

## **Report of the Commission on Theology**

The Commission on Theology was established by the General Synod of 1959 (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 1959*, p. 123). It is assigned to “study theological matters arising in the life of the church and referred to it by the General Synod or initiated within the commission itself” (*Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9b [2023 edition, p. 119]). This is the commission’s 64th report to a General Synod.

The commission met online on September 6, 2023, and online with members of the restructuring team on September 14, 2023. An in-person meeting was held at the Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with three members joining us online, on February 5-6, 2024. Working groups of the commission met online in between those meetings.

### **Representation on the CA 23-2 Task Force**

The commission’s only assignment from the 2023 General Synod was to appoint one member to the *ad hoc* committee formed in response to recommendation CA 23-2 from the report of the Commission on Christian Action: “to seek further transparency and understanding around the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and unemployment insurance for denominational (GSC) staff” (*MGS 2023*, p. 157). Dr. James Hart Brumm served on that *ad hoc* committee, whose report appears elsewhere in this workbook.

### **Christian Decision-Making in Anxious Times**

In light of the ongoing work of the restructuring team and the current state of anxiety in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) over the recent loss of congregations and in society in general over wars, political conflict, the growing climate crisis, and other stresses, the commission spent a significant amount of time discussing and reflecting upon the difficulties and dangers of making decisions while under stress. Given the significant pressures we all live under, it is important to consider how that pressure effects our Christian discernment.

We discussed the concept of “brave spaces,” as introduced by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens in the article listed below. While people often talk about making safe spaces for discussion, many believe that it is impossible to make any group entirely safe. Yet it may be possible to create spaces where people, and especially people of faith, can be brave and feel supported while discussing problematic issues. Your commission did not, however, feel we could add anything to the discussion with another paper. We did think a short bibliography of resources for study would be helpful to the church.

**BUILDING BRAVE SPACES TOGETHER**  
**A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY TO GUIDE CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT**

Arao, Brian, and Kristi Clemens. "From Safe Space to Braves Spaces." In *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, edited by Lisa M. Landreman, 1st edition. Routledge, 2013.

In this chapter, Arao and Clemens argue for a shift from language and practice of safe spaces to brave spaces, particularly around conversations of justice. They contend that "safety" is not a helpful term since any learning and conversation will be hard and require some risk, as controversy is incompatible with safety. They suggest that we should make this language and posture change and offer guidelines for the brave spaces. First, they propose a change from the common stance of "agree to disagree" to a stance of "controversy with civility." Second, they suggest a change from "don't take things personally" to "own your intentions and your impact." Third, they suggest that the approach of "challenge by choice" be reframed and expanded upon to be more helpful. Lastly, they offer the guidelines of "respect" and of "no attacks," with guidance to have conversations to provide clarity about what these stances mean. Arao and Clemens' move from safe to brave spaces provides language and an approach to facilitate and engage in hard conversations well.

McNeil, Brenda Salter. *Becoming Brave: Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now*. Brazos Press, 2020.

The subtitle tells it all: how do we find the courage to pursue racial justice now? A well-known author, speaker, and preacher dives deep into the question of how our belief in the reconciling power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ enables us to speak truth against the powers of injustice at work in the world. An international trailblazer, "Dr. Brenda" (as she is often called) provides a roadmap for Christians to become brave when facing injustice. Honest, wise, and down to earth. Take up and read.

Smedes, Lewis. *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World*. Harper and Row, 1986.

A distinguished Christian ethicist offers wisdom about how we can make wise choices in our ethical decision-making. After a brief explanation regarding what is good about being morally right and a succinct chapter on the language of ethics, Smedes describes a four-step process that brilliantly combines the three main traditions in Western ethics: rights and duties (deontology), consequences (teleology), and virtues (areteology). In making sound decisions we should face the facts, respect the rules, consider the consequences, and be responsible. Each of these steps is explained in much detail and with considerable nuance. All of this is contained in only 121 pages.

