

2024
General Synod
Workbook

Reformed Church in America

Westin La Paloma
Tucson, Arizona

Table of Contents

Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum.....	4
Guidelines for Civil Discourse.....	5
Roll Call of General Synod.....	6
Permanent Commissions, Boards, and Agencies	21
Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod	38
Report of the Office of Finance	50
Report of the General Synod Council on Advancement.....	62
Report of the African American Black Council	64
Report of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries.....	85
Report of the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries.....	89
Report of the Native American Indigenous Ministries Council	91
Report of the General Synod Council on Communication	92
Report of the General Synod Council on the RCA Archives	95
Referrals from General Synod 2021.....	98
Referrals from General Synod 2022	98
Referrals from General Synod 2023	99
Report of the RCA Restructuring Team.....	104
Retired Ministers of Word and Sacrament.....	147
Necrology.....	151
Preliminary Summary of the 2023 Statistical Report	152
Overtures.....	156
Report of the General Synod Council on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry	162
Report of the General Synod Council on Global Mission	168
Report of Words of Hope	175
Report of The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc.....	177
Report of The Board of Benefits Services.....	181

Report of the Commission on Christian Action	200
Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education.....	207
Report of the Commission on Christian Unity	211
Report of the Commission on Christian Worship	231
Report of the Commission on Church Order	236
Report of the Commission on History	282
Report of the Commission on Judicial Business.....	292
Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity.....	293
Report of the Commission on Theology	301
Report of the Commission for Women	316
Report of the General Synod Professorate	319
Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board.....	321
Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency	325
Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary	329
Report of Western Theological Seminary	335
Report of Central College.....	345
Report of Hope College.....	349
Report of Northwestern College.....	352

Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum

This statement was written and approved for inclusion in the General Synod workbook by the General Synod Council at its March 2017 meeting.

In order to have a fruitful, Spirit-led atmosphere on the floor of General Synod, it is important that all delegates observe some simple rules of decorum. These rules are not meant to stifle conversation or the expressing of opinions, but simply to ensure that all delegates are able to focus on the business before the synod. People should act in a courteous and considerate manner at all times and should be respectful of others, regardless of their opinions.

1. Come to General Synod prepared: read all of the reports in the workbook. Come to synod ready to ask questions for clarification and to speak to the reports through your prayerful discernment of the topics at hand.
2. When seated at tables with fellow delegates, be careful not to engage in distracting behavior. Silence your computers, tablets, and mobile phones. Take necessary phone calls away from the synod floor. In short, be courteous to those seated around you. Be aware that your conduct may affect the people around you.
3. When the time comes for debate on an item of business, you may desire to speak to that business. Stand and wait to be recognized by microphone number. When the chair recognizes you, begin by stating your name and the assembly from which you are a delegate. Then address your comments directly to the chair.
4. When it comes time to vote, you might be filled with joy or disappointment at the results. Remember that there are other delegates who feel differently than you do, and extend them the courtesy of not outwardly expressing your feelings. Maintain a respectful atmosphere, taking into account individual circumstances or opinions. This will show proper respect for the decision the synod has made.

Following these simple rules of decorum is each delegate's responsibility. There are no "police" to monitor your behavior. It is a matter of honor. However, those who are found to be in violation of these rules of decorum are subject to discipline at the discretion of the chair of the meeting.

Guidelines for Civil Discourse

The following guidelines were developed by the General Synod's Commission on Christian Action and are based on the fruit of the Spirit as revealed in Galatians 5:22-23. The 2021 General Synod commended these guidelines for use in the RCA, directed that they be included in the delegate workbook for General Synod each year, and encouraged their use in classes and congregations of the RCA (Minutes of General Synod 2021, CA 21-9, p. 210).

1. Show **love** to your fellow delegates. How are your words or silence affecting those around you? Are you creating an environment that is hospitable and allows for differing opinions and the work of the Holy Spirit? Are your words and actions rooted in love and showing respect for those around you?
2. Seek **joy** in the work of this body. We have been called together to do the work of Christ's church. We should look for opportunities to rejoice in the good work God has done in and through the Reformed Church in America.
3. Act to create **peace** and highlight areas of shared interest. One of the mottos on the RCA crest is "Eendracht Maakt Macht," which translates to "in unity/concord there is strength." The church is stronger when we can celebrate the many things we have in common.
4. Practice **patience** and follow proper Robert's Rules of Order. Wait for the moderator or president to call on you before speaking. This allows your fellow delegates time to process what each speaker preceding you has said.
5. Our words and actions should reflect **kindness**. Demeaning and belittling comments, including eye rolls, exasperated sighs, or rude remarks are always inappropriate and should be unwelcome on the floor of General Synod and in any space, let alone the church.
6. Assume **good intent** from the others in this body. Seek to understand the intention and content of speakers who are expressing ideas you disagree with. What message are they trying to convey? How might their experiences, which differ from yours, shape their thinking on this? Can we find empathy for their opinion even if we don't agree with it?
7. Show **faithfulness** to God, to one another, and to the church you've been called to serve. Have you brought a personal agenda into this meeting, or have you set it aside to hear the Holy Spirit, to learn with and from your fellow delegates, and to serve the Reformed Church in America faithfully?
8. Be **gentle** with yourself in times of misunderstanding or confusion. Ask clarifying questions; if you're unsure of something happening or being said, someone else will be too.
9. Practice **self-control**. Refrain from speaking over one another or engaging in outbursts of emotion. If side-conversations are necessary, respect those at your table and around you and take the conversation off the plenary floor.

Roll Call of General Synod

This list represents voting delegates submitted and confirmed by their sending bodies as of April 21, 2024. The number of voting delegates to which each classis is entitled is computed according to Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 (2023 edition, p. 69) and Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1b and c (2023 edition, p. 107). Additions, drops, or changes may still occur. A report listing updates to this delegate roster will be issued shortly before the General Synod meets in June.

REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY

Noreen Fargione

Classis of Albany

Ministers

Paige Convis

Becky Town

Elders

Joan Adriance

Lynne Morse

Classis of Columbia-Greene

Ministers

Derek DeJager

Charles Wiessner

Elders

Matthew Pirrone

Patti Varga

Classis of Montgomery

Ministers

Matt Draffen

Brian Engel

Elders

Randy Karcher

Jackie Leve

Classis of Rochester

Ministers

Chris Jacobsen

Sarah Palsma

Elders

Amy Burdett
Sharon Hann

Classis of Schenectady

Ministers

Kent McHeard
Garret Szantner

Elders

Mark Booth
Deb McKee

Classis of Schoharie

Ministers

Bob Hoffman
Jeffrey Kelley

Elders

Laura Davenport
Martha Stanton

REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA

George Dekker

Classis of Canadian Prairies

Ministers

Al Plat
Doug Smith

Elders

Denis Mugabo
Hank Vrielink

Classis of Ontario

Ministers

Flo Dekker
Stephen Shaffer

Elders

Guido Groeliker
Rick Vriesen

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST

Ina Montoya

Classis of the Americas

Ministers

Hanoi Avila

Jael Serrano-Altamirano

Elders

Claudia Flores

Josefina Ramos Flores

Classis of California

Ministers

Rick DeBruyne

Ron Spence

Elders

Tony Davis

Eric Moreno

Classis of Cascades

Ministers

Fiasili Afalava

John Alfred

Elders

Kevin Maina

Dan Rientjes

Classis of Central California

Ministers

Stephen Norman

Drew Yamamoto

Elder

Jarel Jacobs

Classis of Rocky Mountain

Minister

Brad Kautz

Classis of the Southwest

Ministers

Corinne Ellis

Ted Vande Berg

Elders

Israel Camacho

June Denny

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES

Tim Dieffenbach

Classis of Great Lakes City

Ministers

Dan Beyer

Jon Beyer

Mike Lamson

Elders

Paul Brinks

Marty Bruins

Jeff Frick

Classis of Holland

Ministers

Janelle Koolhaas

Kate Meyer

Mark Waterstone

Elders

Ellen Awad

George Bouwman

Jeff Minkus

Classis of Muskegon

Ministers

Raully Donahue

David Kingma

Elders

Kris Burgess

Shaundra Fairfield

Classis of North Grand Rapids

Ministers

Jennifer Holmes Curran

Kristen Meyer

Elders

Kurt Reppart

George Werkema

Classis of Northern Michigan

Minister

Mical Pugh

Elders

Lee Pranger

Cheryl Rosten

Classis of Southwest Michigan

Ministers

Edward Schmidt

Dave Zomer

Elders

Cindy Dame

Jessica Loper

Classis of Zeeland

Ministers

Jonathan Elgersma

Tom Grabill

Elders

Sara Donkersloot

Linda Kolk

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND

Mike Metten

Classis of Central Iowa

Ministers

Katie Alley

Sara Nielsen

Elders

Jan Van Wyk

Lori Witt

Classis of Central Plains

Minister

Jon Garbison

Elder

Rick McNeese

Classis of East Sioux

Ministers

Brian Keepers
Troy Van Beek

Elders

Anita Cirulis
Andrea Theis

Classis of Minnesota

Ministers

Cory Moss
Brad VanderWaal

Elders

Patti Gilmer-Van Dorp
Beth Westra

Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Minister

David VanNetten

Elder

Lois Fisher

Classis of West Sioux

Ministers

Steve Meester
Scott Van Ravenswaay

Elders

Heath DeJong
Mark DeKock

International Classis of Texas

Ministers

Fabio Sosa
Armando Vera

Elders

Dara San Martin
Alejandro Saucedo

REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA

Bill Reecher

Classis of Chicago

Ministers

Chad De Jager
Steve Young

Elder

LyNae Schleyer

Classis of Illiana

Ministers

Heino Blaauw
Jill Kohlhagen

Elders

Gary Hall
Clair Hoeksema

Classis of Illinois

Ministers

Shannon Parrish
Lyle Zumdahl

Elders

James Bean
Julie Mann

Classis de las Naciones

Ministers

Daniel Davila
Dylan Kallioinen

Elders

Lionel Rogers
Ed Smith-Green

Classis of Wisconsin

Ministers

Luke Baehr
Jane Carlson

Elders

Elizabeth Brozik
Lois Wendlandt

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS

Gene Ryan

Classis of Delaware-Raritan

Ministers

Chris Heitkamp
Jeff Knol

Elders

Scott Barton
Barbara Reid

Classis of the City

Ministers

Beth Carroll
Frances Nelson

Elder

Michael Ehrenfried

Classis of Greater Palisades

Ministers

Mark Ennis
Pam Pater-Ennis

Elders

Tina Bonanno
Cathy Lowden

Classis of New Brunswick

Ministers

Fransisca Rumokoy
Marcy Ryan

Elders

Patrick Beckford
Sharon Mahoney

Classis of Passaic Valley

Ministers

Debbie Pierce
Emily Ratering-Youngberg

Elders

Claudette Reid
Barbara VanHassel

REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK

Grace Jeeyoon Rim

Classis of Brooklyn

Ministers

De'Lafayette Awkward

Carlos Rivera

Elders

Joel Agron

DonMarie Banfield-Jones

Classis of Mid-Hudson

Ministers

Bill Appleyard-Pekich

Renée House

Elders

Jeff DeWitt

Carol Kenyon

Classis of Nassau-Suffolk

Ministers

James Eastland

Vicky Eastland

Elders

Kenny Huan

Barbara King

Classis of New York

Ministers

Sharon Atkins

Karen Jackson Pershing

Elders

Vivian Campbell

Dolores Reig

Classis of Orange

Ministers

Irving Rivera

Stan Seagren

Elders

Joseph Hansen

Pete Newman

Classis of Queens

Ministers

Young Aie Na
Albert Potgieter

Elders

Nancy Gessner
Janet Paduano Cardillo

Classis of Rockland-Westchester

Ministers

Sam Lee
Salome Ryew

Elders

Wayne Adams
Carol Schelin

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSOR

Micah McCreary

GENERAL SYNOD PRESIDENT

Judy Nelson

GENERAL SYNOD VICE PRESIDENT

Joshua Scheid

CORRESPONDING DELEGATES

GENERAL SECRETARY

Eddy Alemán

COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE (GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL)

Nancy Boote
Cal Brouwer
Vivian Campbell
Michelle Chahine
Lin Cline
Devonna Cousins
Susan Davis
Brian Engel
Clair Hoeksema
Dwayne Jackson
Randy Karcher
Brad Kautz
Yong Bok Kim
Mike Meyer-Veen
Sheila Moses
Eric Nichols
Jon Opgenorth
Carlos Rivera
Neale Roller
Jidong Shan
Kjersten Sullivan
Kim Van Es
Harris Van Oort
Patti Varga
Hank Vrielink
Maudelin Willock

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Board of Trustees

Abby Norton-Levering

President

Micah McCreary

Students

Elba Arias

Irma Williams

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

President

Felix Theonugraha

Students

LaCosta VanDyk

Lisa Van Lonkhuyzen

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY

Board of Trustees

Jon Opgenorth

Students

Tristan Lin

Josh Pruis

CHURCH GROWTH FUND BOARD

Ron Rukambe

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES

Beryl Banks

GENERAL SYNOD COMMISSIONS

Commission on Christian Action

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Brad VanderWaal

Commission on Christian Unity

Kim Pavlovich

Commission on Christian Worship

Cory Grimm

Commission on Church Order

Philip De Koster

Commission on Judicial Business

Brion Brooks

Commission on History

Katlyn DeVries

Commission on Nominations

Patricia Sealy

Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Kelvin Spooner

Commission on Theology

James Brumm

Commission for Women

Cedric Nelms

ADDITIONAL COMMISSION DELEGATES

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Elena Davidson

Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Vincea Nez

Commission for Women

Olga Shaffer

REGIONAL SYNOD EXECUTIVES

Regional Synod of Albany

Abby Norton-Levering

Regional Synod of Canada

John Kapteyn

Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Dale Assink

Regional Synod of the Heartland

John Messer

Regional Synod of Mid-America

Chad Farrand

Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics

Stephen Eckert

Regional Synod of New York

Micheal Edwards

REGIONAL SYNOD WOMEN

Regional Synod of Albany

Heather Kramer

Deb Sanburn

Regional Synod of Canada

Jeannette Plat

Grace Slot

Regional Synod of the Far West

Alexa Caballero

Audrey Norberg

Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Jan Luchies

Marcia Pratt

Regional Synod of Mid-America

Nora Johnson

Paige Pugh

Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics

Cheryl Daniel

Marisol Ferrer Malloy

Regional Synod of New York

Cora Taitt
Susanah Wade

REGIONAL SYNOD YOUTH

Regional Synod of Albany

Katherine Makrin

Regional Synod of the Far West

Ivan Garcia

Regional Synod of New York

Tiara Elcock

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE

General Synod Chaplain

Phyllis Palsma

Parliamentarian

Russell Paarlberg

Seminarian Seminar Leader

Tim TenClay

Emerging Leaders Seminar Leader (Youth and College Delegates)

Ruth Langkamp

Restructuring Team Resource People

Eddy Alemán

Dale Assink

Greg Brower

Michelle Chahine

Chad Farrand

Andrea Godwin-Stremmler

Sung Kim

Micah McCreary

Sherri Meyer-Veen

Ina Montoya

Howard Moths

Young Aie Na

Andres Serrano

Gildo Vieira

SEMINARIAN SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

Kelle Alavi

Elba Arias

Amanda Bruehl

AJ Funk
Lucas Grove
Tristan Lin
Leo Poluan
Josh Pruis
Jesse Santiago
LaCosta VanDyk
Lisa Van Lonkhuyzen
Irma Williams

Permanent Commissions, Boards, and Agencies

2023-2024

Names listed below were accurate as of March 17, 2024. Current lists of individuals who are serving as members of these bodies are found online in the General Synod Directory at my.rca.org.

An asterisk (*) indicates serving a final term.

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

Nancy Boote	2027*
Calvin Brouwer	2026*
Vivian Campbell	2024 AABC
Michelle Chahine	2024*
Linda Cline	2025*
Devonna Cousins	2024*
Susan Davis	2025*
Brian Engel	2025*
Clair Hoeksema	2027*
Dwayne Jackson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2024* PP, GS
Randy Karcher	2026* RSA
Bradley Kautz	2026* RSFW
Yong Bok Kim	2026* CPAAM
Michael Meyer-Veen	2025*
Sheila Moses	2024* RSNY
Judith Nelson	2024 P, GS
Eric Nichols	2025* RSMAt
Jonathan Opgenorth	2027* RSGL
Carlos Rivera	2024 CHM
Neale Roller	2025* RSMAM
Joshua Scheid, <i>second vice moderator</i>	2024 VP, GS
Jidong Shan	2027*
Kjersten Sullivan	2025* Ecumenical - ELCA
Kimberly Van Es, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Harris Van Oort	2024* RSH
Patricia Varga	2024*
Hank Vrielink	2027* RSC
Maudelin Willock	2026*
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

RACIAL AND ETHNIC COUNCILS

African American Black Council Executive Committee

Sharon Atkins, *chair*

Winfred Burns, *ministry catalyst for economic development*

Tony Davis, *ministry catalyst for leadership development*
Earl James, *vice chair*
Cedric Nelms, *ministry catalyst for social and racial justice*
Maudelin Willock, *secretary*

Council for Native American Indigenous Ministries Executive Committee

[formal reinstatement by the General Synod Council was not complete as of the date this list was created; council bylaws are nearing completion and executive committee should be elected soon]

Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries Executive Committee

Jae Hyun Ahn
Peihuang Chen, *vice president*
Felix Fan
Jelty Ochotan
Leonardy Poluan, *president*
Narayana Das Rendla
Ancela Fransisca Rumokoy, *past president, ex officio*
Melanie Situmorang
Jui-Lin Ou Yang

Global Council for Hispanic Ministries Executive Committee

Jonatan Basora
Fabio Sosa, *president*
Martin Torrealba
Maria Vera

COMMISSIONS

Christian Action

James Dekker	2026	Ecumenical - Reformed
Anne Elzinga	2026*	
Leah Ennis	2024	
Rodney Haveman	2025	
Edward Lungu	2025*	
Doug Ogden	2026	Ecumenical - ELCA
Bradley Prince	2026*	
Dianna Smith	2024	
Thomas HungYong Song	2026	
Cameron Van Kooten Laughead, <i>moderator</i>	2024*	
Mashona Walston	2025	

Christian Discipleship and Education

Ellen Balk	2025
Rebecca Koerselman	2026*
Patricia Simmons	2025
Mark Swart, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Bradley VanderWaal	2024*
LaCosta VanDyk	2026
Jason White	2024

Christian Unity

Dale Buettner	2024
Nathan Busker	2024
Carlos Corro, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Stacey Duensing Pearce	2025*
Anthony Elenbaas	2026* Ecumenical - CRCNA
Robert Hoffman	2026
Carol (Kitt) Jackson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2026*
Jeffery Lampen, <i>secretary</i>	2026*
Kim Pavlovich	2025
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

Christian Worship

Rosalyn De Koster	2026
Kent Frens	2024*
Cory Grimm	2025
Ronald Rienstra	2025
Irving Rivera	2025
Beverly Robinson	2026
Troy Van Beek, <i>moderator</i>	2024*

Church Order

Brian Andrew	2024
Amanda Bruehl	2026
Philip De Koster	2026
Christopher Jacobsen, <i>moderator</i>	2024
Howard Moths	2025*

History

Aric Balk	2026
Corstian Devos	2026*
Katlyn DeVries, <i>moderator</i>	2025
Daniel Meeter	2024
Douglas Shepler	2024

David Zomer 2025*

Judicial Business

Brion Brooks, *vice moderator, secretary* 2024 RSMAM
Brienne Marriott 2025 RSFW
Erin Parker, *moderator* 2025* RSA
William Peake 2026 RSH
Edward Thornton 2024 RSMAt
Carl Visser 2024 RSC
Susan Vogel-Vanderson 2025 RSGL
Susanah Wade 2026 RSNY

Nominations

Tricia Berry, *secretary* 2024 RSH
Ock Kee Byun 2024* CPAAM
Lawrence Dove, *vice moderator* 2026* AABC
Nancy Gillis 2024 NAIM
Linda Gold 2025 RSA
Suzanne Hart 2025 RSGL
Dwayne Jackson 2024* PP, GS
Dylan Kallioinen 2026 RSMAM
Albert Plat 2024 RSC
Christopher Poest 2026 RSMAt
Patricia Sealy, *moderator* 2024 RSNY
Jael Serrano-Altamirano 2025* GCHM
Eddy Alemán (*general secretary*) *Ex officio*
Vacancy 2025 RSFW

Race and Ethnicity

Rolfi Elivo Lopez 2024 GCHM
Nathan Gullion 2026 NAIM
Earl James, *secretary* 2025
Stephen Kim 2025* CPAAM
Young Na 2026*
Nathan Pyle, *vice moderator* 2026*
Riana Shaw Robinson 2024
Kelvin Spooner, *moderator* 2024* AABC

Theology

Lyle Bierma 2026 Ecumenical – Reformed
Steven Bouma-Prediger 2026*
James Brumm, *moderator* 2025
William (Ruggles) Church 2025
Nathan Longfield 2026

Micah McCreary	2024	
Carlos Santos	2026	Ecumenical observer - ELCA
Douglas Scholten	2025	
Sara Tolsma	2026	
Matthew van Maastricht	2025	
Robert Whittington	2024	
Vacancy	2024	

Women

Philip Bakelaar, <i>secretary</i>	2024	
Kristin Brouwer	2026	
Florence Dekker	2026*	
Cedric Nelms	2025	
Claudette Reid	2024*	
Debra Rensink, <i>moderator</i>	2025*	
Barbara Spooner	2024	
Mark Waterstone	2025	

