the same (congregational revenues remain unchanged, every congregation were to pay the full covenant share percentage, no additional congregations join or leave the RCA). In the long term, moving to a 2.0 percent covenant shares would represent approximately a 15 percent decline in revenue for the denomination over the projected covenant shares revenue for 2024, if all other factors remain the same. These numbers are only an estimate, as changes in church revenue as well as congregations joining or leaving the RCA would have an impact on overall covenant shares revenue.

Even at the 2024 covenant shares rate of 2.7 percent, the denomination is currently operating at a deficit (using a portion of available reserves) as it figures out where to make additional cuts in order to adjust to both reduced income due to a smaller membership base and increased costs due to inflation.

While the team recognizes a reduction even to 2.0 percent will likely require additional cuts at the denominational level, we believe this change is necessary. It will allow the denomination to keep more resources close to the local congregations. More resources are needed at the local level so that congregations and middle assemblies can invest more in disciple-making processes to reproduce more disciples of Jesus, support and revitalize existing congregations, and plant new churches. In RCA polity, it is not the denomination but congregations and middle assemblies that plant churches and directly support existing churches. Limiting the costs of the denominational covenant shares creates opportunities for middle assemblies to better fund their important work of planting churches, making disciples, and supporting existing churches.

Setting a limit to the General Synod’s covenant shares rate will also mean individual General Synods will not be able to increase the assessment amount based on recommendations adopted at a General Synod meeting. If a General Synod wants to add work that will affect the budget of the General Synod, that General Synod assembly would need to wrestle with the consequence of diverting funds from one priority to another rather than simply raising the covenant shares percentage.

This recommendation would not limit the covenant shares that may be assessed by other governing bodies. Middle assemblies can and should decide the percentage of covenant shares they will need for their own staffing and ministry needs at a local level. Adoption of this recommendation will only impact the denominational covenant shares percentage.

RF 24-9

To direct the General Synod Council to limit the percentage rate of General Synod covenant shares to no more than 2.0 percent of contributions received (line 21 in the Consistorial

Report Form [CRF]) by 2027, with a goal of no more than 1.75 percent.

Summarized rationale:

- Limiting General Synod covenant shares will keep more resources at the local level.
- Setting the limit at 2.0 percent (with a goal of 1.75 percent) balances the desire for a local focus and the need to not cripple the essential functions of the General Synod.

Denominational Financial Impact Statement: *The impact of lowering the denominational covenant shares percentage will be affected by factors such as churches joining or leaving the denomination as well as changes in church finances. Using current (2022 year-end) CRF statistics, the long-range impact of a drop to 2.0 percent covenant shares results in a decrease of approximately \$456,000 (14.9 percent) in covenant shares revenue at the denominational level compared to the expected 2024 revenue. (Expected 2024 revenue is capped due to the 10 percent limit; when compared to long range projection for a 2.7 percent rate, a 2.0 percent rate results in a decrease of approximately \$908,000.) The long-range impact of a drop to 1.75 percent covenant shares results in an additional reduction of \$325,000, or approximately \$780,000 less in denominational covenant shares income compared to expected 2024 revenue (a 25.6 percent drop). The feasibility of this decrease is dependent upon General Synod's actions regarding other recommendations in this report that will reduce costs at the General Synod level, particularly RF 24-2 (changing the calculation of middle assembly [classis] delegations to General Synod) and RF 24-4 (moving to a triennial in-person General Synod meeting).*

Experimenting with the Consensus Model for Decision-Making

The restructuring team believes that a consensus model for decision-making can assist the denomination to work together in unity more effectively through building greater understanding and cooperation. However, after listening to feedback and consulting organizations using consensus, we recommend that we experiment with using the principles of consensus decision-making within Robert's Rules of Order.

For the RCA, Robert's Rules of Order has not only served as past practice, but it is written into our Constitution as the way we make decisions as an assembly. However, as the RCA is welcoming more and more people from different cultural backgrounds, the restructuring team recognizes the potential challenges of Robert's Rules of Order. Robert's Rules was developed out of a particularly Western method of decision-making; it has its roots in the English parliamentary system, and the first edition of Robert's Rules itself was codified by a United States Army officer in the nineteenth century. While the core principle of Robert's Rules is protecting the rights of those who hold both majority and minority opinions as well as the rights of individuals (*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 12th Edition*, p. xlix), it is also a complicated and nuanced system, and not understanding the system can be a barrier

to participation. This can be especially true for synod participants for whom English is a second language or who do not speak English, as well as those from a cultural context that views group decision-making through a very different lens than that of parliamentary procedure.

Without removing Robert's Rules of Order, however, there is flexibility under Robert's Rules to include more collaborative and consensus practices to ensure all voices are heard. The restructuring team believes the Reformed Church in America would greatly benefit from experimenting with a consensus model as the RCA seeks to transition into a new way of being together as expressed throughout this report.

Consensus tools can be used within Robert's Rules to create space for nuanced discussion and disagreement without moving directly to advocating for or against a particular course of action. Consensus-building can be a time-consuming process, as it requires all parties to have a chance to voice their opinions and concerns. The General Synod has used some of these consensus-based processes in the past through all-synod advisory groups.

Using more consensus-based processes will require us to listen well to one another, courageously trust each other with differing opinions, and graciously compromise on non-central matters of dispute. We see these very skills clearly practiced by the early church in Acts 15 as they struggled with how to welcome the gentiles who had come to faith in Christ, but were not converting to Judaism. These consensus-seeking practices are also the habits we need to grow in as a denomination if we are to continue to covenant together in ministry.

With these Christian practices, consensus practices can be effective decision-making tools within Robert's Rules of Order. It can lead to decisions that are supported by all parties, which can increase buy-in and commitment to the decision. Additionally, these practices can help to rebuild relationships and trust within our denomination. One resource our team has considered during our deliberations is www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consensus.