## TH 24-1

To instruct the GSC to make “Building Brave Spaces Together: A Short Bibliography to Guide Christian Discernment” available to all congregations, assemblies, and members of the RCA.

### *Reason*

This can be done online with minimal effort or cost.

### **The Effect of Ecclesiastical Structures on Theological Understanding**

Winston Churchill, speaking to the House of Lords on October 28, 1943, said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”<sup>17</sup> Churchill was addressing how the shape of the House of Commons portion of the English Parliament building, which had been destroyed by bombs in World War II, had shaped the British understanding of their two-party political system, and so had to be rebuilt the same way. Arguably, our ecclesial structures, while they are words rather than brick-and-mortar, are very similar: they are shaped by our theological understandings of the church, if we are paying attention when we construct them, and they in turn shape our understandings of the church and our relationship to God.

In the face of our denominational changes, the restructuring team has had this daunting theological work before it as well as the practical and financially driven considerations it has been given. In anticipation that this work will be passed to the assemblies of the whole church beginning with this General Synod, your commission felt that this was a good time for us to reflect theologically on how we construct ourselves. Therefore, we present this paper to the church.

### **ON THE RAFTERS OF THE CATHEDRAL OF LOVE**

“The church has an institutional character. This institution is not a worldly coincidence to the church—not a scaffolding around the building, but the crossbeams of the building, not a corset around the body of Christ, but the skeleton of the body.”<sup>18</sup>

“The church is the cathedral of love.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Introduction**

As the RCA finds itself in a time of restructuring the ecclesiastical structure, your commission believes this to be a valuable time to reflect on the relationship between theology and structure. Your commission sees this not only as an important topic for

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in BrainyQuote.com, accessed 27 February 2024.  
[www.brainyquote.com/quotes/winston\\_churchill\\_111316](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/winston_churchill_111316).

<sup>18</sup> Ruler, A.A. van, “De kerk is ook doel in zichzelf,” 58.

<sup>19</sup> Ruler, A.A. van, *Ik geloof*, 132.

the current moment, but also something important for the future. The connection between church structure and theology is important not only in times of significant restructuring, but also in more “ordinary” times, when the changes seem to be not quite as sweeping but also important. Therefore, your commission offers this to the General Synod to help with discernment here and now, but also, hopefully, into the future as well.

## **Unpacking the Terms**

When speaking about the structure of the church, there are a plethora of terms, and often the uses of these terms confuse what is actually being discussed. For instance, sometimes church polity (that is the theological discipline of the ordering of the church) is often conflated or confused with rules of parliamentary procedure (how assembly meetings function). One important distinction that is to be made is between organizational structure and ecclesial structure, and in particular the degree to which context or theology is to be the dominant force.

Organizational structure is concerned with the denominational machinery: Staff, programs, initiatives, resources, the General Synod Council (as it oversees the program of the denomination), and the general secretary in the capacity of developing and implementing program. Organizational structure is almost entirely practical. If the denomination wants to do something, such as publish and provide educational resources for churches, that is a course of action that can be done, and the way that is done is almost entirely dependent on function and practical considerations. Whether or not there is a resource provider for churches is certainly important, but it is not essential to the nature of the church. Organizational structure considers those things that a denomination can do that are good, useful, and important. However, they are of a different essence than the ecclesial structure.

Ecclesial structure, then, is the matters that are more foundational to the central essence of the church: the pure proclamation of the Word, pure proclamation of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The way, then, that the church lives out its mission requires official offices to carry this out, and we have these offices of elder, deacon, ministers of Word and sacrament, and General Synod professors, and the way in which the church governs itself is by council: consistory, classis, regional synod, General Synod. That is, a church—as a creature of the Word—can exist without a publishing house, but a church cannot exist without office-bearers and church councils. These are things that are more to the essence of the church, things with a scriptural basis. We see the importance of office-bearers (e.g., Exodus 40:12-15; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:1-13, 5:17-20) and councils (e.g., Acts 15), not only for practical matters, but because of the particular nature of the church as the Body of Christ. This category certainly requires practicality, and these practical and contextual matters must be taken into account. However, because the church is a creature of the Word, theology must be a primary foundation. That is, we do not have offices of elder, deacon, and minister simply because it works well to have this structure, but rather because Scripture teaches this and also importantly, we confess it together in the Belgic Confession (Art. 30, 31).