AGENCIES

Board of Benefits Services

Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		
Beryl Banks	2026	
Lynn Barnes	2025*	
Ralph Condis	2024*	
Timothy Cumings, <i>president</i>	2026*	
Lucio Flavio Rodrigues, <i>vice president</i>	2025	
Clair Hoeksema	2027*	GSC Designee
Judith Nelson	2023	P, GS
Wayne Otten	2024	
Seth Weener	2026	

Church Growth Fund, Inc. Board

Elba Arias-Lopez, <i>secretary</i>	2025	
Michael Bos	2026*	
Joel Bouwens, <i>vice president</i>	2025	
Mark Ellingson	2026	
Michael Molling	2026	
Ronald Rukambe, <i>president</i>	2025*	
Diane Smith Faubion	2024	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency Board of Trustees

Gerald Baraza	2025	
---------------	------	--

Scott Christiansen	2024*
Norma Coleman-James, <i>secretary</i>	2025*
Susan Converse	2026
San-Yi Shirley Lin, <i>vice moderator</i>	2024*
Jonathan Opgenorth	2024 GSC Representative
Jacqueline Valdez	2025
Cathleen Wolff, <i>moderator</i>	2025*
Lyle Zumdahl	2026
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

Israel Camacho	2024
Norma Coleman-James	2025* MFCA
Gregory Dunlap	2026* NBTS
Victor Folkert, <i>secretary</i>	2025
Daniel Gillett, <i>moderator</i>	2026*
Kristen Johnson	2024* WTS
Micah McCreary	NBTS president
Carol Mutch, <i>vice moderator</i>	2025* CPAT
Chad Pierce	2026*
David Schutt	MFCA interim executive director
Cora Taitt	2024*
Felix Theonugraha	WTS president
Kimberly Van Es	2024* GSC Designee
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

ECUMENICAL DELEGATIONS

Christian Churches Together

Judy Nelson (executive committee)

Christian Reformed Church (Reformed Collaborative)

Eddy Alemán
Christina Tazelaar

Creation Justice Ministries

Robin Suydam (board member)

Churches for Middle East Peace

Laura Osborne (board member)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Dale Buettner (Church Council)

Formula of Agreement

Eddy Alemán

Global Christian Forum

Stacey Duensing Pearce (young adult consultant)
Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (executive committee)

National Council of Churches

Eddy Alemán (governing board)
Jeffery Lampen (Christian Education Table)
Carol (Kitt) Jackson (Faith and Order Table)
Laura Osborne (Interreligious Table)

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Vacancy (Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations)

Reformed-Catholic Dialogue

Eddy Alemán
Monica Schaap Pierce
Laura Osborne

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Lisa Vander Wal (executive committee)
Chelsea Lampen (CANAAC secretary)

World Council of Churches

Eddy Alemán
Stacey Duensing Pearce (Central Committee and young adult consultant)

INSTITUTIONS

New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees

Valerie Arthur	2025*
Angelita Clifton	2026
Samuel Cruz	2026*
Henry Davis III	2025

Gregory Dunlap, <i>vice moderator</i>	2024* RSMat
Cambria Kaltwasser	2026*
Denise Kingdom Grier	2024* RSGL
Therese McCarty	2025*
Felicia McGinty	2026*
Steven Miller	2025
Michael Morris, <i>secretary</i>	2024 RSFW
Abigail Norton-Levering, <i>moderator</i>	2025* RSA
Zachary Pearce	2025
Albert Plat	2026 RSC
Wilfredo Rodriguez	2025*
Ming-Chen (Grace) Rohrer	2024
Elizabeth Testa	2024 RSNY
Anthony Vis	2026* RSH
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

Western Theological Seminary Board of Trustees Elected by the General Synod

**Note: Due to Western's shift in relationship with the General Synod in 2022, its board now contains three General Synod-approved trustees.*

Kate Bolt	2025
Rebecca Renner Anderson	2025
Lisa Vander Wal	2025*

COLLEGES

Central College Trustees Affirmed by the General Synod

Mark Ellingson	2024
Steve Sikkink	2024
Judith Vogel	2024

Hope College Trustees Elected by the General Synod

Eddy Alemán	2026
Llena Chavis	2024*
Nathan Hart	2025*
Michael Pitsenberger	2026
Matthew Wixon	2027*

Northwestern College Trustees Approved by the General Synod

Eddy Alemán	2026*
Wayne Van Heuvelen	2025*
Gerald Van Roekel	2027

A CHURCH ORDER PRIMER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A PARLIAMENTARY AND PROCEDURAL PRIMER

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 10 of the Book of Church Order states, "The rules of order of the General Synod shall be those set forth in the most recent edition of Robert's Rules of Order except as is otherwise specified in the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod" (2023 edition, p. 127). Following is an explanation of some of the procedures and rules that the synod adheres to as it conducts its business.

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

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

4. Terms

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

5. Procedure for addressing the synod

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

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

FUNCTION OF GENERAL SYNOD COMMITTEES

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

Committee of Reference

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

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

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

Advisory Committees

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

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

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

Plenary Discussion

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

ELECTION OF PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF GENERAL SYNOD

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

Procedures for Election

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

Election of the President

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

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

Election of the Vice President

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

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

Duties of the President and Vice President

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE BYLAWS AND SPECIAL RULES OF ORDER

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

www.rca.org/bco

THE FORMATION OF GENERAL SYNOD

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

A. Seating of Delegates

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

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

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

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

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

GUIDE TO COMMON RCA ACRONYMS

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

Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life, and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ's mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (*Book of Church Order [BCO]*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2023 edition, p. 73]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2023 edition, p. 110]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, refer to the Bylaws of the General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2023 edition, pp. 110-111]).

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to the General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources

given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod's 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod's program agency.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

As part of its adoption of the agenda, this General Synod will be asked to adopt a modification of the rules related to consideration of CO 24-4 (see pp. 246-281). CO 24-4 is a significant and complex change to the *Book of Church Order* that the Commission on Church Order has developed at the request of the restructuring team. Due to the complexity of this set of proposed amendments, any additional proposed amendments are very likely to have “ripple effects” that will require changes to multiple other areas of the proposed amendments.

In order to give the Commission on Church Order time to identify and process the various ramifications, the body is asked to set a deadline of 4:30 p.m. local time on Friday, June 14, for submission of any proposed amendments from the floor to CO 24-4.

Delegates will spend time in discussion groups on Friday morning, and consideration of CO 24-4 is anticipated to begin during the evening session on Friday, June 14. The proposed deadline gives delegates time to process following their discussion groups while also giving the Commission on Church Order time to prepare for any proposed amendments, if any, so that the body is able to consider the full ramifications of any further changes.

EC 24-1

To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook, including the deadline for amendments to CO 24-4 as explained in this report.

The Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2023 edition, p. 107]).

The general secretary will report on classes' payments of General Synod assessments and will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the *Book of Church Order*

The General Synod of 2023 adopted and referred to the classes for approval one amendment to the *Book of Church Order*. The amendment is recorded in the *2023 Minutes of the General Synod* as noted. Forty-five classes were eligible to vote on these amendments (per *BCO*, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2b [2023 edition, p. 77]). As of April 10, 2024, 6 classes had not reported votes to the Office of the General Synod on the question of whether to approve the amendment. The votes of the other 39 classes, as reported in writing by the classes' stated clerks, were as follows:

<i>Book of Church Order</i> Amendment	Disapproved	Approved
1. Updating the Method for Assessment Calculation for Union Churches (<i>MGS 2023</i> , CO 23-1, p. 189)	0	39

The amendment received the approval of the required two-thirds of classes, and so it is presented here for final declarative action.

EC 24-2 To declare Amendment 1 to be approved for incorporation into the 2024 *Book of Church Order*.

The 2023 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the next stated session of the General Synod the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod:

Corresponding Student Delegates from General Synod Agents—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 5 (MGS 2023, CO 23-2, pp. 190-191)

Composition of the Commission on Theology—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9a (MGS 2023, TH 23-1, p. 229)

EC 24-3 To declare the amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod specified in CO 23-2, adopted in first reading by the 2023 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2024 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 24-4

To declare the amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod specified in TH 23-1, adopted in first reading by the 2023 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2024 *Book of Church Order*.

GSC Appointment of Interim General Synod Treasurer Between Sessions of the General Synod

When the GSC's former chief financial officer (CFO) and treasurer, Jillisa Teitsma, left the employ of the GSC at the end of August 2023, Lisa Stover stepped in as interim chief financial officer during the search for a new CFO. At that time, the GSC took action to appoint Lisa as the interim treasurer of the General Synod in order to empower her to fulfill the role she was asked to take on. The GSC did this in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, as the GSC is tasked with "administer[ing] the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2023 edition, p. 73]).

The GSC anticipates taking a similar action at a May 8 special Zoom meeting. It will appoint Tony Schmid as the interim treasurer of the General Synod, so that Tony is able to fulfill his new role as chief financial officer during the time between the beginning of his employment and the 2024 stated session of the General Synod in June, when the General Synod can officially appoint him as its treasurer.

According to the bylaws of the GSC, the Church Growth Fund, the Board of Benefits Services, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, the appointed treasurer of the General Synod is the treasurer of each of the four respective boards, as well (GSC bylaws: Article VI, Section 6.1; Church Growth Fund Bylaws: Article VI, Section A; Board of Benefits Services bylaws: Article V, Section 5.5; MFCA bylaws: Article IV).

Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V). The General Synod has historically appointed the GSC's chief financial officer to serve as the treasurer of the General Synod. Tony Schmid began his service as the GSC's chief financial officer on April 22, 2024, and thus the General Synod is asked to appoint him as its treasurer.

EC 24-5

To appoint Tony Schmid as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

General Synod Meeting Location

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2025 is the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona. The 2025 meeting of the General Synod is planned to

take place on June 5-10. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

Land Use Acknowledgement

The 2021 General Synod, in its adoption of CA 21-1, instructed the GSC to “annually state a land acknowledgement for any location in which General Synod meets” (*MGS 2021*, p. 203). The Commission on Christian Action assisted in the preparation of this acknowledgement.

We respectfully acknowledge that the land on which the 2024 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America meets is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples, who were removed from their ancestral lands, often by governmental entities, and usually by violent means. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes; Tucson is home to the Tohono O’Odham and the Yaqui. We acknowledge their history in this place and lament any role the Reformed Church in America or her members may have played in their displacement.

OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The General Synod Council operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” (goals) that have been established by the General Synod. Initially, those goals were related to Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, *Transformed & Transforming*, and has continued to refine those policies since that time. Most recently, at its March 2024 meeting, the GSC adopted significant edits to all of its ends policies in order to clarify and focus them. This work was encouraged by the expert in policy governance from whom the GSC has received training in recent years. Policy governance also supports the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “executive limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through policies concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff. All GSC members receive training in policy governance. The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance.

RCA Salary Structure for Fiscal Year 2024 (October 2023–September 2024)

The GSC policy (EL-8) pertaining to staff compensation states, “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow

jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market.”

The GSC compensation program allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the supervisor, employee, and Human Resources. As responsibilities change or when there is an open position, the job description is reviewed, updated as needed, and reevaluated to ensure that it is still classified in the correct range. The program incorporates geographic differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions. This approach has become more important as we have more and more employees working remotely. Positions are benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors. The GSC reserves the right to transfer an employee to another position or increase or decrease an employee’s job specifications based on business need.

There are 13 salary ranges that span between 11 and 23. Grade 11 represents the most entry-level positions, and Grade 23 represents the highest level, held by the general secretary. The majority of positions fall within the middle ranges (14 to 17).

Staff are evaluated annually by their supervisors. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff who are accountable to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following table represents the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2024. The ranges are utilized to establish beginning wages and annual salaries and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee. Most employees’ salaries fall in the mid-range of the table. The following table represents Grand Rapids-based staff; this table is adjusted for cost-of-living differences for staff who live and work in other areas.

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN					
2023-2024					
ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE					
GRADE	LOW	25%	MID	75%	HIGH
11	\$24,960	\$27,620	\$30,280	\$32,940	\$35,600
12	\$32,240	\$35,880	\$39,520	\$43,160	\$46,800
13	\$35,200	\$38,975	\$42,750	\$46,525	\$50,300
14	\$41,800	\$46,950	\$52,100	\$57,250	\$62,400
15	\$47,000	\$52,800	\$58,600	\$64,400	\$70,200
16	\$56,000	\$62,900	\$69,800	\$76,700	\$83,600
17	\$61,000	\$68,510	\$76,020	\$83,530	\$91,040
18	\$66,500	\$74,688	\$82,875	\$91,063	\$99,250
19	\$79,000	\$89,625	\$100,250	\$110,875	\$121,500
20	\$89,500	\$101,550	\$113,600	\$125,650	\$137,700

21	\$101,376	\$118,257	\$135,138	\$152,019	\$168,900
22	\$115,983	\$135,237	\$154,492	\$173,746	\$193,000
23	\$144,662	\$168,697	\$192,731	\$216,766	\$240,800

Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its *BCO*-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years. According to *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2023 edition, p. 111), one of the GSC’s responsibilities is

To review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that the necessity of continuation shall not be assumed.

The GSC adopted a new commission review process in March 2017 and completed several annual cycles of review under the new process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process was put on hold while in-person meetings were paused. Coming out of the pandemic, the GSC reviewed and updated its commission review process to account for the fact that a larger percentage of RCA meetings will be held electronically going forward, and there will no longer be a joint in-person meeting of the GSC and commissions every fall. The GSC approved the updated process at its October 2022 stated meeting. The updated process can be found as an appendix to the GSC’s October 2022 meeting minutes, which are posted at www.rca.org/gsc.

The review of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, originally scheduled for last year, is presented below. Due to a resignation on GSC of one of the two members of GSC assigned to the review team for the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, that review was not able to be completed in time to bring to the 2023 General Synod when originally scheduled, but it has since been completed and approved by the GSC for presentation to this General Synod.

Two commissions were scheduled for review during the 2023-2024 review cycle (Year B, according to the GSC’s review process): the Commission on Christian Action and the Commission on Christian Unity. GSC brings one of those two reviews this year: its review on the Commission on Christian Action. At its March 2024 meeting, GSC voted to postpone the review of the Commission on Christian Unity to the fall 2024 meeting of the GSC (GSC 24-19). The GSC review team was unable to meet with members of the commission by the time of the March meeting, and the GSC felt that the review would be more accurate and complete once the review team is able to speak with the commission.

Review of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

On February 20, 2023, Yong Bok Kim and Harris Van Oort met with Kelvin Spooner, the moderator of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) via Zoom. He shared that CORE continues to be very active as it meets every two months via Zoom and has a full in-person meeting annually. It currently has a full membership.

A great deal of the work of CORE was presented to the 2022 General Synod, when for the first time in the history of the RCA, the General Synod adopted CORE's more complete antiracism policies. The details of those policies are stated in CORE's report to the 2023 General Synod.

The work of CORE this year has focused on moving those policies from paper into the hearts and minds of RCA members and into a place where they are reflected in RCA structures. The commission's effort is to share the antiracism policy more broadly so it can be lived out in RCA structures. Kelvin indicated he was open to any help or suggestions from the GSC that would assist informing the structures in the RCA to implement the policies.

The work of CORE is meeting all the *BCO* responsibilities in a positive way. Also, in view of the RCA's increased global engagements, the work of CORE is increasingly important.

EC 24-6 To approve the continuation of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity.

Review of the Commission on Christian Action

“The lion has roared—
who will not fear?
The Sovereign Lord has spoken—
who can but prophesy?”
-Amos 3:8

The Commission on Christian Action (CCA) continues to be a much-needed voice and a vital resource for greater awareness, understanding, and action for the RCA denomination and all congregations of the RCA. Throughout these past five years (and since its inception), the work of the CCA has called us in godly ways to consider a multitude of needs and concerns within our world and continues to challenge us to act as faithful disciples of Christ.

Over the past five years, some of the good work the CCA has engaged in includes resources for lament for the RCA's lack of response to violent tragedies of injustice; evaluating and becoming more involved in addressing issues of food insecurity; engaging more deeply in antiracism training; addressing the needs of refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers; caring for the environment; and resourcing churches and individuals around mental health. Looking to the future, the CCA feels the need

to continue to live out its mandate by helping the church understand more deeply and become more fully engaged in addressing the growing concerns of spiritual abuse, especially at the hands of church leadership.

This commission remains a vital component of the life and witness of the RCA. Therefore, we submit the following recommendation:

EC 24-7

To approve the continuation of the Commission on Christian Action (CCA); and further,

To commend the CCA for its work in being a vital voice and an important resource for Christian action to the Reformed Church in America.

Transfer of Congregations Across Regional Synod Lines

According to *BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 (2023 edition, p. 69), General Synod approval is required when a church is transferred between two classes that are in different regional synods. The most efficient way for this transfer request to come to the General Synod is through the GSC. (Depending upon the timing of the request, such transfer requests could also potentially be brought to the General Synod by means of an overture or new business.)

The GSC has been asked to bring four such transfers to the 2024 General Synod. In all four cases, the congregations are located in Texas, and they are requesting transfer to the newly formed International Classis of Texas in the Regional Synod of the Heartland.

The GSC agreed to bring this transfer request, provided that confirmation of agreement was received from all affected parties. As of April 8, 2024, the office of the General Synod had received signatures of affirmation from both classes, both regional synods, and all four congregations, indicating that they are all in agreement with this transfer.

EC 24-8

To transfer Cantico Nuevo Ministerio Internacional in Humble, Texas; Iglesia Nueva Vida in Plano, Texas; Iglesia Oasis Internacional in Carrollton, Texas; and Iglesia Reformada Impacto in Pittsburg, Texas, from the Classis of the Americas in the Regional Synod of the Far West to the International Classis of Texas in the Regional Synod of the Heartland.

Opportunities and Implications of Church Multiplication Outside North America

One role of the GSC is to keep its ears open to the concerns of people in the RCA. One concern expressed in recent years relates to the RCA becoming a “global denomination,” specifically recognizing churches outside the U.S. and Canada as part

of the RCA, with the potential of having classes and regional synods in other parts of the world.

There are currently 11 organized churches outside the U.S. and Canada that are part of RCA classes, in addition to a number of church plants:

- 1 organized congregation in the Dominican Republic, which joined the Classis de las Naciones in February 2023
- 1 organized congregation in Chile, which joined the Classis of the Americas in February 2023
- 9 organized congregations in Venezuela, which joined the Classis of the Americas in November 2023

The RCA has had only one classis outside North America in its history: the Arcot Classis in India (1854-1902). Eventually the churches in that classis joined a denomination headquartered in India.

Though global engagement has been a value of the RCA since the nineteenth century, only in the last decade has “global” church planting or “global” church adoption been a stated value of denominational staff leaders. A 2019 revision to GSC policy ends included this policy: “The RCA will foster a sustainable movement of church multiplication through starting new congregations and equipping church planters both locally and globally.”

As the GSC reviewed its ends policies this past year, what concerned the GSC is that the General Synod has not directly discussed the opportunities and challenges associated with having RCA assemblies outside the United States and Canada. A change of this magnitude should be addressed at the General Synod level.

The GSC sees both the opportunities and challenges of the RCA having member assemblies outside the U.S. and Canada. As doors have opened, often through existing relationships between immigrant leaders now living in the U.S. and church leaders in other countries, many see these opportunities as Spirit-led. At least four RCA classes have strong relationships with churches outside the U.S. and Canada, including additional churches interested in joining the RCA. Whereas the RCA may have wisdom to share in areas such as doctrine and polity, the RCA can learn from these international partners how God is working through God’s people in other countries and cultures. Moreover, having working relationships with leaders and churches in other countries is much easier than in the past thanks to the Internet.

However, there are questions to process if the RCA continues in this direction:

- Does the RCA’s work in international church planting align with the principles of RCA Global Mission?
- How can we avoid paternalism, part of the history of Western missionary efforts?
- How can our engagement in other countries respect and account for the work of our ecumenical partners in those countries?

- How do responsibilities such as pastor training and supervision, required compensation and benefits, and participation in covenant shares manifest themselves for churches in other countries?
- What other practical considerations need to be addressed? For example—
 - If there are middle assemblies entirely in countries outside the U.S. or Canada, there may be legal differences in different countries that may necessitate *BCO* differences.
 - It is currently a provision in our *BCO* that the General Synod pays for delegate travel only from the continental U.S. and Canada. Would this provision need to be changed, and what would be the financial implication?
 - Might there be visa and/or other documentation requirements for delegates coming to a General Synod from outside the U.S. or Canada? Whose responsibility would it be to research and provide/certify the correct documentation along with any attendant costs?
- Do recent splits in other international Protestant denominations (e.g., Anglican Communion, United Methodist Church) have anything to teach us?

The General Synod staff has limited resources (time, money, energy). Where should resources be invested?

These are not insurmountable questions, but they represent real concerns and questions as well as real opportunities that should be discussed honestly and openly so that we have shared expectations and understandings around our partnerships, resources, and equitability. The GSC presents this recommendation not to try to stifle the work of the Holy Spirit but rather to ensure that we approach this matter in a way that promotes equity, unity, and the growth of the kingdom of God for all involved: the RCA and all of its assemblies, all those interested in joining with the RCA, and our existing global and ecumenical partners.

Other denominations are recognizing similar opportunities and challenges. At the request of the Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) Council of Delegates, the CRCNA formed a Global Vision Team to consider a suitable framework for missional partnerships between classes and international churches. This team is in the process of drafting their findings and recommendations.