Transitioning to include more consensus practices within Robert's Rules is a process that will take time and ongoing practice and learning. While challenges exist, the potential benefits for the Reformed Church in America are significant and can help us live into a future that expresses our values in how we seek to dialogue with each other. By embracing a spirit of collaboration, providing adequate training and resources, and employing effective facilitation strategies, the shift can empower new ways of listening, thinking, and acting together, generate innovative solutions, and ultimately strengthen the Reformed Church in America.

With such a significant shift in decision-making procedures, the team recommends a slow transition led by the General Synod Council, beginning with experimenting at the General Synod Council and General Synod meetings over the next three years. A gradual experimentation will ensure that the RCA has a chance to learn and try these

practices to determine if it is more inclusive and effective for the culture we want to create based on our values rather than Robert's Rules alone.

A way this could be accomplished would be for the GSC to create a volunteer team (that would meet only virtually for budgetary reasons) committed to learning more about consensus, potentially including some people who have previous experience with consensus who have noted a willingness to serve, to help teach the GSC best ways to implement this new model, both at GSC meetings and at General Synod. This would allow all leaders and participants alike to become familiar with the consensus model and its advantages and disadvantages. At and before General Synod, the team could share resources and lead brief training sessions as well as assist the president of General Synod to introduce consensus and ensure that it is implemented fairly and effectively.

In addition to training participants, such a team could also help to create a consensus culture within the RCA. This would involve fostering an environment of open communication, respect for differing viewpoints, and a willingness to compromise. By creating a consensus culture, the RCA could make its decision-making process more inclusive and democratic, which would ultimately benefit all of its members.

RF 24-10

To direct the General Synod Council to find ways to experiment with incorporating the consensus model into the way that General Synod and General Synod Council conducts business, alongside Robert's Rules of Order, during the next three years, for report to the General Synod in 2027.

Summarized rationale:

- There is space for the use of consensus practices within the framework of Robert's Rules of Order.
- Consensus practices create space for more nuanced conversation, dialogue, and creative solutions that listen to the voices of all involved.
- As the RCA becomes a more diverse denomination, decision-making practices are needed that recognize the cultural values of those joining us as well as our historic practices.
- The skills required in consensus decision-making are also the skills and practices needed in the denomination to rebuild trust and relationships.

Conclusion

Over the past three years, the RCA has seen a significant change in its membership and geographic presence. Since General Synod 2021, outside of the three Eastern regional synods, our other five regional synods have all seen at least a 32 percent reduction in membership. The Regional Synod of the Far West has seen the steepest drop, with an 80 percent decline by General Synod 2023, and the Regional Synod of the Heartland is not far behind with a 72 percent decline. Even our three Eastern synods during those two years experienced a 5 to 11 percent decline in membership.

Overall, the RCA has experienced a 49.8 percent decline in reported membership between late 2019 and February 2024. This is not a minor blip or inconvenience but reveals deep rot in both our relationships and our systems that have led to almost half of our members choosing to break covenant with the RCA.

Those who have chosen to stay in the RCA value our shared history, theological heritage, the institutions of the RCA such as Global Mission, and our presbyterian polity, and they view our diversity of race, gender, culture, and theological perspectives as a source of strength. We find hope in these shared values and in the new perspectives and passion we see in the many new congregations being drawn to the RCA.

The restructuring team has sought to enfold our process with prayer and discernment from its beginning to its conclusion. We sought to actively listen to the wisdom of the past and present, to previous task forces and teams created for similar purposes, to various agencies and commissions currently serving, to the learning from other denominations, as well as to those seeking to remain in the RCA. In doing so, we were surprised that our process led us to similar recommendations as those that have been made previously, and we give much credit to the Holy Spirit, believing these are important considerations for the Reformed Church in America at this time.

None of us can know the future of the RCA and, thankfully, we do not need to know for we can trust that we will continue to be held in the hands of our faithful God. In bringing these recommendations, the restructuring team sought to achieve several goals, including:

- Keeping as many financial and people resources as possible in our local congregations and the middle assemblies.
- Creating middle assembly bodies that are both large enough to provide genuine support to congregations and small enough to continue to provide relational connections.
- Creating more equity in representation at General Synod and in making changes to the RCA's Constitution rather than biasing too strongly the voices of either small or larger middle assemblies.
- Welcoming ministers and leaders from other cultural backgrounds into the RCA by clarifying ordination processes and changing how we conduct business to create space for more voices to be heard.

In earlier drafts of the restructuring team's proposals, the team proposed clarifying how congregations outside of the United States and Canada could be welcomed into or be relationally connected to the RCA. After much conversation across the denomination and among the team, the team has not brought a recommendation on this topic to the General Synod, as this work is currently happening in individual classes, and it is the responsibility of the classis to receive individual congregations (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 6). This team is not suggesting any structural changes on this topic at this time. We acknowledge and have requested

more communication and conversations as the RCA as a whole can learn and celebrate all that God is doing.

As a team, we acknowledge the enormity of the task given us in a limited time frame. It was not possible for the team to address all of the issues and their structural implications that would be necessary for the denomination to make a culture shift toward a sustainable “spiritual and organizational health” in its broadest terms. The team believes the recommendations we have made will take the RCA one step in this direction; and others may need to follow in future years.

While we do not know the future of the RCA, our team’s hope is that these changes to our polity and practices will create a more nimble denomination less focused on internal divisions and theological disagreements. We pray for the day when our congregations and assemblies are consumed with a core mission of making disciples who participate in God’s reign everywhere. If this becomes the driving force of our life together in the RCA, we believe we will see lives changed, ministries started, churches renewed and planted, and communities transformed by the grace, justice, and mercy of our God.

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