As we are the commission charged specifically with theology, we will focus on the ecclesial structure.

A further term that will be used in this paper is church polity. Church polity is the theological discipline of ordering the elements of the ecclesial structure, and as such must necessarily find the best pathway forward with both theological and practical/contextual matters, seeking to find the proper balance of application. As such, the term “church polity” refers to the ecclesial structure.

### **Necessity of a Church Order**

The necessity of a church order is clear. A church cannot exist without an order. In the very beginning of the biblical witness, we read of God bringing order out of chaos. We see this continue as God formed the people with whom God made a covenant. The Pentateuch speaks clearly of the essentiality of order and structure. But lest we think that this is simply a matter of the Old Covenant, we see the importance of this reflected in the New Testament as well. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century sought to free itself from human laws that bound the conscience beyond what the Scripture required; they did not, in any way, seek to eliminate a definite government from the church.

No organization is sufficiently strong unless constituted with definite laws; nor can any procedure be maintained without some set form. Therefore, we are so far from condemning the laws that conduce to this as to contend that, when churches are deprived of them, their very sinews disintegrate and they are wholly deformed and scattered.<sup>20</sup>

Your commission believes that the necessity of a church order is evident from the Bible, from the confessions, and from the entire trajectory of the history of the church. The question before us is not whether or not a church order is necessary, but rather, what this means for us and the nature of its relationship with theology.

### **The Nature of the Church**

The church is not simply a group of people who love Jesus and who worship together. Rather, the church is a creation of the Word.

I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.X.27.

<sup>21</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54.

As can be seen here, the action done on the part of the church is that of Christ. Christ gathers this community, Christ protects this community, and Christ preserves this community. The church is Christ's doing, not our doing. This can also be seen from the phrase, "from the beginning of the world," which clearly teaches that the church began not at the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, not even at Pentecost, not at Sinai, not even when God first introduced Godself to Abram, but at the moment of creation of the first humans. The church, then, finds its origin not in people coming together but in the Divine act of creation. We see this reflected in the Belgic Confession:

This church has existed from the beginning of the world  
and will last until the end,  
as appears from the fact  
that Christ is eternal King  
who cannot be without subjects.<sup>22</sup>

The confession and catechism are here speaking of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, but as our churches are complete churches that are in visible and meaningful communion with other churches, we can see ourselves in this as well. We see this reflected in the preamble to our Constitution, which lays out several foundational principles upon which presbyterial-synodical church government is built.

The Reformed churches confess that Jesus Christ is the only Head of his church. The Scriptures call the church his body, and our Lord the Head of that body. He is therefore in the closest and most vital relationship to his church. As the church's true Head, he has complete authority over its life, and therefore the church must ever yield to him a ready obedience and faithfulness. Christ's headship is one of righteousness, love, and tenderness toward his people.<sup>23</sup>

Christ being the head of the church also means that there is no head of the church on earth. As such, we cannot simply govern the church as we see most fit, but we must govern the church in a way that is given to us by Jesus Christ. Consequently, we must be careful that we do not simply baptize our desires and claim them for Christ. This is why the ordering and governing of the church is not simply a pragmatic task, that is, to run an efficient organization. Rather, the ordering and governing of the church is fundamentally and foundationally theological.

### **The Theological Nature of Ecclesial Structure**

Your commission strongly believes that a church order is fundamentally a theological document. There are pragmatic aspects, to be sure, but these are to help our

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<sup>22</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Preamble (2023 edition, p. 2).

theology, and being informed by our theology, about what it means to be the body of Christ to find expression in the world in which we inhabit.