Given all these considerations, the GSC thinks it would be wise for the General Synod to form a task force that can gather information from Reformed theology, history, church order, current classis engagements, and Global Mission experience, then bring recommendations to the General Synod of 2025.

Therefore, at its October 2023 meeting, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to the General Synod (GSC 23-76):

EC 24-9
To form a task force to study the opportunities and implications of having Reformed Church in America assemblies beyond

North America. The task force should include members from the Commission on History, the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Theology, General Synod Council staff from Global Mission and church multiplication, and classes in relationship with churches beyond North America. The task force should bring recommendations to General Synod 2025 for church multiplication outside North America in the RCA.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod Council (GSC), the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), and the Church Growth Fund (CGF). The Office of Finance strives to ensure that financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods as together we carefully manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

2023 Annual Audits

The 2023 financial statements of the GSC, BOBS, RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, and CGF were audited by Plante Moran, PLLC, certified public accountants. All corporations and the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The GSC’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity, reviewed the post-audit letters from the auditors, and reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. The American Institute of CPA’s Statement on Auditing Standards no. 137, The Auditor’s Responsibilities Relating to Other Information Included in Annual Reports, prevents the provision of any link to the audited financials within the General Synod workbook. Including a link would require having the entire General Synod workbook audited; both the timeline and cost of this are prohibitive. Financial highlights of each corporation are presented below. For more information, please contact the Office of Finance.

Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2023

General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC’s total income was \$15.5 million and expenses totaled \$14.4 million, resulting in net income of \$1.1 million. This income was primarily due to an increase in the value of investments of nearly \$3.0 million (an increase of approximately \$6.6 million from last year). Total net assets were \$41.8 million, of which \$19.9 million is without donor restrictions and \$21.9 million is with donor restrictions.

The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—covered 55 percent of the GSC’s costs. Assessments provided 26 percent of GSC’s costs and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated and restricted funds, is presented in the following chart:

REVENUE BY FISCAL YEARS ENDING SEPTEMBER 30

	2023	2022
Contributions and Grants	\$7,904,835	\$8,467,716
Assessments	\$3,712,317	\$5,542,829
Other Income*	\$3,923,142	\$(2,961,610)
TOTAL INCOME	\$15,540,294	\$11,048,935

*Includes investment gains/(losses) and fees for services provided to related entities

Contributions and grants decreased by \$560,000 from 2022. New grant income from the Employee Retention Credit of \$455,000 was offset by decreases in other grant income of \$176,000. Donations to Global Mission also decreased by approximately \$600,000. Decreased giving for U.S. and international disasters accounted for approximately half of this reduction.

Assessments decreased by approximately \$1.8 million due to the large number of churches leaving the denomination.

Other income increased by approximately \$6.9 million due primarily to the appreciation in market values of investments. The endowment fund increased 9.8 percent (net of fees) for fiscal year 2023, and the fixed income portfolio began to realize increased returns due to the raising interest rate environment.

The chart below shows expenses by functional category and is followed with a summary of each functional expense category.

EXPENSES BY FISCAL YEARS ENDING SEPTEMBER 30

	2023	2022
Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry	\$3,092,188	\$3,436,560
Global Mission	\$7,081,806	\$7,125,651
Work of the General Synod*	\$2,090,943	\$2,573,033
Ministry Support Services	\$2,167,725	\$2,149,773
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$14,432,662	\$15,285,017

*Includes GSC, General Synod, and the Office of the General Secretary

The GSC's total expenses decreased from the prior year by \$850,000.

- The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry expenses decreased by approximately 10 percent due to unfilled vacancies and eliminated positions. Global Mission expenses did not change significantly from 2022 to 2023.
- Work of the General Synod expenses decreased because two General Synods were held in fiscal year 2022, and only one in fiscal year 2023.
- Ministry Support Services expenses did not change significantly from 2022 to 2023.

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—403(b) Retirement Program

As mentioned above, audits for the 2023 fiscal year were performed by Plante Moran, PLLC, certified public accountants. The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program and Support and Investment funds were audited separately from the BOBS General Fund and non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan. The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program statements are presented on a modified-cash basis, as this presentation is a more accurate reflection of the financial status of the plan. As of September 30, 2023, the date of BOBS' most recent audit, \$282 million is held in participant accounts in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. In fiscal year 2023, participant and employer contributions to the plan were \$9.3 million, and \$6.7 million was reallocated from the non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan. Distributions to participants totaled \$13.8 million for the same time period.

Together as a denomination, we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute at least 11 percent of the eligible salaries of RCA-ordained ministers to their retirement accounts each year. An estimated \$552,000 has been identified as funds that have not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2023. BOBS staff continues to work with ministers, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with *Book of Church Order* Formulary No. 5 requirements.

For additional information about the retirement plans, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

Board of Benefits Services—General Fund

The BOBS' General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, assistance and retiree chaplains programs, and financial education and well-being programs for active and retired RCA-ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially healthy, with \$28 million in net assets as of September 30, 2023. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2023 with a net surplus of \$2.5 million. Investment earnings on reserves and endowments amounted to \$2.8 million, and other revenue generated \$1.8 million. Administration costs for the retirement plans, which are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program and the RCA Retirement Plan accounts, totaled \$308,000 in 2023, and is included in the other revenue noted above.

Effective January 1, 2022, BOBS implemented a fee reduction for participants from 19 basis points (bps) to 10 bps. Since 2012, the administrative fee has dropped by 30 bps. Earnings from the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund, a decrease in operational expenses, plus investment earnings from other sources and increased values in the retirement plans allowed for BOBS to administer its programs at a reduced fee. Participants were not charged administrative fees for July, August, or September 2023.

Support for the assistance and retiree chaplains programs came from the final quarter of a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance grants and retiree chaplains' ministry expenses were \$506,000 in 2023. The premiums received for life and long-term disability insurances cover the costs of administering those insurances. Financial education and well-being initiatives were funded by annual endowment income and grants from the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

For additional information about the BOBS' General Fund, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

Church Growth Fund (CGF)

The CGF makes affordable-rate loans to current and former RCA churches and related agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by current and former RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return.

As of fiscal year end, September 30, 2023, the CGF ended fiscal year 2023 with \$79 million in total assets, including over \$31 million in cash and short-term investments and \$47 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by \$28 million in savings certificates and \$51 million in net assets (capital). The CGF had a net surplus of \$2.3 million. Interest on loans amounted to \$2.3 million, and the CGF earned \$1.6 million in net investment income. The CGF contributed \$633,500 to the GSC to be used for grants related to church plants, church revitalization, and next generation mission scholarships. Since 2018, the CGF has operated under a goal of being able to contribute up to 50 percent of net operating income annually back to the denomination.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association. For additional information about the CGF, see the report of the Church Growth Fund in this workbook.

Investments

The corporate investments of the GSC, BOBS, and CGF are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the GSC Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise. The GSC Investment Advisory Committee makes recommendations for changes to investment policy or management to each RCA board for consideration.

Excess Operating Reserves

Since December 2017, the operating reserves of the GSC, BOBS, and CGF are being managed by Telemus Capital, LLC, an investment firm based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. Telemus Capital, LLC, allows for the segregation of funds for each RCA corporation. The corporate investments for each RCA entity may then be further segregated and managed under two separate investment policies. The first policy, invested only in fixed income, is the secondary liquidity source after cash and savings for the RCA entity and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays 1-5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The second policy, allocating assets to longer duration fixed income and equities, is the third source of liquidity for the RCA entities and uses the benchmark for fixed income investment returns of the Barclays Intermediate Government Corporate Bond Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Telemus Capital, LLC, was \$32.6 million at September 30, 2023.

Endowment Funds

The GSC manages \$24.7 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the GSC date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the GSC Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index.

In addition to the GSC and CGF, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2023, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed \$955,000 to the GSC; \$36,000 to the CGF; and \$159,000 to organizations associated with the RCA. If you are interested in setting up an endowment for the benefit of the GSC or your local congregation, please contact the RCA's Office of Advancement (advancement@rca.org).

BOBS also manages an endowment fund valued at \$23.9 million. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the GSC Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. In 2023, approximately \$768,000 was distributed from the endowment fund to the BOBS' General Fund.

RCA Retirement Plan Investment Options for Participants

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for the BOBS' retirement plans. In collaboration with the GSC Investment Advisory Committee, in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement plans. BOBS and the Investment Advisory Committee are assisted in this task by outside retirement investment consultants from Creative Planning Retirement Services.

Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant's retirement age as well as 18 diversified mutual funds, including three environment, social, and governance (ESG) investing options. As of April 1, 2024, a self-directed brokerage account was added to allow participants to invest in funds not currently offered in the investment lineup. As of December 31, 2023, 73 percent of the participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds; an additional 6 percent are enrolled in the Fidelity Personalized Planning and Advice (FFPA) program. The total market value of the mutual funds held in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program was \$304 million, with an additional \$184 million in the non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan at September 30, 2023.

For additional information about the retirement plans, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

Planned Giving Programs

The GSC manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling \$1 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and recordkeeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts. This fund is in a wind-down phase. Those wishing to establish a charitable gift annuity benefiting the RCA or a local RCA church may contact the Barnabas Foundation or the RCA's Office of Advancement to do so.

Church Growth Fund Investments

The CGF invests a portion of excess operating cash in four fixed-income accounts and two equity accounts. As of September 30, 2023, Telemus Capital, LLC, the Barnabas Foundation, and LVM Capital Management, Ltd., manage these funds. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

Socially Responsible and Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) Investing

The investment policy statements for each pool of corporate investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms. These

policy statements do not apply to the RCA Retirement Plan and RCA 403(b) Retirement Program assets.

BOBS currently offers three ESG funds to its participants in the Retirement Program. In addition, the newly offered brokerage account offers a greater variety of ESG funds for participants who are interested in investing in funds that align with their personal values. Participants who wish to learn more about ESG investing, the ESG funds available, and the brokerage link may visit www.rca.org/benefits/investment-options-in-the-retirement-plans.

Two General Synod actions (CA 21-6, *MGS 2021*, p. 206; ONB 21-9a, *MGS 2021*, p. 119) taken in October 2021 were related to ESG investments. Both actions were tasked to the GSC Investment Advisory Committee for follow up. The GSC Investment Advisory Committee created an ESG subcommittee to specifically review these actions. The subcommittee membership includes the moderator of the Commission on Christian Action and continues to meet annually.

The subcommittee recognizes that the industry standards for ESG ratings and definitions are a work in progress. The criteria and scoring methods are constantly evolving. There is also a significant amount of pushback, both political and regulatory, regarding ESG standards. The subcommittee does not believe that the RCA is behind the industry standard on incorporating ESG criteria into our corporate investment policies. In this frequently changing environment, the GSC Investment Advisory Committee is being cautious and prudent and continues to believe it is not a good time to integrate ESG criteria into our investment policies. We are committed to balancing investment growth, fiduciary responsibility, and our ESG impact.

2024 Budget Process

Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming and GSC Ends Policies

The general secretary has identified ministry priorities that are in line with the GSC's ends policies. These include church ministry initiatives related to Transformed & Transforming, global mission, church multiplication, and a multicultural, multiracial, and multigenerational future for the RCA that is freed from the sins of racism, sexism, and ageism. The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry encapsulates the work to further these ministry initiatives. GSC staff focus on equipping churches and church leaders in these areas so that they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. Budget managers developed 2024 budgets with the aim of making sure that we are utilizing resources wisely in light of decreased assessment revenue.

The covenant shares and contributions provided by RCA churches and members enable the GSC staff to come alongside RCA congregations in many ways, start new churches, and reach people with the love of Christ through RCA mission efforts. For more on how the RCA's financial resources were used in ministry during the past year, please see the reports in this workbook on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry and on Global Mission.

General Synod Council Operating Budget Process

The GSC operating budget is primarily funded by covenant shares, contributions, and operating reserves. Operating expenses for BOBS and CGF are covered under separate budgets. The 2024 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from covenant shares, contributions, investments, and other income. On January 1, 2024, covenant shares was implemented to replace per-member assessments. In June 2023, the General Synod approved a covenant share percentage of 2.7 percent of contribution revenue noted on line 21 of the 2022 Consistorial Report Form (CRF) for the 2024 calendar year. \$415,000 of covenant shares was earmarked for Theological Education, and \$30,000 was reserved for future General Synod initiatives. The fiscal year 2024 budgeted assessment revenue to the GSC (excluding the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency [MFCA]) is \$2.8 million, representing a decrease of \$600,000 from the 2023 budget.

Contributions to the On Mission Fund are unrestricted contributions to the RCA. For 2024, contributions to the On Mission Fund are budgeted at the same amount as 2023. Based on Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares pledged to support missionaries, and a reduced number of missionaries in the field, Global Mission expects to see an overall decrease in contributions of about \$400,000 compared to prior year giving.

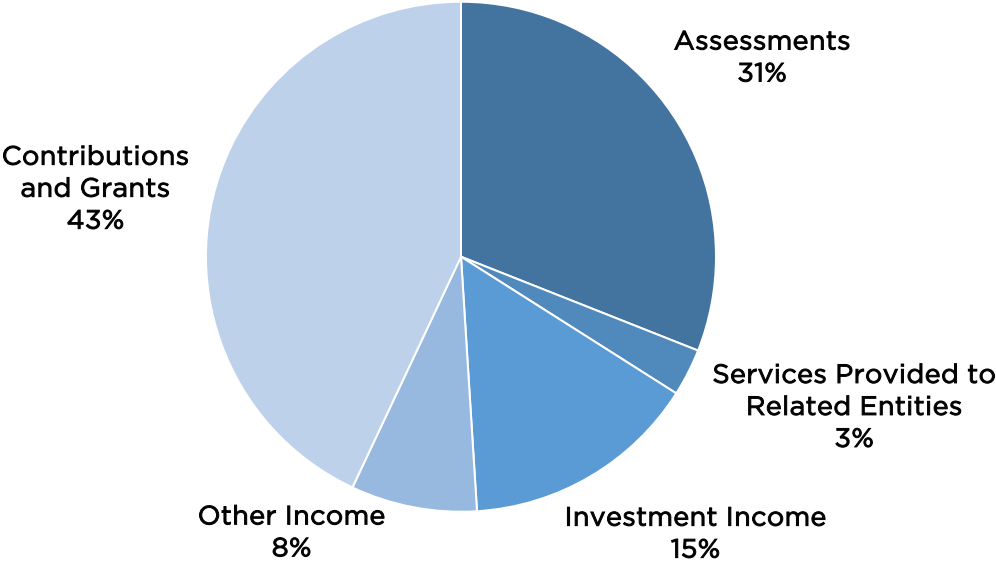
Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 71 percent of the total budget. The remaining 29 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.

The 2024 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about \$1.1 million. This deficit included a planned draw on reserves of \$105,000 for the MFCA.

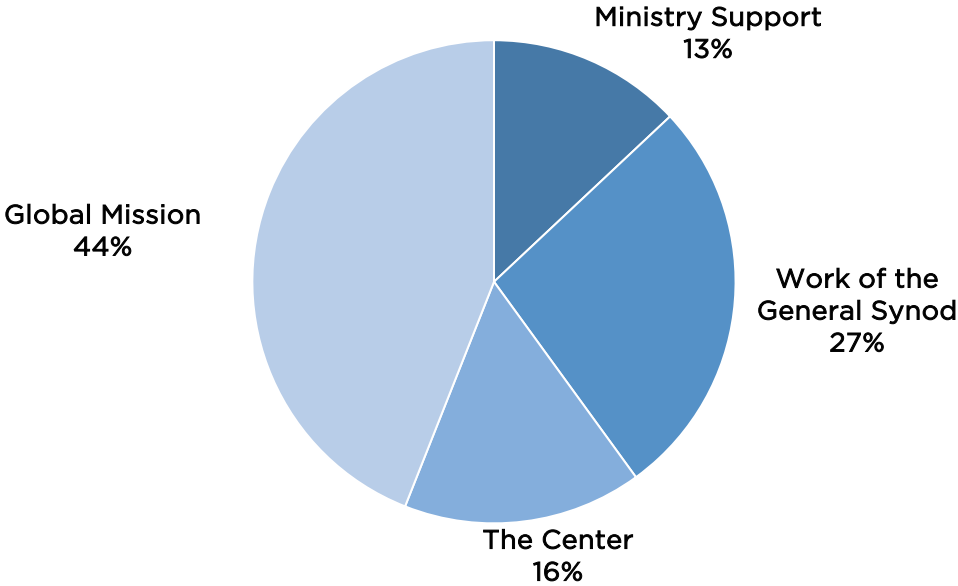
General Synod Council 2024 Fiscal Year Budget

The charts below show the budgeted operating income and expenses for 2024. This budget includes the work of the strategic ministry priorities identified by GSC through its ends policies, the work of the General Synod, and ministry support services. The budgets do not include donor-restricted activity.

2024 GSC BUDGETED INCOME
Total \$9.4 Million



2024 GSC BUDGETED EXPENSES
Total of \$10.5 Million



In addition to the operating budget, gifts and grants designated for specific purposes typically provide about \$4 to \$5 million annually. These specific purposes include funds for disaster relief, Global Mission projects, grants from foundations, and other projects beyond the scope of operational work.

In January 2024, the general secretary, in consultation with the Strategic Leadership Team, began the process of developing a three-year plan to balance the budget. In the summer of 2024, staff will finalize the 2025 budget, which will be based on the approved covenant shares percentage rate and other estimated revenue for 2025. We are expecting a drop in revenue based on a planned reduction in the covenant shares percentage, as proposed by the restructuring team. The budget will remain focused on fulfilling the priorities of Transformed & Transforming, including the GSC's ends policies of equipping leaders, global mission, church multiplication, and multicultural, multiracial, and multigenerational future in impactful and measurable ways.

2025 Covenant Shares

As noted earlier, 2024 was the first year that classes were assessed utilizing the covenant share method. The June 2023 General Synod approved a covenant share percentage of 2.7 percent (of Line 21 of the CRF; including the 10 percent increase/decrease limits per church explained below) to provide funding for GSC, theological education, and the establishment of a fund for future General Synod initiatives. Classes and regional synods also assess churches, but those assessments are not covered in this report because they are not proposed by the GSC or approved by the General Synod.

In an effort to move toward the covenant share cap that is coming as a recommendation from the restructuring team to the 2024 General Synod, the GSC is recommending a reduced covenant shares rate of 2.5 percent for the calendar year 2025. The GSC will calculate the amount due from each classis based on the total contributions received by each church within its bounds, as reported on Line 21 of the Consistorial Report Form (CRF), multiplied by the General Synod-approved percentage rate. As stated in the original motion adopted by the General Synod defining the covenant shares method (see EC 19-9, *MGS 2019*, pp. 51-52), the change in the total dollar amount of a church's covenant shares will be limited to no more than 10 percent, either up or down, over the previous year's covenant shares amount.

Clerks were able to make adjustments and corrections to CRF information submitted by their congregations until April 15. Preliminary calculations indicated a covenant shares rate of 2.5 percent will generate approximately \$3 million of assessment revenue. This represents a decrease of approximately \$100,000, or 3.2 percent compared to the 2024 assessment.

To find out more about covenant shares and how they provide funding to the denomination, please review the following resources on the RCA website:

www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials and www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials/why-pay-covenant-shares.

Proposed Utilization of Covenant Share Revenue

The GSC has an operating budget deficit (excluding Global Mission and the MFCA) of \$931,000 for fiscal year 2024. The general secretary has developed a plan to balance the budget by fiscal year 2027, while also reducing the covenant shares rate to the 2.0 percent that is being recommended by the restructuring team. (While that recommendation from the restructuring team has not yet been adopted by this General Synod, the general secretary's plan proactively assumes that it will be, as this produces a more conservative budget plan.)

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommended to the GSC a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$415,000, allocated in the following manner:

- \$15,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split evenly among the three theological agents.

PFOB's original recommendation to the GSC was to keep the theological education assessment for 2025 at the same dollar amount as the previous year; however, due to the anticipated decrease in the overall covenant shares amount as well as the need to work toward balancing the GSC budget rather than continuing to use reserves, the GSC's recommendation to the General Synod includes a lower amount for theological education, in alignment with the general secretary's three-year plan to balance the budget.

The general secretary's plan assumes that the assessment for theological education is reduced 50 percent (\$207,500) for 2025. The plan also reduces operating expenses and the budget deficit by approximately \$650,000 in 2025. The three-year budget plan includes no further reductions to the theological education assessment beyond the 50% reduction in 2025, but it does include further reductions to expenses in future years. As of December 31, 2023, PFOB had a balance of unspent funds of approximately \$39,000 at its disposal, and according to the formula it originally proposed to GSC, it would receive an additional \$15,000 in 2024. Given the existing balance in its account, PFOB may choose to split the entire reduced theological education budget among the three agents this year.

If the general secretary's plan is implemented, the \$3 million in covenant share revenue for 2025 would be allocated in the following manner:

- \$30,000 of the assessments collected will be reserved for General Synod initiatives. This fund was initiated in 2024 and will continue to be set aside and carried forward year to year unless the General Synod takes action to use a portion of the funds for a specific purpose. If a General Synod action requires funding that exceeds the amount available in this fund, an additional assessment would need to be voted upon.
- \$207,500 for theological education

- \$2,762,500 for GSC

The assessment of \$2.8 million will provide an estimated 57 percent of the 2025 budgeted operating revenue to the GSC (excluding Global Mission and MFCA). This is down from 60 percent in 2024. Contributions and grants, investment income, endowment distributions, and fees for services provide the remainder of the budgeted operating revenue to the GSC. The GSC budget includes funding the ministry priorities that are in line with the GSC's ends policies. The GSC budget also includes funding the work of the General Synod—the annual General Synod meeting, GSC meetings, commissions, and racial and ethnic councils—as well as general and administrative support services.

Assessment revenue has declined significantly in the past five years due to churches leaving the denomination. In calendar year 2020, the GSC received \$6 million in assessment revenue. The GSC staff have made several budget reductions in anticipation of this significant decline in assessment revenue and plan additional cuts to obtain a balanced budget. These cuts will take the form of both personnel and non-personnel reductions. Variance from the general secretary's plan—including if the General Synod decides against reducing the theological education assessment to the proposed \$207,500—will result in additional personnel reductions. In the summer of 2024, staff will finalize the 2025 budget, which will be based on the approved covenant shares percentage rate and other estimated revenue as well as using a significantly smaller portion of our unrestricted operating reserves.

The GSC, general secretary, and the GSC staff realize the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations. We commit to careful stewardship of the funds with which God has blessed us.

Covenant Shares Recommendation

The GSC recommends that the General Synod approve a 2025 covenant shares rate of 2.5 percent of Line 21 of the CRF, with 10 percent increase/decrease limits per church. Of the assessments collected, \$207,500 would be provided to theological education, and \$30,000 would be reserved for future General Synod special initiatives.

F 24-1

To approve a General Synod 2025 covenant shares rate of 2.5 percent, of which \$207,500 would be provided to theological education, and \$30,000 would be reserved for future General Synod special initiatives.

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON ADVANCEMENT

The advancement team's responsibility is to encourage churches and individuals to generously give of the financial resources God has entrusted to them in support of the mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The team coordinates all General Synod Council (GSC) fundraising efforts while striving to develop and strengthen relationships with donors, potential donors, church leaders, business allies, and others that will inspire financial partnerships, but also promote the mission and vision of the RCA.

Team members raise financial support through outright cash gifts, will bequests, life income plans, and grants. These funds are primarily given as a result of personal solicitation on the part of an advancement team member and/or a member of the GSC staff's Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) or via direct mail appeals. The team's primary fundraising responsibility is to raise money in support of the On Mission Fund. Twenty-five percent of all On Mission Fund giving supports RCA Global Mission, and seventy-five percent of all On Mission Fund giving supports the General Synod Council and the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry comes alongside groups of RCA churches to strengthen and support existing congregations and new churches in the following areas:

- Race relations and advocacy
- Leadership development
- Disability advocacy
- Women's transformation and leadership
- Discipleship building and training
- Church planting and multiplication
- Local missional engagement
- Next generation engagement

The center is a place of connection and curated resources, for the purpose of making disciples who make disciples, and to the glory of God, whose mission we follow. In addition to supporting the work of the center, the On Mission Fund supports the ongoing work of RCA Global Mission. Your gift to the On Mission Fund makes ministry possible.

Advancement team members work with GSC staff in seeking to secure financial resources that enable the RCA to further its work. We seek to secure mutually beneficial partnerships that allow us to continue our work while providing the finances to do that work well—money following mission. Such mutually beneficial partnerships the RCA enjoys are with the Lilly Endowment Religion Department (Economic Challenges Facing Pastoral Leaders, Generation Spark, and Renovations) and the RCA Church Growth Fund (Flourishing Churches Grants, congregational revitalization, church multiplication grants, and Next Generation Missional Engagement Scholarship Fund). We thank God for these partnerships and pray God will open more of these doors in the future.

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God's people. In fiscal year 2023, 51 percent of the RCA's total revenue was received via voluntary support (contributions, grants, and Partnership-In-Mission [PIM] shares). For a brief synopsis of the 2023 budget, please refer to page 26 of the most recent Ministry Impact Report (October 2022 through September 2023). You may request a Ministry Impact Report by calling 616-541-0881 or by emailing advancement@rca.org.

The advancement team has also taken on responsibility for leading the strategic goal (one of several goals set by the Strategic Leadership Team for 2023-2024 using the Entrepreneurial Operating System framework) of personally connecting with every RCA minister of Word and sacrament who is currently serving in an RCA congregation prior to the end of the current fiscal year for the purpose of establishing a relationship. These integral connections are being made by several different GSC staff members, either via phone or in person. While making the connection, staff are asking three primary questions of each pastor and cataloging their responses: first, how are you doing (or, better stated, how is your soul)? Second, how may the RCA walk alongside you? And third, are there others pastors in your network of support that would benefit from a call similar to this? The collective responses to these questions are being synthesized for common themes and possible ministry directives for the RCA center staff. We, the GSC staff, believe this is an important step into building and maintaining support and camaraderie with those with whom we serve.

The ongoing funding structure of the denomination relies heavily upon the generosity of individual donors, foundations, corporations, and churches that give over and above covenant shares. We remain truly grateful for all those who have chosen to invest in the mission and ministry of the RCA.

The RCA continues to partner with Barnabas Foundation for resources around estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift management. The easiest gift, and oftentimes the gift with the most impact, is the gift that is made through your estate plan. For information about how you can include the RCA in your final estate plan or how you can receive income for the remainder of your lifetime from a planned gift that will benefit the RCA at the time of your passing, please contact Larryl Humme at lhumme@rca.org or 708-778-3780.

The mission and the ministry of the Reformed Church in America only happens because of the generosity of people like you throughout the denomination. Please consider including a gift to the RCA in your regular giving and/or in your estate planning. For more information on how to make a gift, please visit www.rca.org/give or contact one of our team members:

Larryl Humme, director of advancement: lhumme@rca.org or 708-778-3780
Natalie Lopez, executive assistant to the director of advancement:
nlopez@rca.org or 616-541-0881

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

*Note: The General Synod Council (GSC) considered both parts of this report from the African American Black Council (AABC) at its March 19-20, 2024, meeting. The GSC's responses, including related recommendations it is bringing to this General Synod, can be found immediately following this report on pages 78-84 of this workbook. The racial and ethnic councils are advisory councils of the GSC; as such, their recommendations are made to the General Synod Council, not directly to the General Synod. This General Synod will vote on the recommendations in bold immediately following this report—recommendations coming from the GSC.

Introduction

The African American Black Council (AABC) made the following recommendation to the General Synod Council (GSC) in the AABC's March 2023 report:

To direct its racial and ethnic councils to, individually, review the *BCO* and develop specific ideas to alter, eliminate, or replace any article or section that would result in making those portions of the *BCO* more antiracist and culturally inviting for their groups.

GSC made that direction.

On September 19, 2023, the AABC forwarded its recommendations and specific ideas to GSC.

In an October 24, 2023, letter to the AABC, Kim Van Es, GSC moderator, thanked the AABC for its response. The GSC requested that recommendations that contain specific changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* be returned to the GSC.

In the same letter, moderator Van Es requested additional information about the AABC's recommendations that were broader than *BCO* revisions. She wrote that GSC suggested "prioritizing and developing specific initiatives" for those recommendations.

The GSC requested both sets of recommendations be forwarded to GSC by December 31, 2023.

The AABC recommendations will be presented in two parts. Part 1 focuses on specific *BCO* revisions. Part 2 focuses on recommendations that are broader than *BCO*-specific revisions.

Part 1: Recommendations for Specific Changes to the *BCO* Related to Antiracism

AABC Recommendation #1 to GSC

BCO location: Preamble, Paragraph 3.

Current *BCO* language:

Second, there is only one ministry and that ministry is shared by all Christians. The particular ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to preserve it.

Recommended *BCO* language (with changes tracked):

Second, there is only one ministry and that ministry is shared by all Christians. “All Christians” includes everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity, color, or class. Policies, beliefs, and behaviors that, because of race, ethnicity, color, or class diminish the contributions of any Christians must be confronted and changed. The particular ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to preserve ~~it~~ the inclusive meaning embedded in the word “all”.

Rationale for change:

1. The *BCO* was created by Dutch people, for Dutch people. Though the phrase “all Christians” has been in the preamble for many years, “all” historically meant “Dutch” or “Dutch-American.” People of other races and ethnicities eventually became members of the RCA. However, they—non-Dutch people—had to adopt as their own the *BCO*’s Dutch-oriented polity practices. The newness and giftedness that non-Dutch people brought with them were lessened by the practiced application of the *BCO*. That resulted in the non-inclusion of their approaches to polity. Efforts were not made to re-craft the *BCO* into a multiracial, multicultural polity tool.
2. In most classes and churches, people of Dutch and Dutch-American descent make up a controlling majority. Intentionally or unintentionally, contributions of people who are not of Dutch or Dutch-American background have not been given equal consideration. Majority rules without minority wisdom and integrity being safeguarded.
3. Stating that “all Christians” is sufficient is tantamount to the U.S. Founding Fathers’ assertion that “all men are created equal.” The Founding Fathers really only meant, “all landowning white men are created equal.” Decades of advocacy, court cases, and legislation were required to expand the Founding Fathers’ intent about “all men being created equal” to mean “all people are created equal.” A similar expansion is required for the RCA’s intentions about “all Christians.”
4. The *BCO* is the introduction to how the RCA governs its ministry. The preamble is the *BCO*’s first statement about that work. Silence about racism in the preamble can be tantamount to consenting to not addressing or eliminating racist policies, beliefs, and actions in the RCA’s ministry. Silence

about embedded racism supports a passive racist approach that assimilates non-Dutch people. That assimilation denies them the right to bring their whole selves to the denomination's leadership and life.

AABC Recommendation #2 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1

Current BCO language:

The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods. Typically, the "world within which the classis ministers" is comprised of people from various racial, ethnic, class, and color identities. The classis ministries, therefore, should reflect the diversity found within the classis bounds.

Rationale:

Obedience to the Holy Scripture means that ministry is based on the need for Jesus, not on racial or ethnic preferences among the people who need Jesus. Participation in the work of classis, as the classis works within its respective bounds, needs to include people from the geographic community being served. There should be no race-based "us" or "them" when planning, organizing, implementing, resourcing, and evaluating the work of a classis within its bounds. The work of classis must reflect the Holy Spirit's interests in all communities.

AABC Recommendation #3 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11, sub-section f

Current BCO language:

The points of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism shall be explained by the minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The points of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belhar Confession shall be explained by the minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Rationale:

1. The Belhar Confession is the backbone confession supporting antiracism. It is the RCA's only Standard of Unity that clearly and directly guides us toward a future freed from racism and culturalism.
2. Sunday worship services are the optimal times for providing biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical antiracism instruction for leadership, discipleship, and mission for RCA members. Further, antiracism should be experienced and lived as fully integrated into our leadership, discipleship, and mission, not as a stand-alone feature. Hence, the Belhar Confession should do for all of us what the Heidelberg Catechism should do for all of us.
3. In African American and, perhaps, other worship traditions practiced by people of color, stories of God's guidance of us into a racial future grounded in unity, reconciliation, and justice is part of what it means to be children of God. This change further highlights contributions of historically oppressed people to worshiping, living, and working before God. It also encourages white pastors to include stories and biblical narratives important to people of color in worship services.

AABC Recommendation #4 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 14, sub-section e

Current BCO language:

The elders and deacons shall be elected for a term not to exceed five years, the length of the term being at the discretion of the consistory. A classis may, under extenuating circumstances and at the request of a consistory, grant permission for an extension of the term of office of elders and deacons, subject to classis review at least once every five years.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The elders and deacons ~~shall be elected for a term not to exceed five years,~~ the length of the term being at the discretion of the consistory will serve up to two consecutive three-year terms per office. To fill vacant positions, the nominating group will first seek nominees who never served on consistory, or are not members of the greater consistory. A classis may, under extenuating circumstances and at the request of a consistory, grant permission for an extension of the term of office of elders and deacons, subject to classis review at least once every ~~five~~ three years.

Rationale:

1. Some churches that have multiracial memberships often do not experience diverse and equitable, multiracial leadership within the consistory. That is, regardless of how many members of color there are, leadership tends to remain white-dominant. This pattern might be caused by too few people of color being interested in leadership. It can also be a result of not preparing significant numbers of church members to assume leadership. Three-year term limits can open more opportunities for leadership than can five-year terms to a wider racial, etc., diversity of congregational members.
2. Some of our mono-racial white congregations are located in multiracial communities. Active policies and behaviors are not in play to ensure the church membership mirrors the community's membership. The recommended *BCO* change can incentivize intentional congregational policies, beliefs, and behaviors to develop multiracial congregations within those multiracial communities.
3. Other RCA church bodies such as the GSC and commissions have term limits of three years that are renewable for three additional years. This change makes consistorial service consistent with those service opportunities.

AABC Recommendation #5 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1, new section f

Current *BCO* language:

Section f does not exist.

Recommended *BCO* language (with changes tracked):

Classis shall ensure that Ministers of Word and Sacrament serving in its jurisdiction are adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.

Rationale:

1. People living in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal areas often face spiritual, life, and cultural challenges particular to those geographies.
2. While people of color live, work, and worship in all of these geographic areas, members of urban churches tend to be predominately people of color, and tribal congregations are predominately First Nations/Native American people.
3. Paragraph 3 of the *BCO* preamble states the following: "First, the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its head – to announce the good news of his Saviorhood, and extend his Lordship throughout the world." The development of a church's life always is influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives the church's members live and work in. Ministers and commissioned pastors who are unaware of those distinctives cannot best position their declaration of the good news to that church's members or their local mission field.

4. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism can have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices living within those contexts. Such silence can and has undermined the fruitful “announcement of the good news” and extension “of his Lordship throughout the world.”
5. Many local congregations appear to prefer to maintain their historically white or Dutch heritages as opposed to transitioning to embrace changed and changing cultural and demographic contexts. Such preferences can, intentionally and unintentionally, violate tenets of the antiracism policy.
6. Multiracial congregations and classes with African American and other people of color members tend to have consistories that are largely or even all white. Those leadership patterns effectively block the ordination of people of color into leadership positions.
7. Worship choices and patterns likely will insufficiently reflect the cultural rhythms, patterns, and needs of people who are not of Dutch descent, or bring to God in worship the particular challenges faced in urban, suburban, rural, or tribal areas. Such lack of reflection suggests that God is not sensitive to the challenges to life and faith that are particular to particular people groups. If all these matters were considered with fresh hearts, minds, ears, and eyes, the AABC believes some different understandings and approaches to our shared ministry would result.
8. Each area has its own local mission challenges and opportunities. Leadership should be knowledgeable of them and be able to articulate them to God and the congregation in worship.

AABC Recommendation #6 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Sec. 1

Current BCO language:

A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within the classis and under the auspice of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Recommended BCO language (with changes tracked):

A commissioned pastor is an elder who is selected, commissioned, and supervised by the consistory, church, or ministry in which the person will serve. Commissioned pastors are trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within the classis and under the auspice of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. The commission ~~shall~~ may be valid for the period of assigned service. The commissioned pastor must be annually recertified to that service. Successful recertification is to be based on evidence that the assigned service’s constituents are growing faithfully and fruitfully.

Rationale for change:

1. There are a number of qualified elders who are people of color who could be ordained as commissioned pastors but are not. Many times, it appears that the decision not to commission is based in a classis view or policy not to utilize the office. Whether or not a congregation or ministry has the right to a commissioned pastor should be a consistory matter, not a classis one.
2. Reduce classis discretion in this matter, but do not transfer that authority to a higher assembly or body.
3. There appear to be times when commissioned pastors of color are not adequately held accountable by the classis. We know of commissioned pastors of color who do not participate in active coaching, training, and/or do not regularly attend classis meetings. Such persons may not be held accountable for these deficiencies. Classis leaders might not challenge such commissioned pastors out of concern for or fear of being called racist. We are aware of no such deficient commissioned pastors who were decertified.
4. Annual recertification should focus on the following features: satisfactory participation in a regular coaching relationship, completion of expected training, participation at scheduled classis meetings, and increasing faithfulness and fruitfulness within their assigned service.
5. Increasingly, some churches are unable to support the full-time, one pastor/one church model. Pulpits are often left vacant for excessively long periods of time while searching for suitable seminary-graduated pastors. Also, some congregations cannot afford to pay a full-time pastor. A result of both situations can be a decline in the fruitfulness of pastor-less worshiping congregations. Additional pastoral leadership models are needed. Increased use of full-time commissioned pastors, bivocational commissioned pastors, and commissioned pastor teams would benefit and bless more worshiping communities.

AABC Recommendation #7 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2, new sub-section d

Current BCO language:

Sub-section d does not currently exist.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

Classis shall ensure that commissioned pastors serving in its jurisdiction are knowledgeable of and adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.

Rationale:

Same rationale as Recommendation #3.

Part 2: Recommendations on Extra-BCO Matters Related to Antiracism

This report is Part 2 of the AABC's report to the GSC also submitted on December 31, 2023. This report is the AABC's response to GSC moderator Kim Van Es' request for additional information about antiracism recommendations that are broader than *BCO* revisions.

Prioritized Proposal #1

“Learn from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) how they inputted antiracism into all aspects of Seminary life and customize replication of NBTS's best practices for use in assemblies, congregations and denominational staff.” (From AABC report to the GSC dated 9-19-23)

Proposal information gathered from interviews and email exchanges with the following persons. Representing NBTS: Rev. Micah L. McCreary, PhD (president of NBTS), Charles Rix, PhD (interim vice president of academics and dean of the seminary, and director of MA in Theological Studies and Ministry Studies). Representing the AABC: Rev. Dr. Peter Watts (coordinator), Rev. Sharon Atkins (chair), Rev. Maudelin Willock (secretary), and Earl James (vice chair).

The AABC uses the following descriptions of “best practices” for this report:

1. A standard or set of guidelines that is known to produce good outcomes if followed and
2. Related to how to carry out a task or configure something.

The NBTS best practices are provided in three categories:

1. Prerequisites to be owned before an organization can transform into an antiracist one
2. Antiracism practices
3. Ways to deliver and implement antiracism best practices

Category 1 Best Practices – Organizational Prerequisites

1. Clarify the reasons upon which the entity must become antiracist.
2. Continually assert that antiracism is a roadmap, not merely a statement, that directs the entity's future.
3. Identify the sources of courage to continually drive the entity to become increasingly antiracist.
4. Adopt and operationalize organizational traits that promote frequent, safe discussions about racism.

Background and history behind Category 1 Best Practices:

1. NBTS's executive and board leadership recognized NBTS could not survive by largely training only white males. The seminary's financial and missional lives required deep changes in its administration, faculty, and student demographics, cultures, and power sharing practices.

2. At several points, racial-ethnic students charged the administration that their presence was desired only to increase revenues. They demanded greater inclusion.
3. There were strong voices and inertias to keep NBTS as a largely white/Dutch educational institution. Sufficient organizational courage had to be mustered to “stay the antiracism course.”
4. NBTS had to change how it assessed and managed both resource scarcities and abundances.
5. NBTS adopted the following organizational traits as lenses for antiracism progress:
 - a. Integrity.
 - b. Transparency.
 - c. Leave assumptions at the door.
 - d. Do not deny the truths of others.
 - e. Do not take things personally.
 - f. Do not justify positions, either historic or envisioned ones.
 - g. Do not adopt needs to defend positions such that other ones are not welcome.
 - h. Do not romanticize people, places, events, things, or histories.
6. Antiracism is to be embedded in all topics and is the lens through which all institutional decisions and actions are assessed.

Category 2 Best Practices – Antiracism Practices

1. Adopt, post, and frequently use an antiracism statement.
2. Look to God to bring forward expected and unexpected new opportunities for antiracist decisions and actions.
3. Regarding training:
 - a. Encourage members and constituents to participate in antiracism training at least annually.
 - b. Always directly connect training to everyday life experiences.
 - c. Help people identify what they will assume responsibility to prevent regarding racism.
 - d. Approach training as being more than cerebral. Include arts and music.
4. Act out antiracism in intersectional situations.
5. Create safe places to explore racism and be antiracist, and insist on that safety regardless of politics, cultures, and experiences.
6. Encourage each other to own the forms of diversity that make one uncomfortable.
7. Embed diversity in all that is taught about leadership, spiritual formation, and mission.
8. No people group has adequate windows into most of the experiences of other people groups.
9. Conciliation proceeds reconciliation. Develop relationships that can handle stresses and remain resilient.

Background and history behind Category 2 Best Practices:

1. The NBTS antiracism statement is prominently posted around the NBTS building and on its website. The NBTS board of directors repeats and uses the antiracism statement at all board meetings.
2. Every NBTS student has to engage in an annual antiracism training.
3. Training alone is insufficient. It must include opportunities for people to connect what they are learning to their real-life situations and evoke from participants a sense for committing to oppose racist actions, thoughts, and policies.
4. Antiracism is not treated as a stand-alone feature. Racism is expressed in conjunction with other demographic dynamics—economics, nations of origin, education, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc. Therefore, antiracism is lived out intersectionally, both personally and corporately.
5. We often give “favorable points” to people who are “like me” demographically, etc. That tendency is normal for many of us. Therefore, we find we must keep “front of mind” our biases, preferences, and tendencies to see the familiar as normal and the unfamiliar as abnormal or wrong. We must think and live with the knowledge that God lives in front of others who have ways unfamiliar to us just as God does with us.
6. Every NBTS class has some element of antiracism or diversity within it. A fundamental position is that if we do not teach leadership, spiritual formation, and mission with antiracism embedded, then we inadvertently embed racist assumptions and tendencies in how we teach leadership, spiritual formation, and mission.
7. Antiracism work can become uncomfortable. As antiracists, we need to especially and intentionally build into our skill sets resiliency and effective listening.
8. A critical part of living as an antiracist is always looking for and supporting antiracist freedom fighters, allies, and accomplices.