Because the church is the body of Christ and because it derives its being and nature from him, any faithful understanding of how to order our life together can have no other proper foundation than a theological examination of the church's being and nature, and then an application of that theology to the particular details of matters involving assembling the church for worship, the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the guidance of its people.<sup>24</sup>

The ordering and structuring of the church, then, must always be theologically informed and accountable, rather than simply justifiable. The structuring of the church must be theologically tested, not only theologically defensible. The South African church polity scholar Pieter Coertzen speaks to this quite unambiguously, "Not for one moment may the church organize itself according to the principles that exist in other human associations."<sup>25</sup>

The way in which the church is ecclesially structured is not disconnected or incidental to its confession, but is essentially connected. "The church's confession of God's order for His church is made true in the creation and implementation of its order."<sup>26</sup>

Church government and ecclesial structure is not simply a matter of pragmatism, but of confession. The Belgic Confession includes articles on "The Government of the Church" (30), "The Officers of the Church" (31), and "The Order and Discipline of the Church" (32). The Belgic Confession does not contain a fully realized church order, far from it, but rather includes building blocks. However, the existence of these articles reminds us that church polity/ecclesial structure is not confessionally neutral but very intertwined with the confession of the church.

On the one hand, then, matters of church structure are intertwined with the confession of the church. On the other hand, we must also resist "church polity confessionalism" or "an uncritical continuation and justification of a specific traditional view with the one and only argument that this is the position of our confessional forebears."<sup>27</sup> As such, church polity work, and in particular for our purposes here, ecclesial structure, are the result of a dialogue between the contextual theological reality of the confessions and the lived reality of the church today. It is in this back and forth between theology and history and the current reality that we can seek to find a theologically sound and faithful structure that makes contextual sense.

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<sup>24</sup> van Maastricht, Matthew. *Foundations of Reformed Church Polity*, 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Coertzen, Pieter. *Decently and in Order*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> Coertzen, Pieter. *Church and Order*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Koffeman, Leo. *In Order to Serve*, 16.

## **Church Polity as a Dynamic Theological Discipline**

All of this discussion about the theological nature of the church and the church structure cannot leave us thinking that church polity is made in a closed room disconnected from the contextual reality of the churches. Far from it, church polity is a dynamic theological discipline, which is always a dialogue between theology and the lived reality of the church. In order for a church structure or a church order to be contextually intelligible, it needs to be able to adequately speak to the realities and needs of the church as it exists. Indeed, since the church is not simply a human organization, we cannot take efficiency or ease as our points of departure, but rather, the reality of the body of Christ, a body of which Christ is the living head, who has immediate jurisdiction over the church, and that his teachings, as we understand them, as informed by Scripture and tradition, must be the departure point for ecclesial structure and order.

It is for this reason that the Reformed tradition has, rather than seeking to invent the wheel anew in each generation, worked with our forebears in the work of structure and order, such that no structure or order is ever set in stone, but rather is all in a slow and graduate becoming through the centuries. The Church Order of Dort (1619) was never intended to be interpreted as some grand pinnacle of church order, but rather was simply the last in a prematurely arrested development. This development continued for the RCA in the first edition of our Constitution as we adopted the Church Order of Dort, but also a set of Explanatory Articles to apply these articles of church government to the American context, which differed greatly from seventeenth-century Netherlands. In seeking to order this American church, however, they did not seek to reinvent the wheel or to throw the book out and design something brand new; rather, they further developed that which they had inherited and made it work for them in their context.

The ecclesial structures that we have are not identical to the seventeenth-century Netherlands, nor the eighteenth-century United States. Indeed, there have been many changes over the centuries to the details of the working of the ecclesial structure, but the changes have been a gradual process of growth and development in continuity with tradition rather than from a sharp break from that tradition. Presbyterial-synodical church polity came into being at a certain point in time and was understood to be a theologically appropriate and fitting way to govern and structure the church. This structure, just as every form of church structure, did not fall from heaven, but was developed from similar structures that had already existed, and so even the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was, itself, simply a part of this organic development.

To say that church polity is a theological discipline does not mean that it is static. Far from it. It is dynamic, but it is always a measured and careful dynamism.

The Belgic Confession begins its article on the government of the church by saying, 'We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word.' As such, Scripture is the primary source for all church polity. As van Maastricht notes, "During the Protestant



Reformation of the sixteenth century, church polity reforms were, perhaps, more significant even than the doctrinal ones. The Reformed branch of this reform movement always sought to restore the order and governance of the church to a practice that reflects the Scriptures and the early church.”<sup>28</sup> As the RCA affirms in its creeds and as every ordained member affirms at their ordination, the Scriptures are our only rule of faith and life; as such, there is no polity or structure we can design that is infallible or unchangeable if, when tested against Scripture, necessities change. Rather, church order and polity is always under the scrutiny of the witness of Scripture and so may be adjusted as we test it in each time and place against God’s Word.

Because church polity is driven not by a singular focus on effectiveness, efficiency, budgetary management, or any other theories that drive the other structures in society, but is informed by the Word of God, it must exist differently than how we as a society order other parts of life. That is not to say that effectiveness, efficiency, budgetary management, or other theories of organizational theory and structure in the world and life can not, do not, or should not inform our structure, as we can of course learn from the wisdom and knowledge of those fields, but that, as in all of faithful life, Scripture remains the central and authoritative Word over, above, and when needed, in contradiction to, those values. Thus, a “church order cannot be a theologically neutral rulebook or instruction manual because there is no such thing. Church order is a practical ecclesiology in that it helps to give life—to put into practice—to that which we believe that Christ desires for the ordering of the church here and now. Therefore, a church order is a theological document, through and through, and church polity is a theological discipline.”<sup>29</sup>

However, while Scripture is the primary source and authority for polity, it is also clear that the Bible does not hand down one singular form of polity. Rather, as with much of faithful life and in discerning faithful orthopraxy from our faithful orthodoxy, we can discern principles, values, and practices as to how we might most faithfully and best structure and organize this body in service to God and in faithful alignment with God’s Word. As is evident in the variety of church orders seen across time and traditions, a biblical basis can be made for many forms, all of which are undergirded by the tradition’s emphasis on certain passages, theological claims, and biblical interpretation. However, no matter what form and structure we discern, it must be based in Scripture, as our guide and our standard as we study, change, and function both into and out from a particular church order and structure. And so, as in any faithful work of pastoral theology, we must “rely on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit among us as we study the Scriptures; and we listen to the counsel of the church, both past [and] present, as we work.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 6.

Of the various forms of church structure that exist, it could be argued that our presbyterian structure is one of, if not the, least “efficient,” a fact to which most ministers within presbyterian structure can likely attest. However, it is also a form of church organization and governance that is faithful to the biblical witness and what the Reformed tradition believes about the church. Since the Lord did not instruct and prescribe one form of structure, part of our calling and responsibility of the church, and of leading the church, is developing church order, not in some theoretical lens, but for the church in its time, place, and structure, shaped by the guidance of Scripture and the wisdom of the saints who have gone before. Thus, “as a discipline, church polity takes the biblical witness and seeks to apply it to the church’s circumstances. Although the Scriptures do not change, the circumstances do, and the church order must adapt its order, directed by the Scriptures, to give order and structure to *this* church in *this* context.”<sup>31</sup>

The Swiss New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer notes that “Church order is to be regarded as a part of the proclamation in which the Church’s witness is expressed, as it is in its preaching. ... So when we ask about the Church’s order, we must also try to understand the Church’s essential nature.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, church order must always be driven by, focused on, and guided by Scripture and the mission and vision of the church. Consequently, we cannot make polity, or policy, changes strictly out of a desire for efficiency, effectiveness, or any other measure if they are not first governed by a faithfulness to Scripture and the call of Scripture. In *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine rightly argues that the end of Scripture is “love of God and love of neighbor.”<sup>33</sup> As such, if we are to faithfully let Scripture be our only rule of life and faith, and to guide our polity, we must be sure that all decisions and actions of polity move towards Scripture’s end and serve us faithfully executing God’s work, ministry, and mission in the world.