Category 3 Best Practices - Ways to Deliver Antiracism

1. Find or create catalytic events that highlight the needs for antiracism.
2. Embed antiracism into everything the organization does and promote discussions that assess the values for the embedding.
3. Consider trainings in highly focused 15-minute intervals in addition to longer training durations.

Prioritized Proposal #2

“Study the four confessions in the *BCO* to identify specific bridges to antiracism and implement processes to incorporate those bridges into the *BCO* and its bylaws. The bridges can be specifically incorporated into the second article of the *BCO* that outlines the responsibilities of each assembly. This is critically important because policy is only as good as its accountability. An antiracism policy must also be embedded in the *BCO*’s portion on discipline so that when the policy is violated the body can be restored.”

Below are some initial efforts to show bridges that connects antiracism to our confessions into our *BCO*. The focus surrounds a clear understanding of the purposes in methods of discipline as outlined in the *BCO*.

The GSC might appoint a ministry team to identify additional and review the interconnections, and make specific recommendations to the GSC. The AABC is happy to have a representative serve on such a team.

BCO Chapter 2, Part 1 - Discipline. This is the locus for placing the *BCO* antiracism enhancements.

Article 1. Nature of Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sec. 2. The exercise of discipline may take the form of admonition, rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership in the church or from office, deposition from office, or excommunication, as the gravity of the offense in the opinion of the assembly or the judicatory may warrant. Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings. All further steps of discipline—suspension, deposition, and excommunication—are judicial in nature and require the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory. A judicatory may, in the judicial process, impose admonition or rebuke as a form of discipline.

Article 2. Nature of Offenses

Sec. 1. The only matters to be considered as offenses subject to accusation are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. [emphasis added]

The Confessions

Note: The Constitution of the RCA includes the four Confessions. These, in addition to the Bible, dictate the manner by which accusations can be brought forth.

Here are some examples from the Confessions of how and where race-related accusations and offenses can be considered.

Belhar Confession

(Reference numbered section 2, third bullet point of the “We believe” sub-section.)

...unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already

conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted. (John 17:20-23)

Heidelberg Catechism

1. Lord's Day 2, Q+A 4 - Love God and neighbor
2. Lord's Day 3, Q+A 87 - Case for repentance
3. Lord's Day 33, Q+A 89 - To be "genuinely sorry for sin"
4. Lord's Day 40, Q+A 105-106 - "not to belittle, hate, insult..." the roots of murder matter to God, not just the actual actions (envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness)
5. Lord's Day 41, Q+A 107 - Love defined
6. Lord's Day 42, Q+A 111 - "Do whatever I can for my neighbor's good"

Belgic Confession, Article 29

As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.

Critical nature of "notorious"

BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2, Section 3

Notwithstanding Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 2, notorious and scandalous offenses require immediate suspension and/or other action as determined by the responsible body, pending review by the appropriate assembly or judicatory. [emphasis added]

Definitions of "notorious":

1. Merriam-Webster dictionary: "Generally known and talked of, especially widely unfavorably."
2. Cambridge Dictionary: "Famous for something bad."

The Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America are infamous for their racist history including apartheid, participation in the transatlantic slave trade, and anti-abolitionist positions. Therefore, any act of racism should be considered a "notorious" offense. Such acts should require immediate suspension as per the BCO.

Resource:

- “The Dutch Reformed Church and its Contribution to Apartheid,” from the European Academy on Religion and Society (<https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/news/the-dutch-reformed-church-and-its-contribution-to-apartheid>)

BCO Part II

Article 5, Section 11a

The judicatory shall establish such administrative rules for the trial as it deems appropriate to ensure that the trial will be conducted in a fair and impartial manner.

Does the judicatory administering the rules have an equity lens? They should be trained and astute in racial equity, cultural norms, and power dynamics.

Article 2, Nature of Offenses

Section 2: Matthew 18 and power dynamics, especially in racial and ethnic congregations where complaints across intergenerational and gender lines can be downplayed and not taken seriously.

Article 4, Section 4: If a committee is going to hear a complaint involving racial and ethnic parties, the committee should be made of individuals trained and astute in racial equity, cultural norms, and power dynamics.

A Real Impact Story

An elder made an accusation about a Black male staff member having a sexually inappropriate relationship with a young Mexican American female in the church. The staff member denied it. The elder was motivated by a desire to repay the staff member from differences they had with a business deal gone bad. The pastor decided not to engage the conflict, as it was clearly driven by something beyond the church’s jurisdiction. The consistory of all white people, on the other hand, was determined to get to the bottom of it. They wanted to directly ask the woman, a single mom of three children, if she had indeed engaged in an inappropriate sexual relationship with the staff member. The pastor discouraged the ask, but decided to ask the classis for advice. The classis representative sat with the consistory and immediately advised, “ask her.” The pastor and an elder met with the woman. Their questioning cut straight to her soul. Her response was not only a complete denial of the affair, but she also declared her painful disappointment that her church saw her as an adulteress, home wrecker, etc. Years later, she told her pastor that incident was one of her most painful moments in the life of the church she deeply loved.

1. Who made the decision? The white consistory, at the urging of a disgruntled elder toward a staff member, with the white male classis clerk’s approval.

2. Had the two parties been white, would they have so wantonly approached the young woman?
3. Are women of color, especially Black and Brown women, perceived as desirable, promiscuous, exotic, differently than white women?
4. Would it have been different if the gender roles were reversed—a woman on staff was accused of having an affair with a man in the congregation who happened to be a single father?
 - a. Would the classis have advised them to ask him?
5. How do we determine if racial bias influences or guides cross-racial decisions and actions? Where does the power to determine that lie?
6. We all are admonished to rely on Matthew 18:15-17 to resolve differences. However, like in the impact story, there are unspoken biases at play. Those unspoken biases were fueled by unequal power dynamics. The use of Matthew 18:15-17 as a dispute resolving tool without accounting for power imbalances can lead to unjust, unrighteousness, unbiblical, personally devastating decisions and outcomes.

Prioritized Proposal #3

“Develop a racial equity lens that includes assessment of power dynamics to ensure fundamental equity or justice in decisions and actions of the denominational staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions. Use of that lens, or one similar to it, could be incorporated into the *BCO* articles that outline the responsibilities of each assembly. Alternatively, the lens could be recommended to the churches and assemblies by General Synod and required for use by GSC.”

Why develop and use a “racial equity lens”?

Currently, the RCA has an antiracism policy that has little to no accountability for its implementation.

The traditional approaches we use to resolve disagreements tend to not take into account power imbalances in contested situations. Neither do they take into account implicit biases embedded within systems. Contested situations may be between people, or involve group decision-making or the implementation of decisions. Power imbalances can exist in situations involving people of different races, ethnicities, genders, generations, etc. Even resolution techniques based on Matthew 18:15-17 typically might not take power imbalances into account.

A racial equity lens will intentionally assess situations, decisions, and actions for real or apparent power imbalances, and will make recommendations to the decision-making authorities to resolve them.

What is a racial equity lens?

The lens is a group of people trained to a high level of expertise to ask questions to identify racial power imbalances in decisions and actions. They must:

1. Know what racial inequity patterns look like.
2. Be able to identify them in real-time situations.
3. Make recommendations to bring racial equity to disputed decisions and actions.

There might be a small number (perhaps five or six) who can be engaged in smaller groups of two to four around the RCA. Or each assembly, institution, and agency may have its own team of experts.

When should a racial equity group be utilized?

The use of such a team should be triggered whenever a charge involving racism is brought through *BCO* Chapter 2, Part 1: Discipline and Part 2: Complaints. It can also be used when there is any reported violation of the antiracism policy to help bring understanding and healing.

Critical matters going forward

1. The selection of the training provider is crucial. The training provider should be concurred with the racial and ethnic councils and have deep experience with:
 - a. Racial and cultural patterns of communication, etc.
 - b. Facility with identifying racial power imbalances.
 - c. Demonstrated skills at conflict resolution.
2. The selection standards for identifying strong candidates for serving on the racial equity team should be clear, high, and require a positive history of conflict resolution.
3. Delineate how this racial equity lens fits into RCA polity.

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL RESPONSE TO AABC REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At its March 19-20, 2024, stated meeting, the GSC received and addressed both Part 1 and Part 2 of the AABC's report. The GSC expressed its deep appreciation to the AABC for the significant amount of work that the AABC dedicated to providing these reports. The GSC is grateful for the AABC's partnership in continuing to help the RCA move toward attitudes, structures, and processes that embed antiracism in the whole of our life together.

Part 1: Specific Recommended Changes to the BCO

A subcommittee of GSC members (Joshua Scheid, Kim Van Es, and Maudelin Willock) reviewed the seven proposals for *BCO* amendments in Part 1 of the AABC's report, and recommended that the GSC bring five proposed amendments to the *BCO* in response. GSC's response to each of the AABC's seven proposals is detailed below, along with rationale and recommendation for General Synod action, if applicable.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #1

In response to the AABC's first recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-42).

EC 24-10

To adopt the following amendment to the Preamble of the *Book of Church Order* (2023 edition, pp. 3-5) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

The Representative Principle. The power which Jesus Christ bestows upon his church is mediated by the Holy Spirit to all ~~the people~~ of every tribe, tongue, and nation. Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made on~~in~~ their behalf by those who represent them.

Government by Elders. The Reformed churches have sought to follow the practice of the churches whose experience is recorded in the New Testament. The churches then were ruled by "presbyters" or "elders," just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the "teaching elder." Ministers and elders therefore govern the church together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church. Thus also the lines of authority in the Reformed churches move from the local church to the General Synod. This is so since Christ, according to the New Testament, has appointed officers to govern the church under himself. Their authority to govern derives from him even though they are elected by the people. The local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern.

While governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies, the church expresses its full

ministry through all its members in a variety of tasks. Each assembly is charged with determining the nature and extent of its ministry in faithful obedience to Scripture and in responsible concern for the church's mission in the world. Every member, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color, or class, receives a ministry in baptism and is called with the whole church to embody Christ's intentions for the world.

The Equality of the Ministry. The Reformed Church in America uses the term "parity" to describe its concept of the equality of ministers. It is not meant that authority can never be exercised by one over the other. But in every instance this authority will be delegated by the proper body, and the authority will cease to be exercised when the need for it is no longer demanded. The principle of equality pertains also among churches, among elders, and among deacons. The principle of the equality of the ministry, conceived now in its broadest sense as including the functions of the elder and the deacon, is based upon the fact that the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself in such a way that he is, in a sense, the only one holding that office. Every ministerial function is found preeminently in him. By his Holy Spirit he distributes these functions among those whom he calls to serve in his name. Therefore, the church continually seeks to equip, empower, and embrace servant leaders who reflect the full diversity of the body of Christ. The church is called to reform any biases, behaviors, policies, or procedures that diminish the spiritual gifts or contributions of any Christian due to gender, race, ethnicity, or economic class.

Rationale:

1. The GSC agrees with the AABC that explicitly inclusive language should be added to the Preamble of the *BCO*, but we feel as if the point is better made in the latter part of the Preamble.
2. Given the fact that for most of RCA history the majority of members have been people of Dutch descent, it is important in the Preamble to the *BCO* to explicitly state that "people" called to ministry include those from every tongue, tribe, and nation regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color, or class.
3. Given that RCA office holders have historically been majority white men, it is important to explicitly state that leaders should arise from the diversity of the people of Christ.
4. Given the RCA's priority of antiracism and given the RCA's fallenness in this area of corporate life, the commitment to reform should be included in the *BCO* Preamble.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #2

In response to the AABC's second recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-43).

EC 24-11

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1 (2023 edition, p. 31) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 1. The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods. To the extent possible, the ministries of the classis shall reflect the racial-ethnic and socio-economic diversity found within the classis bounds.

Rationale:

The GSC appreciates the aspirations of the AABC's original proposal and offers this adjusted language. In an age of "us versus them," the *BCO* should explicitly guide the planning, organizing, implementing, resourcing, and evaluating work of the classis to take into account the diversity within its bounds. While there may be extenuating reasons (e.g., financial, leadership equipping, etc.) that a classis's ministry cannot always fully reflect such diversity, the work of classis must reflect the Holy Spirit's interests in all populations within their communities.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #3

In response to the AABC's third recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-44).

EC 24-12

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11f (2023 edition, p. 16) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

- f. The points of doctrine contained in the ~~Heidelberg Catechism~~ Doctrinal Standards shall be explained by the**

minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day, so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Rationale:

1. The GSC understands why the AABC wants ministers to preach from the Belhar Confession, but we felt that it would be problematic to name two of our Doctrinal Standards but not the other two.
2. Sunday worship services are an optimal time for providing biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical instruction for leadership, discipleship, and mission for RCA members. Congregants benefit from the teaching of all four Reformed confessions (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, and the Belhar Confession), which are collectively referred to and defined as the "Doctrinal Standards" in the Preamble of the *BCO*.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #4

In response to the AABC's fourth recommendation, the GSC decided to take no action. Such changes are likely to contradict the bylaws of particular churches. The GSC believes that the *BCO* should not more specifically dictate consistory terms in churches.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #5

In response to the AABC's fifth recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-45).

EC 24-13

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 5 (2023 edition, p. 56) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 5.

- a. **The classis shall designate a minister to serve as a mentor to guide, counsel, and model the learning and developmental processes of each newly-ordained minister or, where deemed appropriate by classis, a minister received from another denomination.**
- b. **The classis shall ensure that all enrolled ministers actively serving under its jurisdiction are adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.**

Rationale:

1. Though this added point may appear obvious, ministers in RCA churches have not always been adequately trained to serve sensitively where they have been placed. This context-based training is necessary because the life of a church is always influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives of the community. Ministers well acquainted with those distinctives are best positioned to bring the good news to that church's members or their assigned mission field.
2. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism also have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices in those contexts. Ministers educated in the context and particular struggles of their communities are best equipped to lead with wisdom, grace, and humility.
3. The wording of the new sentence from the AABC's original proposed language is consistent with other language in the *BCO*, and the GSC believes that it fits best in Section 5 of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #6

In response to the AABC's sixth recommendation, the GSC decided to take no action.

While the GSC hears AABC's concerns, it does not agree with the council's proposed change because we believe that the responsibility to commission and oversee commissioned pastors should remain with the classis rather than being the responsibility of individual consistories. There is already significant disparity in the training of commissioned pastors across classes, to which the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) has been working to bring more consistency; moving the responsibility for commissioning and supervising commissioned pastors to individual consistories would likely increase this concern.

The GSC encouraged the AABC to share its concerns with PFOB if it still believes that change is needed, since PFOB is the body charged with working with the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team in "sharing best practices, addressing common problems, and developing creative solutions for the formation of commissioned pastor candidates" (PFOB bylaws, Article II, Section B).

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #7

In response to the AABC's seventh recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-46).

EC 24-14

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2 (2023 edition, p. 61) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

d. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate is knowledgeable of and adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are to be commissioned.

Rationale:

1. The life of a church is always influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives of the community. Commissioned pastors well acquainted with those distinctives are best positioned to bring the good news to that church's members or their assigned mission field.
2. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism also have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices in those contexts. Commissioned pastors educated in the struggles of their communities are best equipped to lead with wisdom, grace, and humility.
3. The wording of the proposed sentence uses language consistent with other places in the *BCO* and recognizes that the person is not yet a commissioned pastor but instead a candidate, which is appropriately reflective of its placement in this particular section of the *BCO*.

Part 2: Recommendations on Extra-BCO Matters Related to Antiracism

Due to a particularly heavy agenda, the GSC was unable to dedicate sufficient agenda time to the second part of the AABC's report to take action; however, the GSC recognizes the work done by the AABC as important and as requiring further consideration and possible action. For that reason, the GSC voted (GSC 24-47) to form a subcommittee to study the second portion of the AABC's report and bring recommendations to the GSC.

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

Introduction

The *Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 3, Section 2b states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.” To that end, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents as well as advocate for the rights of our people while ensuring that we speak up and strategize together on positive strategies of resolving issues that separate us all as God’s people.

CPAAM Annual Consultation 2023 - “Learning Our Names”

CPAAM successfully held its annual consultation meeting on October 2-3, 2023, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS). We are very grateful to NBTS for allowing CPAAM to use its facilities as a meeting place for the two-day duration of the annual consultation. The purpose of the annual consultation this year was to discuss concerns and needs as well as to encourage and support each other with a time of worship, fellowship, and networking.

The theme of this year’s consultation was “Learning Our Names,” based on a book by Sabrina Chan. This theme examines how young Asian American Christians view their identity, relationships, community, and careers as they live as an Asian here in America. We want to thank the leadership of Rev. Kelvin Kong and Mrs. Gerri Yoshida, who led the conversation and discussion of “Learning Our Names” in the annual consultation. We were able to share what it means to be Asian American, learn about the story of our names, cultures, churches, and communities based on our unique diversity, and discuss how we can bring the gospel and the pursuit of social justice in our churches and communities.

We also had Rev. Jeremy Simpson, the RCA’s director of diversity and belonging, as our keynote guest speaker, along with Rev. Young Na from the restructuring team to update us on the RCA’s restructuring plan.

The participants of this consultation meeting appreciated this opportunity to retreat from ministry, be refreshed and renewed, and return to ministry with new insights and resources.

CPAAM Executive Committee

New Officers Elected

As Rev. Fransisca Rumokoy’s term as chairperson ended in the fall of 2023, we elected the following new officers: Mr. Leo Poluan as chair, Mrs. Peihuang Chen as

vice-chair, Mr. Felix (Bo Yang) Fan as secretary, and Ms. Melanie Situmorang as treasurer.

We are so grateful to the following individuals who represented their language groups within the executive committee: Rev. Fransisca Rumokoy, Rev. Jai Hyun Ahn, and Rev. Kelvin Kong. These individuals played a pivotal role in enhancing the CPAAM ministries by offering thoughtful and wise guidance to the executive committee. We also welcome our new representatives of the Indonesian and Indian language groups: Rev. Jelty Ochotan and Rev. Narayana Das Rendla, respectively.

Joint Council Meeting

The CPAAM executive committee felt that the meeting between all the racial and ethnic groups and the joint council that took place on January 20, 2024, in Orlando, Florida, was valuable and productive. Each council learned much from hearing stories and experiences of other racial and ethnic groups. Many were especially touched by Ms. Nancy Gillis, the Native American representative, who shared the history of her people as well as the personal impact on individuals and tribes. We felt inspired that much more must be accomplished for all racial and ethnic groups to work together to dismantle racism within the RCA and to have a strong active presence in the RCA.

Asian American Experiences of Racism

In the ongoing pursuit of understanding and addressing racial dynamics within the church and the denomination, we want to shed some light on the Asian American experiences of racism in the church as part of our report for 2024. Asian American congregants continue to face persistence of racial disparities and are shedding light on instances of discrimination and prejudice within the church and denomination context.

Key highlights from the report include narratives shared by individuals who have faced various forms of racism ranging from microaggressions to overt acts of discrimination. We have faced this in the context of racism and hate crimes that exist in our very own General Synod and even in our local churches. These stories underscore the importance of acknowledging and rectifying the impact of racism on the Asian American community within the church setting.

Despite these challenges, we also capture instances of positive change and initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity. Churches and ministries are increasingly recognizing the need for awareness, cultural sensitivity, and education to dismantle racial biases. Efforts to promote dialogue, understanding, and allyship have emerged as critical components in the ongoing journey toward a more inclusive and equitable church environment in prayer meetings, Bible studies, and more.

By amplifying the voices of those affected and offering practical solutions through our meetings and reports, we continue to fight for dismantling racism, fostering positive change, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive church community for all.

Ministry Updates in CPAAM

Japanese Ministry

The Japanese American United Church has had an interim pastor, Rev. Stanley Wayne, since August 2023. He is focusing on more outreach in the Japanese-speaking community in New York City, such as advertising in Japanese newspapers, better signage in front of the church, and participating in community events like the Japan Day parade. Mrs. Gerri Yoshida continues to be involved in Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings as the Asian leader—a representative voice fighting against racism.

Chinese Ministry

The Chinese members are coming back to in-person services. Preaching stations have been doing well and they are looking for a place of worship. They also celebrated the ordination of Rev. Tiffany Fan on June 25, 2023, as another Asian and female minister at Grace Christian Church in the Bronx! They continue to applaud her leadership and obedience to the call for the ministry of God.

Taiwanese Ministry

Mrs. Peihuang Chen also reported that the Taiwanese ministry in her church recently has a second-generation pastor who does double duty preaching in English and Taiwanese. They are hoping for him to not take on the load of preaching both the English and Taiwanese services, concerned that it might be too much for him to carry. She also said that the Taiwanese churches had their in-person annual joint retreat where everyone could connect and share resources together, and they had a great time of refreshing and renewal at the retreat.

Indonesian Ministry

We are happy to announce the First Reformed Church of New Hampshire, led by Rev. Jely Ochotan. This is a new RCA Indonesian church plant in New Hampshire that began on September 10, 2023. This is not only the first Reformed Church in New Hampshire, but also in the New England region. Praise God!

The Reformed Church of Metuchen has also been growing under the leadership of Rev. Fransisca Rumokoy. Along with that, a new associate pastor, Rev. Ferani Wongkar, was also installed. Rev. Rumokoy continues to be involved in various ministries in the RCA as she is now also serving as the president of the Classis of New Brunswick, and she is assigned to help revive a dying church in the RCA along with all her other responsibilities.

Indian Ministry

The Indian ministry continues to be growing in the RCA. Rev. Savitri Mark from Columbia-Greene Classis was ordained as minister of Word and sacrament on

September 24, 2023, at First Reformed Church in Catskill, New York. She reports this with joy and gratitude.

Rev. Das Rendla continues to serve as the senior pastor at New Hope Community Church of Long Island, New York, as he looks forward to being ordained and installed in the coming months.

Korean Ministry

Ever since the global pandemic in 2020, many Asian churches, including the Korean ministries, are struggling for their members to hold in-person services. Gradually, attendance for in-person services is growing within most Korean churches. It is a huge change for many churches to provide both in-person and online worship services.

Conclusion

The Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) steadfastly upholds its mission to represent the collective vision and voice of its constituents within the Reformed Church in America, as emphasized in the 2024 report to the General Synod Council. CPAAM's unwavering dedication to advocating for racial and ethnic inclusion and economic and social justice and to fostering unity is evident in its diverse initiatives.

As CPAAM continues to amplify voices and provide practical solutions, it remains a beacon for positive change and inclusivity, embodying a steadfast commitment to dismantling racism within the RCA and representing Christ in the ministry of building his kingdom for his glory. Thank you and God bless you all.

Respectfully submitted,
Leo Poluan, chair of CPAAM

REPORT OF THE GLOBAL COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

The *Book of Church Order (BCO)* states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b [2023 edition, p. 109]). To that end, the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents as well as advocate for the rights of our people, all while ensuring that we speak up and work together on positive strategies to resolve issues that separate us all as God’s people.

To the General Synod Council (GSC) of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), peace, God’s blessings, and greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Global Council for Hispanic Ministries (GCHM) submits the following as our report to the GSC for 2024.

The GCHM has continued to support the implementation of GSC policies of Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, Global Mission, and Multicultural and Multiracial Future Free from Racism, and we continue to collaborate in the work of all RCA ministries.

The GCHM held its annual meeting in Houston, Texas, on August 17-19, 2023. The theme for our event was “The Future of the Hispanic Church in the United States.” Over 90 participants attended the event.

The GCHM continues to assist pastors and leaders to get seminary training with New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) and Western Theological Seminary (WTS). We believe in the theological training of our pastors. The number of students who need RCA scholarships continues to outnumber the number of students who are receiving RCA scholarships. This is an area of need that our constituency is facing.

The GCHM continues to work with RCA classes and regional synods (Orange, Far West, New Brunswick, Greater Palisades, Delaware-Raritan, las Naciones, Central Plains, Americas, International of Texas, and other classes) in exploring ways to plant churches. We celebrate the brand new bilingual church plant in Brooklyn Classis.

The GCHM collaborates with church multiplication by educating all classes about the resources available to plant churches. We are also looking for ways to do the same with church revitalization and youth ministry. Furthermore, GCHM works with all racial and ethnic councils and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in ways to support CORE’s promotion of an antiracism culture. The GCHM collaborates with Rev. Liz Testa, director of women’s transformation and leadership, in the implementation of the *Ella es Llamada*—She is Called discipleship movement with Latino churches in the northeast region of the U.S. We are also in the beginning stages of facilitating the same with the southeast region.

The GCHM continues its monthly prayer Zoom meeting every Monday with our general secretary, Rev. Eddy Alemán. Training and relationship building also takes place at these meetings. One of the emphases of our prayer has been intercession for our restructuring team and its recommendations. The GCHM believes that our Lord Jesus Christ is in control of his church and the Holy Spirit is leading and empowering the RCA to lead and innovate into the twenty-first century. We are thankful for each member of the restructuring team and the many hours that they have invested in the process. We have embraced the restructuring team's principles of being Reformed, missional, aligned, diverse, adaptive, and efficient; along with the restructuring team's goal of centering on God's mission globally (global and local), creating a robust leadership structure for pastors and leaders, innovating in credentialing processes without diluting standards and accountability systems. We highlight the call for a contextualized credentialing process as a way to respond to the invitation that the GSC issued to all councils (GSC 23-31) to review the *BCO* to provide specific ideas that will result in a more antiracist and culturally inviting process of credentialing for all Latino pastors.

The GCHM celebrates how the restructuring team has contextualized our Belhar Confession invitation to pursue reconciliation through unity in the midst of a divisive culture, to reconciliation within church and society by leading and witnessing to the world a new way to move forward as a denomination in order to display God's justice.

In conclusion, we are thankful for the work and support of the general secretary, the General Synod Council, and all agencies within the RCA. We pray for our beloved RCA and we are excited to be part of what God has done, is doing, and will do with the RCA. We submit this report to you as we bless you and continue to walk in our call to be disciples who make disciples for God's glory.

Respectfully submitted,
The Executive Committee of the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries

REPORT OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN INDIGENOUS MINISTRIES COUNCIL

The Native American Indigenous Ministries (NAIM) Council met in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, April 24-26, 2023, for the first time in person since 2019.

The meeting started with our interim leadership group that was appointed by the General Synod Council (GSC) to review the draft of the council's bylaws and make updates. Those bylaws have now been forwarded to the GSC, and the GSC was asked to approve them at its March 19-20, 2024, meeting.

On Monday night, we gathered for a meal and devotions along with a time of making new friends and connecting with old friends. Connections and relationships have been our main focus as we work to reestablish our council. On Tuesday morning, we spent time in worship, followed by a time of storytelling and sharing testimonies. In the afternoon, we talked about how our stories intersect with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the importance of the NAIM voice in the RCA. On Wednesday, we had a greeting from the RCA's general secretary, Eddy Alemán, and director of diversity and belonging, Jeremy Simpson. We closed our time together with communion.

NAIM will be meeting again in Oklahoma on April 22-24, 2024.

**Note: At its March 19-20 meeting, the GSC requested that the bylaws drafting team address several concerns at NAIM's April 22-24 meeting and forward an updated draft of its bylaws to the GSC by May 1, 2024, so that the GSC can hold a special session to approve the bylaws and reconstitute the council (GSC 24-40). The GSC's intention is to approve the bylaws and formally reconstitute NAIM prior to the 2024 General Synod meeting.*

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

Since its origins in 1628, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Today, we continue to share stories of how God is at work among us. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, utilizing longstanding communication channels alongside new ones.

Supporting Denominational Priorities

In response to shrinking budgets over the past few years, the General Synod Council (GSC) communication staff have changed the way they work and pared down communication vehicles, focusing on the things that are most important and most valued. This includes communicating about and providing marketing support for key RCA initiatives, including RCA Global Mission and the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. Over the last two years, staff have also assisted with communication and updates from the restructuring team.

Faithward Serves a Growing Audience

A discipleship website the RCA launched in 2019 has reached more than 6.5 million users in its first five years.

Faithward.org, focused on moving faith forward, includes ideas for living out your faith, reflections on Scripture, and resources for your church. In its first year, Faithward helped church leaders connect with resources and spend time in thoughtful reflection about faith. It also engaged people asking big questions like “Who is God?” and “How do I know God’s listening when I pray?” and “How do I know what God wants for me?” Contributors come from across the RCA and sometimes outside it.

As Faithward’s reach grew, it began to shift from a blog site to a resourcing hub for the wider church. The website contains many resources for RCA leaders and church members, but it also serves a much wider audience. In the last year alone, Faithward has reached more than 3 million users, from pastors looking for tools to teens struggling with their faith. In the last year, people have visited Faithward from nearly every country in the world.

What began as a small, experimental ministry has become a digital space for discipleship, spiritual growth, transformation, and connection.

All Faithward content is now available in English and Spanish, and the number of Spanish-language visitors has grown to match site traffic in English. When the site was solely in English, traffic came primarily from North America, followed by Africa. Those continents continue to provide steady traffic, and site visits from South and Central America have skyrocketed.

Popular Faithward content posted in the last year includes a summer series on Sabbath-keeping as a spiritual practice, a discernment toolkit, and a year-long series on innovation that complements the Renovations learning process.

One Faithward visitor shared this comment: “Gracias por compartir tan importante material de mision. Es muy interesante ver la manera como obra de diferentes maneras atraves de las misiones transculturales...” (Thank you for sharing such important mission material. It is very interesting to see how it works in different ways through cross-cultural missions.)

Other Digital Communications Continue

The RCA website, www.rca.org, continues to resource RCA leaders with RCA-specific materials, including creeds and confessions in several languages, liturgies, and information about governance. The website is now fully available in Spanish, Portuguese, and Korean as well as English.

A News and Resources email newsletter provides provide dynamic, responsive resourcing to church leaders twice a month and keeps them connected to what is happening in the denomination. Other email newsletters provide updates related to particular topics or initiatives. Subscribe at www.rca.org/subscribe.

Translation Efforts Continue Across Platforms

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2023 *Book of Church Order* in Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish, a number of other resources have been translated. Recommendations from the General Synod workbook were translated into Spanish for Spanish-speaking delegates beginning in 2022; live English-to-Spanish interpretation is also available at General Synod. Other recent translation projects include updates from the restructuring team, the Pastoral Search Handbook, and welcome materials for new pastors.

Report on the RCA Store

The RCA Store operated as an online, print-on-demand website from 2020 to 2023. Creating the RCA Store and shifting from Faith Alive Christian Resources significantly reduced both production and fulfillment costs for the denomination.

Over the last year, resources housed on the RCA Store were migrated to Amazon.com to further reduce cost, improve customer service, and streamline staff time dedicated to the store.

As with the RCA Store, RCA resources on Amazon are print-on-demand, which requires no inventory. When an order comes in, each item is printed at that time and shipped to the purchaser.

Revenue from sales of resources supports the ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON THE RCA ARCHIVES

A Transformative Vision of the Archives: Informed about the Past, Transforming the Future

Generally, the role of archives is to preserve the legal, financial, historical, and administrative records of a corporate body. The Archives also serve a spiritual purpose in the life of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Our records tell a compelling story: how the Reformed faith is lived in the world.

The current vision for the Archives emerges from the Belhar Confession and continues with denominational progress toward the goals of justice, righteousness, and siblinghood in Christ. This report outlines specific ways that the Archives can contribute to the ever-transforming RCA and how current initiatives in the RCA Archives align with its transformative vision, which is detailed in full at www.rca.org/archives.

Examples of Recent Research in the RCA Archives

The RCA Archives holds materials that serve diverse research interests within and outside of the RCA. We have provided archival materials to the following categories of researchers:

- Rutgers University professors, such as Dr. Edwin Bryant (Religion) and Dr. Haruko Wakabayashi (co-director of Global Asias program, whose class in Japanese culture visited the Archives to do primary research on Ferris Seminary). Dr. Wakabayashi is hosting a conference (March 8) on Rutgers and the Japan Mission.
- Mission researchers, such as Dr. John Hubers, for his biography of Samuel M. Zwemer (founder of the Arabian mission), and Rev. Doug Leonard, former head of the interfaith Al Amana Centre in Oman, researching Arabian Mission co-founder James Cantine, for his PhD thesis
- RCA-adjacent fellows and researchers, such as Dirk Mouw, fellow, scholar of New Netherlands history; Professor Bill Rhoads, professor of architecture at SUNY New Paltz; Rev. Harry Tysen; and Sander Roijackers, a graduate student in economic history
- University-affiliated researchers, such as Dr. Karine Walther of Georgetown University
- Independent researchers, such as John Daniel, whose published work documents how his ancestor, Cornelius Vermeule of Somerset, New Jersey, along with his sons, fought in the Revolutionary War. Many such contributions to American history reside in the Archives.
- Many congregants of churches in the Reformed Church in America seek their baptism records. Others, like the descendants of the Vermeule family, research and write about their ancestors.

Historical Materials and Digital Initiatives

As the oldest corporation in the country, we need to digitize the earliest documents of our four-century history, the Collegiate Church record books. The Archives has just applied for a grant to digitize these records.

Because it documents the history of marginalized individuals and communities, the Collegiate Collection serves the goal of social justice as well as researchers of New Netherlands, colonial, and early American history. In December 2022, the RCA Archives inherited the Collegiate Church record books *Libers A - Z* (books of baptisms, marriages, deaths); ministers, elders, and deacons minutes; ledgers (1730-1942); New York Real Estate documents; and records of the RCA's four-century history.

How does the digitization grant relate to the above-mentioned transformative vision for the Archives? Since the records list enslaved (and freed) persons, this collection fits into the Archives' social justice aims as well as the denominational antiracism initiative. This cultural moment necessitates a clear view of the historical past in order to right its wrongs—and to pursue the denominational goals of justice and righteousness.

Other Historical Digitization Initiatives

NEH Grant (2024-2025). The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) offers an annual Preservation Assessment Grant to support the recovery, repair, and preservation of archival materials, following a rigorous assessment. The NEH confirmed our eligibility for this grant, which we will pursue this year.

State of the Archives

Physical storage. Our vulnerable records are in a climate-controlled storage room in Sage Library. Other records are stored in the basement alcoves, where dehumidifiers eliminate excess humidity. Some materials are stored at off-site storage facilities in Michigan and New Jersey.

Digital storage will be increased to accommodate the volume of digitized materials. Informed by best practices, the Archives will continue to advocate for digitization and digital storage needs.

Additional personnel needs. The archivist desires the addition of one person, at least 5 hours a week, and a summer intern for 15 hours a week.

Equipment and building. A dumbwaiter (elevator to transfer materials between floors) will be repaired this June. This repair project will facilitate archival processing.

Digitizing the Church Herald. The archivist has just initiated the digitization of all issues of the *Church Herald*, the RCA periodical published from 1945 to 2009. The audience for this sociological resource includes theology students, faculty, pastors,

and independent researchers. The next step is to secure hosting by library organizations, to make this journal (and others) available. We are exploring the low-cost hosting provided by a theological library association.

In conclusion, this report details various initiatives that align the witness-bearing history of the Archives with the goal of a just, righteous, and ever-transforming denomination. Onward toward these goals!

REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2021

Response to *MGS 2021*, RF 21-1, p. 94

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should consider the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2024; and further,

To approve the \$0.29 per member assessment to fund the work of this team.

Because the final report of the restructuring team is extensive, its report and recommendations can be found in a separate sub-report on pages 104-146 of this workbook.

REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2022

Response to *MGS 2022*, RE 22-3, p. 238

To direct the General Synod Council to reinstate and recognize a fourth racial/ethnic council for Native American and First Nations Ministries as a council in the Reformed Church in America with all rights and privileges hereto according to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2021 edition, p. 109).

The General Synod Council (GSC) reported to General Synod 2023 that GSC staff had consulted with the Commission on Church Order (CCO) for guidance regarding the steps needed to “reinstate and recognize” the Native American Indigenous Ministries Council (NAIM) as directed in RE 22-3. The CCO advised staff and the GSC that it believed that three things needed to take place in order to consider the council “officially reconstituted”:

1. Writing of bylaws by NAIM and approval of those bylaws by the GSC
2. Designation of the initial members of the council or its executive board
3. A declaration by the GSC that the council is reconstituted

Because the GSC wanted to ensure that NAIM itself would be the primary drafter of its own bylaws (though final bylaws will need to be approved by the GSC, as is the

case for all racial and ethnic council bylaws), at its March 2023 meeting, the GSC appointed a small group of five NAIM leaders—Jeffrey Botella, Nancy Gillis, Nathan Gullion, George Montanari, and Vincea Nez—to draft initial bylaws for the council. They did this over the course of the next year, presenting draft bylaws to the March 2024 meeting of the GSC for approval.

The GSC noted two areas of concern with the originally proposed bylaws. It asked NAIM to revisit the draft to address the concerns noted (GSC 24-40) at NAIM's late-April gathering so that as many of its constituents as possible could be consulted, and then send an updated draft back to the GSC as soon as possible so that the GSC could hold a special meeting to approve the revised bylaws and take action to officially reconstitute NAIM prior to General Synod 2024. The GSC has a special Zoom meeting scheduled for May 8, 2024, shortly after this workbook will be published, at which it hopes to be able to take these actions.

REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2023

Response to *MGS 2023*, OG 23-1, p. 95

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to consider the revision to the *Book of Church Order* requested in Overture 1, and report back to General Synod 2024.

See the report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 239-240 in this workbook.

Response to *MGS 2023*, BBS 23-1, pp. 151-152

To commend “An Equitable Future” to all RCA assemblies in the United States; and further,

To direct the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, in its role as advisor to the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism, to study the paper, to partner with the racial and ethnic councils and the Board of Benefits Services to seek ways to address a more equitable future, and to report back to General Synod 2024.

See the report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in this workbook, pp. 299-300, for information on CORE's work with the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) toward this end. This work is also referenced in the report of the Board of Benefits Services on pp. 193-194.

Response to *MGS 2023*, CA 23-2, p. 157

REPORT OF THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE REGARDING CA 23-2

In its report to the 2023 General Synod, the General Synod's Commission on Christian Action (CCA) said:

Related to these employment practices [a reference to the characterization of people doing work for the GSC as independent contractors rather than employees] is the common use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and non-disparagement clauses in circumstances of employee terminations. It has come to our attention that in many cases of termination of employees who are not protected by unemployment insurance, any severance package given is contingent on the signing of such NDAs. NDAs have received much bad publicity in recent years. In the well-publicized cases of Mars Hill Church and Hillsong, NDAs were used as a means of controlling employees and keeping secrets within the institutions in question. Such documents, at worst, give the distinct impression that the Reformed Church in America may have something to hide. We are not privy to the internal Human Resources and personnel discussions that have made these documents a prominent part of General Synod Council (GSC) staff terminations, but we seek to understand their intention and use so that misunderstanding may be washed away (*MGS 2023*, p. 154).

The CCA included in its report a recommendation, labeled CA 23-2. The General Synod's Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business advised the General Synod to amend CA 23-2 (which the General Synod did), and prior to its adoption the recommendation was further amended on the floor. The final version of CA 23-2 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

CA 23-2

To form an *ad hoc* committee, meeting remotely via Zoom or other technology, to seek further transparency and understanding around the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and unemployment insurance for denominational (GSC) staff. The membership will be made up of at least one person from each of the following groups or GSC staff departments: GSC legal counsel, GSC human resources, GSC financial offices, General Synod Council, the Commission on Christian Action, and the Commission on Theology, along with others who may be deemed appropriate at the discretion of the committee's membership. The committee shall choose a chairperson from its membership who is not a staff member. This committee's purpose will be to understand the current practices affecting GSC staff and seek to bring a legally, financially, and theologically sound recommendation to the General Synod of 2024 (*MGS 2023*, p. 157).

The committee met on several occasions but chose a convener and a notetaker instead of a chairperson. The committee discussed this topic with the GSC's human resources and executive consultant director, and one of the committee's members discussed it with GSC payroll staff. The committee also reviewed materials available from the United States (U.S.) Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and Social Security Administration.

The committee determined the following:

Regarding Unemployment Insurance

As a matter of U.S. federal law, *it appears that churches and other religious organizations cannot participate in unemployment insurance programs.* Relevant sections of the IRS website indicate that tax exempt organizations with employees **generally** are responsible for employment taxes such as federal income tax, social security and medicare taxes, and federal unemployment taxes (www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organizations-what-are-employment-taxes). However, “[p]ayments for services performed by an employee of a religious, charitable, educational or other organization described in section 501(c)(3) that are generally subject to FICA (Social Security and Medicare) taxes if the payments are \$100 or more for the year, are not subject to FUTA (unemployment) taxes” (www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/section-501c3-organizations-futa-exemption). The initially cited page also says the exemption from FUTA cannot be waived. What *is* done in most (perhaps all) states is that a former employee of a 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization may apply to the state for unemployment compensation. The state determines whether the individual is eligible for unemployment compensation, and the amount they would be due. The state then seeks reimbursement from the employer for whatever amount is paid to the former employee. Organizations may be exempt from contributing into a fund, but they are not exempt from paying for unemployment claims approved by the state.

CA 23-2 does not specifically reference either United States or Canadian law. When seeking information regarding unemployment insurance the *ad hoc* committee focused more of its attention on United States law. This was in large part due to the somewhat unique provisions in United States federal law regarding non-participation by churches and other religious organizations. Canadian law provides various benefits related to employment, unemployment, and temporary leaves from employment due to such things as sickness, caregiving, maternity, parenting, and other similar situations. Detailed information regarding such benefits is provided by the Canadian government online at www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei.html. Regarding benefits for unemployed persons, it appears that there is no exception for churches and other religious organizations under Canadian law similar to what exists under United States law.

Regarding Non-disclosure Agreements

Non-disclosure agreements can be “stand alone” documents between an employer and employee during the time of employment, or during some period of time following the end of employment. When such agreements are used following the end of employment, they are commonly part of a broader severance agreement that covers multiple topics, including continuation of certain types of compensation for a limited period of time, non-disclosure of certain types of information (such as trade secrets), and refraining from certain types of communications (such as disparaging comments about the other party). This committee believes that references in CA 23-2 to non-disclosure agreements were intended for “post-employment” situations and has crafted this report accordingly.

Severance agreements and—by extension—non-disclosure agreements are not legally required, and employees are not legally entitled to them. Nevertheless, they are commonly used when employment is terminated. This is a common practice whether or not the termination is agreed to mutually, and regardless of who the employer is (a church or other religious or non-profit organization or some other type of entity).