So then, since Scripture is the only rule of faith and life, since we must direct all of ourselves to love of God and love of neighbor, and since our orthodoxy must not only inform but guide our orthopraxy, then within the dialogic relationship of theology and polity, polity must seek to serve the theology, ministry, and mission of the church. Polity must not function first with the business precision and sharpness of a Fortune 500 company, or any entity that has a driving value and mission other than the faithful witness to and work of the gospel. Rather, while being faithful stewards of our time, talent, and treasure, the church must evaluate, and when necessary, adapt, its polity and structure so as to further the mission of the church, to live as those called by God, to live as those who are called to death and new life in Christ, and to live in love of God and love of neighbor. Thus, from the bylaws and functioning of a congregation, to every level in between, up to a denominational level and structure, every change, choice, and direction must be prayerfully and faithfully considered and offered not just with logical and practical implications and proposals, though those are of course valuable in our discernment, but with a clear Scriptural

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<sup>31</sup> van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Schweizer, Eduard. *Church Order in the New Testament*, 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> St. Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*, 23.

and theological vision and telos and to answer the question: how does this change and decision further our church in love of God and love of neighbor and equip all members of the body to lives of faithful discipleship?

## **APPENDIX**

In an attempt to bring some tangible and practical application of our paper, we want to raise some of the theological issues at play in some of the items that will be before the General Synod from the restructuring team. We desire to tread lightly because we do not desire to tell the General Synod *how* it should vote, but rather, raise some of the issues that we think the General Synod should *consider* in making its decision. Our concern is not necessarily what the General Synod decides, but rather, how it decides.

As such, we want to address some of the recommendations by the restructuring team in order to raise some of the theological issues that your commission thinks is important.

### **Names**

The names that we give things have meaning. It says something about what we believe about the church. The word “classis” means a group of something, the word “synod” means together on the road. These words with Latin and Greek origin are certainly not unchangeable. But these terms are more than simply a label, and we think that thought does need to be given to the ecclesial bodies, and that name should reflect not only a functional reality, but also a theological reality.

### **Proportional Representation and Weighted Constitutional Votes**

There are two proposals regarding proportional representation and vote weights that the restructuring team is considering. These proposals rest upon certain values that are, by no means, universal. Our structure looks to be based on democratic values, but we do not profess this. That is, in our theology of the church, Christ is the head of the church rather than the people, which is the value underlying democracy. The church, in our understanding, is not a democracy; rather, it is a Christocracy. Conserving these values is important when considering these proposals.

The original design of sending the same number of ministers and elders was not because classes and synods always had the same number of members within their bounds. Ecclesial assemblies are not voting districts. Rather, the historic practice of sending the same number of elders and deacons was because, theologically, these bodies are equally the church, since we represent Christ and not constituencies.

This is a place where theological reflection is particularly important because cultural values can lead to different paths than these theological values.

## **Deacons in Middle Judicatories**

Deacons and elders are distinct offices with distinct giftings and ministries. For too long deacons have been understood to be junior elders, and such a view has caused great harm to the church. Thankfully, there has been a recovery of the importance of the diaconate. There are different ways to handle this blessed renewal of the diaconate. One would be to continue to have the diaconate exclusively as a congregational office, understanding that the ministries of mercy, service, and outreach takes shape most clearly at the local level. A second way could be to delegate deacons as well as elders to one or more of the greater assemblies, with the expectation that deacons will bring the particularities of their office and ministry into these greater assemblies. There are other possibilities, of course, more creatively and more outside the box, of creating deacons conferences that operate parallel to the current assembly structure. There may be others, as well. However, the important matter is that we ought to consider such proposals theologically, and so considering the biblical call of the offices of elder and deacon, and that we are clear about what we are doing and why.