Reasons for using non-disclosure agreements include the following:

1. If termination of employment has not been mutually agreed to, an employer may require such an agreement as a condition for its provision of post-employment benefits (e.g., continuation of monetary compensation or benefits for a specified time period). Absent such an arrangement, the employer may find itself in a “no win” situation—namely, being criticized by the employee while providing compensation or benefits to the employee (even though not required to do so), while at the same time being reluctant to respond to the employee’s criticism for reasons of public reputation, potential liability, or simply distractions from other things that are more worthy of its attention.
2. Even if the termination has been mutually agreed to, a person’s attitude can change as time goes on, and consequently many of the considerations noted in the preceding subsection may still apply.

While there are good reasons for employers to use non-disclosure agreements, it is also true (as the CCA has noted) that at times non-disclosure agreements may be used for improper purposes. That negative potential does not mean, however, that their use should be abandoned.

The GSC uses severance and non-disclosure agreements, but it appears that no policy regarding their use has been formally adopted by the GSC or incorporated into the GSC’s Employee Handbook.

This committee believes that each termination of employment involves unique circumstances and considerations. Consequently, it is reluctant to recommend that the General Synod instruct the GSC to develop a formal policy regarding the use of severance and/or non-disclosure agreements, or what they should include when used.

At the same time, however, this committee believes that it **is** important that those among the GSC staff who deal with terminations of employment be guided by and attentive to certain principles that should be obvious to all followers of Christ. They include principles of *agape* love, justice, and grace. Indeed, many of these are already put into practice. Examples include allowing for someone to get their full payment for vacation and unearned time even when the employee is not otherwise entitled and allowing benefits coverage to continue through the full month when a termination occurs.

Therefore, this committee offers the following recommendation:

RF 24-11

To instruct the General Synod Council to include in the GSC Employee Handbook a basic, general, simple explanation of the legal situation regarding how unemployment insurance relates to GSC staff and how non-disclosure agreements are used when the relationships to staff members are ended, and to make such information available in a publicly accessible location for such times when inquiries are made by RCA members or assemblies, for report to the General Synod of 2025.

Reasons:

1. While the *ad hoc* committee was able to retain this information with relative ease, it still required an effort. In the absence of readily available information, it is human nature to assume the worst and to imagine plots where none exist. Having this information, perhaps simply reprinted from this report, readily available for anyone who asks will increase transparency and decrease suspicion.
2. While most people would not know to search the *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod* (commonly referred to as the *Minutes of the General Synod*) for this information, a link to this report, either made publicly available or handy for certain staff to share with inquirers, as the GSC sees fit, would answer the need at negligible cost.

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

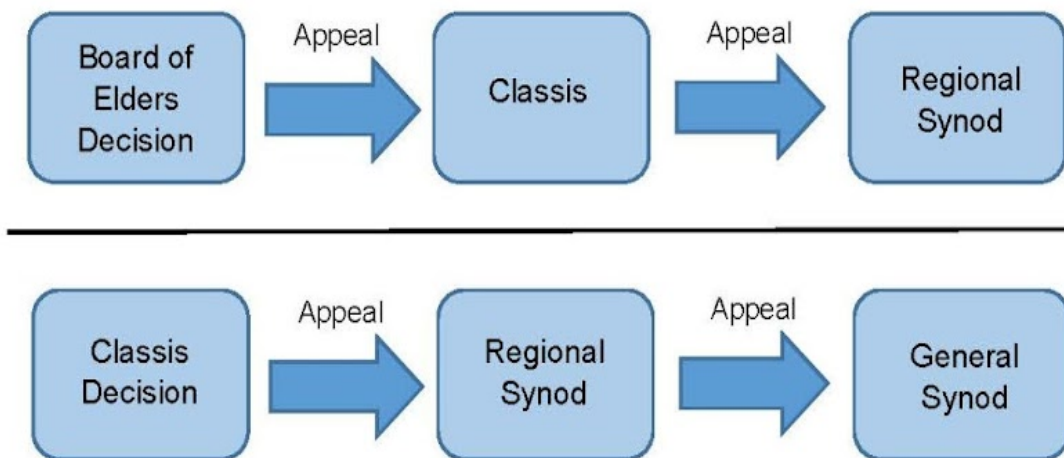
Business. While the amendments were adopted by the 2007 General Synod, they failed to receive approval from the required two-thirds of the classes.

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.

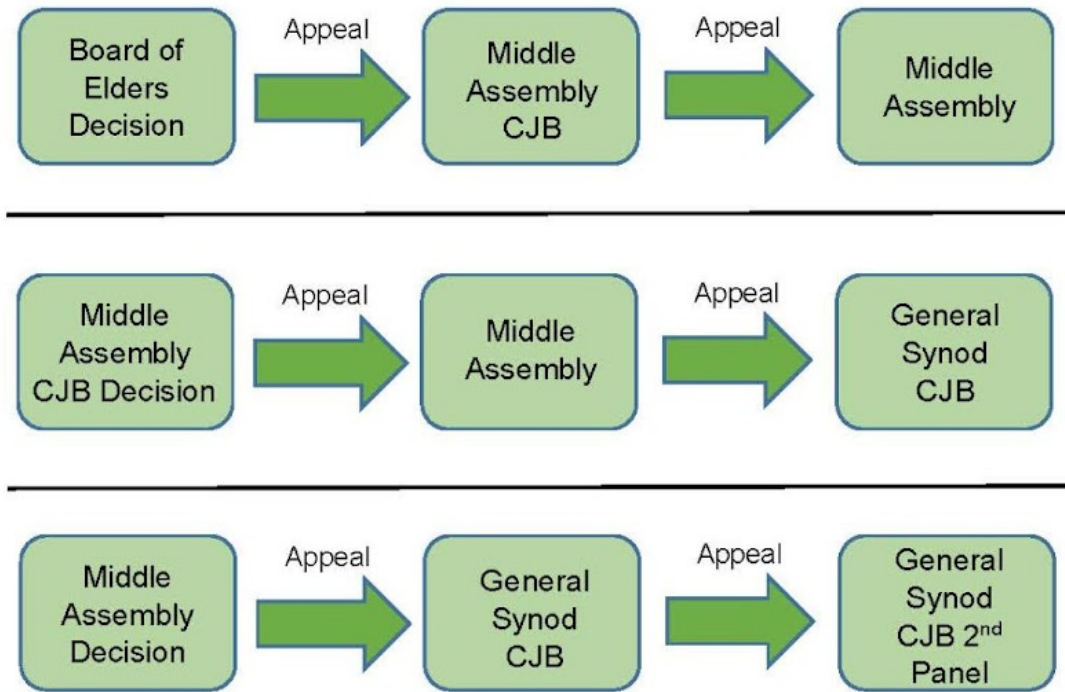
Currently, when someone objects to a decision by a classis (whether it is a decision on a complaint or a charge), the appeal is heard by the regional synod. In the new proposed structure, both the middle assembly (classis) and General Synod will establish a Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) that 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
-------------	-----	-------	-----	-----

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.

References

Janssen, Allan J. *Constitutional Theology*. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000.

Minutes of the General Synod, various years. All volumes can be accessed at www.rca.org/minutes.

RCA *Book of Church Order*, 2023 edition. (Reformed Church Press: New York, New York, 2023.) Can be accessed at www.rca.org/bco.

RETIRED MINISTERS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

During 2023, 46 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service. Those who retired are being recognized by the General Synod through its endorsement of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

EC 24-15

To adopt the following resolution:

These individuals have loved Christ and fed his sheep. They have devoted themselves to spreading the Word and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Their contribution to a needy world is rich beyond measure; their record is on high.

The Reformed Church in America, with admiration, deep affection, and overflowing thanks to God, celebrates their lifelong service.

**Philip Arnold
Latimer, Iowa**

**Kathy Bartels
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

**Beverly Bell Winslow
Glen Head, New York**

**Carl Boersma
West Des Moines, Iowa**

**Bernard Brower
Everson, Washington**

**Kathleen Brumm
Highland Park, New Jersey**

**Richard Christy
Plainwell, Michigan**

**Nancy Claus
Ada, Michigan**

**Bruce Cook
Des Moines, Iowa**

**David DeKuiper
LaValle, Wisconsin**

**Terry DeYoung
Holland, Michigan**

**James Dykstra
Zeeland, Michigan**

**Thomas Fiet
Millbrook, New York**

**F. Peter Ford
Midlothian, Virginia**

**John Haas
Sumas, Washington**

**Robert Hoffman
Voorheesville, New York**

**John Hubers
Holland, Michigan**

**Arthur Hudak
Ballston Lake, New York**

**James Karsten
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

**Ron Klein
Bismarck, North Dakota**

**Kenneth Kolenbrander
Zeeland, Michigan**

**David Kool
Holland, Michigan**

**Keith Krebs
Yucca Valley, California**

**Joseph Loux
Hannacroix, New York**

**Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell
Des Moines, Iowa**

Stephen Mathonnet-VanderWell
Des Moines, Iowa

Rodney Meester
Meservey, Iowa

Nolan Palsma
Liverpool, New York

Phyllis Palsma
Liverpool, New York

Steven Peterson
Granby, Colorado

Dawn Seaman
Manchester, New Jersey

Conrad Strauch
Princeton, New Jersey

Scott Summers
Aplington, Iowa

David Tellinghuisen
Bradenton, Florida

David Theonugraha
San Mateo, California

Karen VandeBunte
Newaygo, Michigan

Lisa Vander Wal
Niskayuna, New York

William VanderWerp
Jenison, Michigan

Richard Van Dop
Marne, Michigan

Michael Van Hamersveld
Byron Center, Michigan

**Timothy Van Heest
Palos Heights, Illinois**

**Donald White
Marion, New York**

**John White
Franklin, Wisconsin**

**Randal Wieland
Peoria, Arizona**

**Barry Wynveen
Geneseo, Illinois**

**Arthur Zewert
Waldboro, Maine**

NECROLOGY

This necrology report covers calendar year 2023.

Name	Date of Birth	Date of Death	Age
Rick Oppenhuizen	December 30, 1952	January 6, 2023	70
Gary Van Koevering	September 16, 1942	January 8, 2023	80
Randall Bosch	May 4, 1931	January 17, 2023	92
Sylvester Van Oort	June 10, 1925	January 20, 2023	98
Alan Beagley	September 3, 1940	January 28, 2023	82
Carl Balk	June 20, 1944	January 30, 2023	79
Charles Bigelow	February 23, 1948	March 9, 2023	75
Robert Van Earden	February 9, 1929	March 29, 2023	94
Dennis DeWitt	August 29, 1941	April 6, 2023	82
Gerald Vander Velde	December 25, 1930	April 10, 2023	92
Ross Arnold	November 27, 1935	April 16, 2023	87
William Hudson	January 1, 1931	May 20, 2023	92
C. Gordon Ross	June 15, 1936	May 24, 2023	87
Eugene Van Dusseldorp	September 17, 1949	June 24, 2023	74
Arlen Salthouse	October 9, 1934	June 26, 2023	89
Andrew Rienstra	January 14, 1935	July 2, 2023	89
Charles Spencer	June 12, 1947	July 9, 2023	76
Melvin Voss	January 21, 1930	July 23, 2023	94
J. Harry Hall	March 16, 1925	August 25, 2023	99
Carole Barber	September 1, 1947	September 8, 2023	76
Richard TerMaat	September 21, 1938	September 13, 2023	85
Joseph Loux	October 2, 1945	October 17, 2023	78
Bruce Cornwell	May 8, 1951	October 18, 2023	72
Neal Busker	September 30, 1938	November 5, 2023	85
Henry Stegenga	February 5, 1932	November 6, 2023	92
Eric Nichols	March 16, 1965	November 13, 2023	59
Howard Hoekstra	May 8, 1945	November 19, 2023	79
Paul Walther	June 6, 1949	November 20, 2023	75
Robert Perless	September 16, 1937	December 4, 2023	86
Roberta Arden	August 24, 1936	December 14, 2023	87
Carl De Jong	February 21, 1938	December 18, 2023	86
Kenneth Van Wyk	September 11, 1927	December 26, 2023	96

**PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF THE STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE REFORMED
CHURCH IN AMERICA FOR THE YEAR ENDING 12/31/2023**

Organized Churches

	2021	2022	2023	Change
1. Churches	781	659	603	-56
2. Church Households	63,442	42,976	34,327	-8,649
3. Confessing Members	95,579	64,113	53,943	-10,170
4. Inactive Members	25,839	21,941	17,968	-3,973
5. Baptized Members	30,899	18,867	14,364	-4,503
6. Total Membership	152,317	104,921	86,275	-18,646
7. Adherents	36,544	24,818	18,768	-6,050
8. Avg. Worship Attendance	88,114	61,160	43,854	-17,306
9. Received on Confession	2,378	1,860	1,999	139
10. Received on Certificate	1,043	915	697	-28
11. Transferred	1,718	943	831	-112
12. Deceased	2,115	1,599	1,306	-293
13. Other Removals from Roll	4,866	2,987	2,512	-475
14. Infants Baptized	1,392	981	797	-184
15. Adults Baptized	879	596	636	40
21. Contributions Received	261,355,821	157,449,273	130,186,980	-27,262,293
22. Endowment Gifts	2,273,988	2,581,013	2,981,366	400,353
23. Investment Income	13,518,110	13,603,676	13,029,989	-573,687
24. All Other Income	41,717,559	23,466,943	20,696,533	-2,770,410
25. Total Income	318,865,478	197,100,905	166,894,868	-30,206,037
26. Assessments Paid	12,467,935	7,344,238	4,655,614	-2,688,624
27. All Other Church Expenses	281,198,456	180,830,145	154,000,704	-26,829,441
28. Total Expenses	293,666,391	188,174,383	159,656,318	-28,518,065
NET INCOME	25,199,087	8,926,522	7,238,550	-1,687,972

Church Plants with a Denominational Plan

Does not include satellites or campuses whose data is included with that of their parent congregation

	2021	2022	2023	Change
1. Churches	94	81	95	14
2. Church Households	1,452	1,095	889	-206
3. Confessing Members	2,196	1,851	1,357	-494
4. Inactive Members	230	252	164	-88
5. Baptized Members	642	677	332	-345
6. Total Membership	3,068	2,780	1,853	-927
7. Adherents	1,123	1,342	1,649	307
8. Avg. Worship Attendance	2,534	2,410	1,981	-429
9. Received on Confession	307	316	152	-164
10. Received on Certificate	81	100	34	-66
11. Transferred	192	174	124	-50
12. Deceased	21	19	22	3
13. Other Removals from Roll	50	39	8	-31

14.	Infants Baptized	33	34	35	1
15.	Adults Baptized	142	135	93	-42
21.	Contributions Received	3,324,150	3,618,517	3,422,517	-196,000
22.	Endowment Gifts	0	14,500	31,980	17,480
23.	Investment Income	1,479	1,018	6,571	5,553
24.	All Other Income	985,630	636,550	424,980	-211,570
25.	Total Income	4,311,259	4,270,585	3,886,048	-384,537
26.	Assessments Paid	5,506	2,250	85,760	83,510
27.	All Other Church Expenses	3,950,573	3,681,105	3,388,570	-292,535
28.	Total Expenses	3,956,067	3,683,355	3,474,330	-209,025
	NET INCOME	355,180	587,230	411,718	-175,512

Organized/Received/Adopted

Montreal Church Reformada, Miami, Florida (1/23) Classis de las Naciones
Reformed Church of Highland Park Collegiate Church, Highland Park, New Jersey
(1/23) Classis of New Brunswick
Iglesia Centro Protestante de Chile, Santiago, Chile (2/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Cristiana Semilla de Oracion IRD, Samana, Dominican Republic (2/23) Classis
de las Naciones
Sunrise Community Church, Austin, Texas (3/23) Classis of the City
Nueva Esperanza, Mesa, Arizona (3/23) Classis of the Southwest
Iglesia Evangelica Renacer, Parroquia la Candelaria, Municipio Liber, Distrito Capital,
Venezuela (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Buenas Nueva de Dios para Multitudes (BND), Secotr Centro, Barquisimeto, Estado
Lara, Venezuela (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Centro Cristiano Apostolico Obra de Vida, Juan Giego, Estado Nueva Esparta,
Venezuela (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Manifestacion del Reino, Ciudad Bolivar, Estado Bolivar, Venezuela (11/23)
Classis of the Americas
A.C. Iglesia Nazareth Ciudad Fiel, El Tigre, Estado Anzoategui, Venezuela (11/23)
Classis of the Americas
Centro Cristiano Oasis de Bendicion, Maturin, Estado Monagas, Venezuela (11/23)
Classis of the Americas
Ministerio Apostolico de Restauracion Profetica, Maturin, Estado Monagas, Venezuela
(11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Renacer Guayana, San Felix, Estado Bolivar, Venezuela (11/23) Classis of the
Americas
Ministerio Cristiano Ciudad Fuerte, La Vega, Barquisimeto, Estado Lara, Venezuela
(11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Edificadores, Cedar Park, Texas (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Reformada Impacto, Pittsburg, Texas (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Oasis Internacional, Carrollton, Texas (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Nueva Vida, Plano, Texas (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Cantico Nuevo - Humble, Humble, Texas (11/23) Classis of the Americas
Iglesia Cristiana Rios de Agua Viva, Esparto, California (11/23) Classis of the Americas

Iglesia Cristiana Emmanuel de Turlock, Turlock, California (12/23) Classis of Central California

Disbanded/Transferred/Released

First Reformed Church, Grant, Michigan (1/23) Classis of Northern Michigan
Christ's Community Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana (2/23) Classis of Illiana
Bethany Reformed Church, Des Moines, Iowa (2/23) Classis of Central Iowa
Prairie Ridge Church, Ankeny, Iowa (2/23) Classis of Central Iowa
Brick Reformed Church, Montgomery, New York (2/23) Classis of Orange
Hope Reformed Church, South Haven, Michigan (2/23) Classis of Southwest Michigan
First Reformed Church, Portage, Michigan (2/23) Classis of Southwest Michigan
Roseland Reformed Church, Blomkest, Minnesota (3/23) Classis of Minnesota
Bethany Reformed Church, Clara City, Minnesota (3/23) Classis of Minnesota
Greenleafton Reformed Church, Preston, Minnesota (3/23) Classis of Minnesota
Fultonville Reformed Church, Fultonville, New York (3/23) Classis of Schoharie
Fujian Evangelical Church, Richmond, British Columbia (3/23) Classis of British Columbia
First Reformed Church, Grand Haven, Michigan (3/23) Classis of Muskegon
Newkirk Reformed Church, Hospers, Iowa (3/23) Classis of East Sioux
Hope Reformed Church, Spencer, Iowa (3/23) Classis of East Sioux
Jamestown Reformed Church, Jamestown, Michigan (3/23) Classis of Zeeland
Dumont Reformed Church, Dumont, Iowa (3/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
New Life Community Church, Coralville, Iowa (3/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Trinity Reformed Church, Allison, Iowa (3/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Washington Reformed Church, Ackley, Iowa (3/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Wellsburg Reformed Church, Wellsburg, Iowa (3/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Rockford Reformed Church, Rockford, Michigan (3/23) Classis of North Grand Rapids
First Reformed Church, St Catharines, Ontario (3/23) Classis of Ontario
Faith Reformed Church, Stevensville, Ontario (3/23) Classis of Ontario
Fellowship Reformed Church, Muskegon, Michigan (4/23) Classis of Muskegon
First Reformed Church, Meservey, Iowa (4/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Water's Edge Church, Blaine, Washington (4/23) Classis of Cascades
Faith Reformed Church, Lynden, Washington (4/23) Classis of Cascades
Faith Community Church, Edmonds, Washington (4/23) Classis of Cascades
Living Word Reformed Church, North Haledon, New Jersey (4/23) Classis of Passaic Valley
Trinity Community Church, Brown Deer, Wisconsin (5/23) Classis of Wisconsin
City Church of Compton, Compton, California (5/23) Classis of the Americas
Westview Church, Waukee, Iowa (5/23) Classis of Central Iowa
Covenant Hope Church, Battle Creek, Michigan (6/23) Classis of Southwest Michigan
First Reformed Church, Byron Center, Michigan (6/23) Classis of Great Lakes City
Orchard Hill Reformed Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa (6/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
First Reformed Church of the Palisades, Fort Lee, New Jersey (6/23) Classis of Greater Palisades
Vriesland Reformed Church, Zeeland, Michigan (6/23) Classis of Zeeland
North Blendon Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan (6/23) Classis of Zeeland
Dunningville Reformed Church, Allegan, Michigan (6/23) Classis of Zeeland

Free Grace Reformed Church, Orange City, Iowa (6/23) Classis of West Sioux
 Salem Reformed Church, Little Rock, Iowa (6/23) Classis of West Sioux
 Christ's Community Church, Glendale, Arizona (6/23) Classis of the Southwest
 Abbe Reformed Church, Clymer, New York (7/23) Classis of Rochester
 First Reformed Church, Fremont, Michigan (7/23) Classis of Northern Michigan
 Coopersville Reformed Church, Coopersville, Michigan (7/23) Classis of Muskegon
 First Reformed Church, Bristow, Iowa (8/23) Classis of Pleasant Prairie
 Fifth Reformed Church, Muskegon, Michigan (8/23) Classis of Muskegon
 Chinese Community Church, Sacramento, California (9/23) Classis of Central
 California
 Grace Gospel Christian Church, San Mateo, California (9/23) Classis of Central
 California
 First Reformed Church, Baldwin, Wisconsin (9/23) Classis of Minnesota
 First Reformed Church, Edgerton, Minnesota (9/23) Classis of Minnesota
 Minisink Reformed Church, Montague, New Jersey (10/23) Classis of Orange
 Tinley Park Reformed Church, Tinley Park, Illinois (10/23) Classis of Illiana
 Thorn Creek Reformed Church, South Holland, Illinois (12/23) Classis of Illiana
 Ross Community Reformed Church, Gary, Indiana (10/23) Classis of Illiana
 First Reformed Church, Lincoln Park, New Jersey (10/23) Classis of Passaic Valley
 Southridge Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan (10/23) Classis of Southwest
 Michigan
 Forestview Community Church, Grimsby, Ontario (10/23) Classis of Ontario
 Church at Hemlock Farms, Lords Valley, Pennsylvania (10/23) Classis of Orange
 Faith Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan (11/23) Classis of Great Lakes City
 West Copake Reformed Church, Copake, New York (12/23) Classis of Columbia-
 Greene
 First Reformed Church, Maurice, Iowa (12/23) Classis of West Sioux
 First Reformed Church, Hull, Iowa (12/23) Classis of West Sioux
 First Reformed Church, Doon, Iowa (12/23) Classis of West Sioux
 Mount Greenwood Reformed Church, Chicago, Illinois (12/23) Classis of Chicago

Creation of Collegiate Church

Reformed Church of Highland Park Collegiate Church, Highland Park, New Jersey
 (1/23) Classis of New Brunswick; a collegiate church comprised of:
 Reformed Church of Highland Park (previously organized), Highland Park, New
 Jersey
 First Reformed Church of South River (previously organized), South River,
 New Jersey

Harbor Churches of Hudsonville, Michigan (7/23) Classis of Great Lakes City
 Wyoming Harbor Church (previously a new start), Hudsonville, Michigan

Overtures

Reconsider Method of Covenant Shares Calculation

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

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

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

Reasons:

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

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

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

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

Reasons:

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

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

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

Reasons:

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

Change Book of Church Order Provision Regarding Synod Travel Expenses

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

Reasons:

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

Amend Restructuring Team Recommendation Regarding General Synod Delegation Size

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

Reasons:

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

Change Denominational Method of Collecting Gender-Related Data

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

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

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

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

Reasons:

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

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

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

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

Reasons:

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

Report of the General Synod Council on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry

The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry in the midst of a cultural shift in the way the denomination works with regions, classes, and churches. Where once Reformed Church in America (RCA) staff were producers of programs and materials, we are now equipping and resourcing leaders in different ways. We can assist churches in identifying tools and models that are helpful for discerning ministry direction in the local context. We seek to network churches in similar circumstances that often span traditional boundaries of an assembly.