## **Elders as Supervisors**

The Constitution affirms that the offices meeting together represent the fullness of Christ's ministry. That is, elders, deacons, and ministers each represent a facet of the three-fold office of Christ, and together the fullness of Christ's ministry is present.

When a church is without a minister, the church order has required a minister to be present with the consistory. There are practical functions to this, of course, but theologically it ensures that a minister participates with the elders and deacons so that the fullness of Christ's ministry is present. When we allowed elders serving as commissioned pastors to supervise a consistory that did not have a minister, we removed this. However, we never really grappled with the theological implications. Change to allow for elders to supervise in place of ministers ought to grapple in a meaningful way with the theological aspects. This doesn't mean that this cannot be done, but we must consider the theological aspects.

## **Frequency of General Synod Meetings**

The Reformed Church in America is profoundly dysfunctional, not in its structure, but in its relationality. The *Church Herald*, for all of its problems, served as a communication avenue for the church to speak to itself, rather than only the denominational program speaking to the churches. Since the elimination of the *Church Herald*, engagement within the Reformed Church has been relegated to online posts and social media engagement, all of which quickly create an echo chamber and do not allow real and meaningful engagement. Even when, in the pages of the *Church Herald*, people were arguing, they were at least arguing *with* one another rather than the cut-offs and distancing that we are now experiencing. Indeed, the RCA is not in conflict, but we are relationally disconnected—conflict would actually be an improvement. The results of eliminating the single avenue for communication from the RCA to the RCA have become apparent as General Synod

hostilities and maneuvering have increased. These sorts of things, of course, are nothing new; however, the frequency and intensity has anecdotally increased in recent years. We are not suggesting to simply bring back the *Church Herald*; that was an avenue of a previous era. But we must give attention to this.

General Synod, for better or worse, has become the relational connection point, which is difficult because that is not what the synod is actually for. This has created all sorts of other considerations as increasing relational connection means decreasing meaningful work, which has led to further dysfunction at General Synod.

As we will carry our own relational dysfunction into whatever structure we enter, we need to give serious, intentional, focused, and meaningful thought to the relational connections in the Reformed Church in ways that are not filtered through or framed by the denominational program—that is, a way for the RCA to connect with itself in a meaningful and life-giving way. Synodical frequency has always been largely a matter of practical consideration. Your commission does not think that we necessarily must maintain annual frequency of in-person meetings. However, we do believe that fewer times to be embodied with one another may very well lead to increased distancing, and this would only be to the detriment of the RCA. Thus, decreased frequency of in-person meetings requires intentional attention given to increasing meaningful relational connection freed from the strictures of denominational programmatic ends-driven means.

Relationality is the core of the church, the core of the message of Jesus, and we must give meaningful attention to this.

## **Conclusion**

Your commission hopes that this appendix helps to put a tangible expression on this paper, particularly for your consideration in your discernment of the items presented by the restructuring team.

## **Bibliography**

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#### **TH 24-2**

**To commend the paper “On the Rafters of the Cathedral of Love” to all RCA assemblies and the General Synod professors for reading and reflection as they discuss the proposed structure changes coming from the General Synod.**

#### *Reason*

Making a successful transition from what we have been to what God is calling us to be is the prayerful work of the entire church and, to different degrees, all its office-bearers.

#### **Looking Back and Ahead**

From the inception of this commission until the year 2000, the papers presented by the commission were preserved and made more accessible in *The Church Speaks*, volumes 1 (1985) and 2 (2002), each edited by Dr. James I. Cook, each published as part of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. Your commission is pleased to note that *The Church Speaks, volume 3*, edited by Dr. David Komline, a past member of this commission who is a faculty member at Western Theological Seminary, will be available on Amazon.com as part of The Historical Series by the time this General Synod is meeting. It is planned that this book will include an index

to all three volumes to aid in research. We thank Dr. Komline and the staff of the Historical Series for this work.

Moving ahead, in addition to whatever work is assigned to us by this synod, the commission is working on studies on missiology and the use of power in the church (and culture).