We are seeking to be in a posture of listening well to the church. This includes reading all of the Consistorial Report Forms, attending classis and regional synod meetings, talking to pastors and church leaders, and responding to inquiries. The center is seeking to walk with classes, pastors, and churches on their ministry journeys. We can assist with church multiplication, church health assessment, leadership training, expanding hospitality, multicultural dynamics, women and men serving together, engaging the next generations, and resource identification.

In most churches, health and renewal are no longer accomplished by tweaking existing activities or adding a clever program observed in another church. It calls for deep and costly change. It challenges us to move beyond “serving our members” to connecting with those who are not actively following Jesus. Here is one story of a courageous ministry that demonstrates the extent of change many churches are exploring.

The Adventure Church

The Adventure Church launched a new way of being the church in 2023 by turning its Muskegon, Michigan, building into a genuine third space for the surrounding community that is heavily resistant to churches. They opened up The Community House, a coffeehouse and social space to connect and engage people throughout the week. Aside from regular coffeehouse hours, gatherings include senior socials, Mixitup Social dry bar nights, board game nights, open mic/karaoke nights, and family date nights.

Within this ecosystem of relationships, the church is called and equipped to live on mission in these spaces by engaging and building relationships, and ultimately inviting others to discover Jesus with them in discovery groups, alternative disciple-making gatherings, or worship on Sunday. This is not a pretend coffeehouse in the narthex of the church. The church gathers at The Community House during the week for worship and community. This is a legitimate coffeehouse with locally, fresh roasted coffee, made-in-house syrups, and even cold drinks on tap. It says something when baristas from local chains come in for their coffee fix before heading to work.

Since The Community House opened in September 2023, the Adventure Church has multiplied its engagements by five times. More than 90 percent of these

engagements are with people outside the church, with meaningful daily interactions. As of January 2024, the Adventure Church has seen over 40 new people engaging in the life of the church who were unchurched or de-churched. They believe this is just the beginning of a mission and multiplication movement.

Church Ministry

The staff departments and teams formerly called Transformed & Transforming now work under the broader name called “Church Ministry” (another way of saying church revitalization). They focus on three essential areas of discipleship, leadership development, and local mission. Church ministry approaches discipleship, leadership development, and local mission as parts of a holistic system within the local church rather than viewing them as three separate and distinct areas of ministry. Just like a person’s brain, bones, and nerves function interdependently with each other, so these key components cannot be divided, categorized, or separated.

One way of equipping and resourcing churches for revitalization is through an intentional process called “**Stronger Churches**” (through a formal agreement with Multiplication Network, a global movement that “equips leaders with the tools to strengthen and multiply healthy churches”). It utilizes module-based, action-biased coaching that includes workshops, retreats, and mentoring that provides biblical instruction, practical ministry tools, and action plans that provide a strategy for moving the congregation toward greater health. The congregation evaluates its ongoing progress using a congregational feedback report.

In a similar way, **Renovations** is a congregational discernment tool designed to help congregations live into their mission and values by starting something new. This ministry, created through the generous gift of Lilly Endowment, is offered for free. It promotes online learning, coaching, and discussion processes to help further contextualize the growth and establish ongoing transformation. Over the past two years, twelve congregations from a variety of geographical regions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sizes have participated.

Another means of equipping and resourcing church revitalization is through smaller, cohort-based **learning communities** that meet every month. Each group is based on a specific affinity, such as urban churches, pastors of medium-size churches, women/BIPOC pastors, and first-time senior leaders. Starting in January 2024, eight different churches have signed up for these peer-learning coaching groups (as of March 1, 2024); conversations are pending with eighteen other churches and pastors, two classis leaders, and a regional executive about starting one of these learning communities.

A final means of equipping and resourcing churches is responding to various specific needs of individual churches such as consistory training, pastoral searches, strategic planning, leadership development, discipleship pathways, and more. Upcoming work will include webinars and specific training for smaller churches in particular.

One pastor asked the center staff about whether their congregation should spend \$5,000 for a coach (outside the RCA). Instead, center staff were able to get him connected in a learning community with other pastors where they have been discussing important and practical topics for senior pastors such as finances and budgeting, best practices for staff management, ideas for creative missional outreach, discipleship movements in the Global South, and more.

Another congregation hoping to empower its younger leaders turned to **Generation Spark**. After a few months of discussion, the congregation empowered a 23-year-old to serve as the director of the church program. This young leader has reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging, she is actively engaging more young leaders, and she has stepped into a level of leadership made possible by her congregation's willingness to reflect and live into their commitment to raising up the next generation.

All the above-mentioned resources are available free of charge for all churches that belong to the Reformed Church in America.

Church Multiplication

Church multiplication envisions three priorities with regional synods and classes. These priorities will also be our mission and vision for 2024.

Church multiplication's three crucial priorities are:

1. **Disciples who can make other disciples:** The first priority in church multiplication is to develop disciples who have a deep understanding of the gospel and are equipped to share it with others. These disciples should be trained to effectively make disciples themselves, following the model of Jesus's ministry. This involves teaching them how to grow in their relationship with God, study God's Word, and share their faith with others. In addition, it will involve investing in discipleship programs, small groups, and mentoring relationships to cultivate a culture of multiplication within the church.
2. **Church growth:** The second priority is to focus on the growth and expansion of existing churches. This includes intentional efforts to reach out to the community, invite new people to church, and provide excellent worship experiences and relevant teaching, as well as developing strategies to assimilate new believers into the church community and help them mature in their faith. Effective outreach and evangelism initiatives are essential in ensuring the growth and health of the church.
3. **Church health:** The third priority is to ensure the spiritual health and maturity of the church. This involves cultivating a strong foundation of biblical teachings, maintaining unity and healthy relationships within the church body, and fostering an atmosphere of love, grace, and accountability. The focus should be on prioritizing pastoral care, discipleship, and spiritual formation programs that help individuals grow in their relationship with God and live out their faith authentically. A healthy church will naturally multiply and reproduce disciples and churches.

These priorities are interrelated and should be pursued simultaneously. By developing disciples who can make other disciples, prioritizing church growth, and nurturing church health, we lay the foundation for effective church multiplication and kingdom impact.

Women's Transformation and Leadership

Women's transformation and leadership helps the RCA pursue the vision for the full inclusion of women's gifts, influence, and leadership in all areas of the church and beyond. This is done by encouraging, equipping, and empowering women to live into their God-given gifts and callings, and equipping faith communities to create healthy environments where men and women of diverse backgrounds can freely, fully serve together and flourish in ministry. As women's transformation and leadership marks ten years of ministry, we continue to celebrate five decades of women in ordained ministry, all women's gifts and callings, the many ways men and women are flourishing together in ministry today, and the many collaborative relationships the RCA enjoys with like-minded organizations. It was an honor that New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) presented the "Women of the RCA" with a Presidential Service Award "for their years of service and commitment to the church and the wider community" in 2023. Women's transformation and leadership delights in a close partnership with the Commission for Women and the Commission on History.

Over the past year, the ministry of women's transformation and leadership has encouraged and equipped hundreds of diverse RCA leaders through virtual gatherings; leadership trainings; seminary cohorts; transformational, Sabbath rest, and hospitality retreats; *We are Speaking*, "Five Decades", and *Women in Ministry* Sunday web resources; the *She is Called/Ella es Llamada Women of the Bible* study series; "five decades" celebration events; annual Women's Stories Day with NBTS' Reformed Church Center; and Building God's Church Together connection opportunities with regional synods, classes, NBTS and Western Theological Seminary, and Northwestern College. Several of these were made in partnership with General Synod president Judy Nelson, deepening relationships and especially seeking to encourage those congregations and leaders feeling the weight of other churches' departures. In the coming year, women's transformation and leadership will continue to equip leaders and congregations with these resources, expanding globally, and including the development of women-focused missional experiences to places like Mescalero, New Mexico; the U.S. Virgin Islands; and Upstate New York, where diverse women's stories and experiences will be engaged. This summer, all are invited to join us at CBE (Christians for Biblical Equality) International's conference "Tell Her Story: Women in Scripture and History" in Denver, Colorado, on July 25-27, 2024.

There are many Spirit-led stories of impact. Three are highlighted here:

The "Honoring Our Stories/Honrando Nuestras Historias" retreat for **East Coast women of the Hispanic Council** ignited their desire for further equipping; leaders from six congregations are currently engaged in the "Transformational Journey Workshop for Women," being trained by our guiding coalition master facilitators,

Karla Camacho and Asbei Loera Castro, to facilitate the process in their own churches.

Our *She is Called/Ella es Llamada Women of the Bible* study series has been accessed by over 2 million people globally, and dozens of RCA churches are engaging it for small group study. The **women of St. Thomas Reformed Church, U.S. Virgin Islands**, were so inspired by the biblical story of Deacon Phoebe (Volume 1) that they decided they, too, were called to travel and are planning a trip to visit a sister missionary and her family in South America.

In March 2024, a regional celebration of women's gifts came to **Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan**. This church ordained one of the first women in the RCA, Rev. Kathy Jo Blaske, as a minister of Word and sacrament on Reformation Day 1979. Today it has Rev. Janelle López-Koolhaas (the first woman ordained in the Regional Synod of Canada) as one of its pastors; the church just ordained its first Latina deacon and has many other women leaders! This worship celebration and festive reception, based on the General Synod 2023 "five decades" plenary, lifted up the legacy of women's leadership past, present, and future, with shared stories of trailblazers from across the RCA, as well as affirming the men who helped open doors and model the vision of shared leadership. A museum-like display held self-curated mementos from dozens of women who have served God's church as missionaries, pastors, Reformed Church Women's Ministries leaders, and more. God's promise of a future with hope was palpable, and people left uplifted and encouraged.

Diversity and Belonging

Over the past year, our office has diligently worked toward fostering an environment of belonging and a culture of honor throughout the RCA, with various initiatives aimed at promoting unity in Christ through the lens of diversity and reconciliation across all facets of the denomination.

One of our primary focuses has been on implementing comprehensive diversity and belonging training programs for General Synod delegates, GSC staff, and volunteers. These trainings are designed to raise awareness of unconscious biases, promote cultural competency, and provide tools for effectively engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Through these efforts, we aim to create a more welcoming and understanding environment for all.

Additionally, we have actively worked to ensure that our policies and practices reflect our commitment to diversity and inclusion. The antiracism policy adopted at General Synod 2022 has been effective in holding one another accountable to our covenant to honor one another, each person made in God's image. By prioritizing inclusivity in our policies, we are striving to create a culture where every individual feels seen, valued, and respected.

Furthermore, our office has facilitated various outreach initiatives to engage with marginalized communities both within and outside of our denomination. Through these pillars of sankofa journeys, dismantling racism prayer gatherings, the Breaking

Barriers newsletter, and the racial and ethnic leadership cohort, we are working to build bridges and foster connections with all members of our wider community.

As we move forward, we remain committed to being a multiethnic denomination, where all the family of God are not only welcomed but celebrated.

Report of the General Synod Council on Global Mission

Working Together to Share God's Love with the World

RCA Global Mission exists to strengthen and grow the global church by supporting ministries of compassion, developing leaders, and sharing the good news. Our goal is to provide engagement opportunities for Reformed Church in America (RCA) churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful that help us all to live and love like Jesus.

Stories of God's Faithfulness

Portugal

For hundreds of years, RCA Global Mission has been forming partnerships all around the world. As a result, our team is also passionate about introducing friends to friends—introducing our partners to each other. One great example of this is how we've worked with our mission partners in Brazil, the Presbyterian Church in Manaus (IPM), to plant a new church in Portugal. After successfully planting a thriving church in Braga, Portugal, they have now planted another church in Porto, Portugal. In addition, the church leaders from Braga recently visited Ancora Church—started by RCA missionaries Felipe and Janelle deWaard-Silva—in Vulcan, Romania, to help lead an evangelism retreat. This is a testament to our goal of strengthening and growing the church together around the world!

Madagascar

Imagine living in a space designed for 250 people—but you're now one of 1,900 residents. This is the reality of prisons in Antalaha, Madagascar. In 2023, an RCA missionary (name not disclosed due to sensitivity) visited an Antalaha prison ward and met some of the inmates. Partnering with a local organization and denomination, the RCA missionary intended to develop a training program where artisanal products could be created by the young prisoners, providing them with educational opportunities and enabling teenage minors in prison to gain employment upon release. But when the RCA missionary witnessed the inhumane living conditions of the prison, she was overwhelmed by the health concerns that needed to be addressed first. Working with a Malagasy team of three, the RCA missionary built trust among the prison officials and was given full access to the various sections of the prison to carry out renovation projects. From new latrines, new mattresses, and new paved courtyards, to restoring the water supply, building a new kitchen, and rebuilding a septic system, the work was plenty. Because of your support of this RCA missionary and her work, you have improved the lives of inmates and shared the love of Christ by responding to their humanity and needs.

South Africa

Children in Botshabelo, South Africa, have a second chance because of the RCA's heart to provide resources that keep vulnerable children in their own homes and to

place orphans into loving foster or adoptive families through the work of our partners Setshabelo Family and Child Services (SFCS). Blessed is one of those children. When she was born, she had visible disabilities and was cast aside by her biological family. While receiving care at the hospital, a nurse who did not have children prepared to open her home and heart to foster Blessed. There was one big problem—her small home presented an obstacle for her to become a licensed foster parent. SFCS adoption worker Boniswa Bele was able to step in and convinced the court to approve the home study. Now, Blessed is preparing to be adopted by the woman whose heart is bigger than her home. Thank you for supporting the work of SFCS and RCA missionary Denise Kingdom. You are changing the life trajectory of the next generation in South Africa.

Mozambique

Alberto has come to New Harvest Farm—a farm established and run by RCA missionary Chad Vanden Bosch in Mozambique—every Friday for two years to participate in a Bible-based agricultural training. Alberto has always had a keen interest in agriculture and knew from a young age he wanted to own a farm. Alberto completed his agricultural training at a local technical school and began farming, but was finding very little success. As he participated in the “Growing with God” training program at New Harvest Farm, he began spending more time observing and seeking to understand God’s creation and the natural cycles that were put into place by God. Within this new framework, what Alberto was seeing in his fields started to make sense and he became an early adopter of both regenerative agricultural techniques and agroforestry. Alberto shared with Chad and his team how these new methods and understanding not only brought his farm from debt to profitability, but also how his faith and depth of understanding of the Lord has increased. The most exciting thing is that Alberto is now a professor at the technical school he attended and has the opportunity to share his knowledge and experience daily with his students.

Brazil

A lack of sign language training resources has caused the Deaf community in Brazil to be vastly unreached with the gospel. In 2023, the RCA made it possible to provide resources to our partners at the Presbyterian Church in Manaus (IPM) and International Christian Centers for the Deaf (ICCD) to hold the first-ever conference to encourage the Deaf ministry leadership of IPM and also to create momentum for a training on LIBRAS—Brazilian sign language—that began after the conference. One of the conference attendees, Bruna, was inspired to use her gift of sign language to become an interpreter after what she experienced at the conference. Bruna and her team are so grateful for the resources you’ve provided to help them train more people to share the gospel with the Deaf community in Brazil.

Mexico

Where do you see God at the border? That is the question RCA missionary Angel Lopez asks every group he takes to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The RCA’s support of Angel Lopez helps him bring small groups to the U.S.-Mexico border to see what

God is doing through Frontera de Gracia—a church and shelter run by his brother, Pastor Samuel Lopez—and to help them begin to understand the needs of migrants. Eleanor McMullen, a young person from Holland, Michigan, traveled to Ciudad Juarez with Angel in 2023. Eleanor shared that she expected it to be hard to consistently find peace and love in a place full of frustration and shattered dreams.

“While those were present, [peace and love were] evident in how openly families let us sit at their tables and eat with them and in the generosity from those who had much less than us,” said McMullen. “It was easy to see ‘love your neighbor as yourself,’ even in the shadow of a wall that works to separate. However, this love needs to be extended on both sides of the border, starting with the churches in the U.S.”

Angel continues to take trips to the border and welcomes you to join him in this work.

Japan

Each month, RCA missionaries Nathan and Nozomi Brownell open up the Greenhouse Youth Center for Sunday Afternoon Fellowship (SAF)—a gathering of graduates from the area mission schools in Yokohama, Japan. This time is designed to build a community among graduates centered around the gospel and provide a space to raise up the next generation of leaders. Some attendees come from nearby and others fly from the other side of Japan to join. The majority of the group come from non-Christian homes and are not yet believers. SAF has become a very uncommon type of gathering in Japan where the Christian minority is completely free to share their faith organically during table conversations. Through this ministry, hearts are changing and some of the graduates are visiting churches, responding to the invitations of the Brownells’ team and the other Christians who attend SAF. God is doing something beautiful in Japan thanks to your generous partnership in mission!

Bangladesh

For Bible translation work, 2023 produced the most concrete example of fruit: 1,000 copies of the Bramar New Testament. More than that, the New Testaments were the fruit of the church working together to bring God’s Word to a Bibleless group: foreign mission workers were involved, but more important were the Bramar mother tongue translators, the Bramar church leaders who gave feedback on the translation, and believers like you around the world who supported the translation project for more than ten years by praying and giving. In May of 2023, about 80 Bramar believers gathered to dedicate the New Testament. It was a time of celebration—of praising God for his faithfulness and goodness to his people, of thanking the many people who played a part in the translation work—as well as a time for committing themselves to know God and make him known through his Word. The turnout was small compared to most dedication ceremonies, but it was still the largest gathering of Bramar believers our partners on the ground had ever seen. Due to persecution, many Bramar believers are reluctant to gather as a church, so it was precious and

encouraging that the New Testament dedication ceremony was the occasion for such a turnout.

Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) Shares

The mission personnel and staff of RCA Global Mission would like to express appreciation to the churches and individuals of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) who so generously support our mission programs. The RCA mission program is supported almost entirely by contributions and Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares. Without you, there would be no RCA Global Mission.

The Reformed Church in America has over 80 active partnerships in over 40 countries around the world. There are 48 missionaries and 46 partner personnel (those employed by the partner but supported through RCA Partnership-in-Mission shares). These mission personnel were supported by 405 churches and 301 individual donors through PIM shares. There are over 120 active projects, including disaster response and projects of compassion. These projects were supported by gifts from 228 churches and 789 individual donors.

GM 24-1

To keep the value of a full Partnership-in-Mission share at \$6,900 for 2024; and further, to ask every RCA congregation that does not currently support an RCA missionary with a Partnership-in-Mission share to consider taking on a full or partial share of support.

Transitions in Mission Personnel

Keith Krebs

For nine years, Keith faithfully served the staff and patients of the American Mission Hospital in Bahrain, followed by his time serving as spiritual care coordinator for RCA Mission in Europe and the Middle East. Keith's calming, hopeful, loving presence was a blessing in both roles. Keith has shared the love of Christ in word and deed with so many people, and he has left an impact in the hearts and lives of so many. Keith ended his mission service on May 31, 2023.

Kathy DeKock

Kathy served with RCA Global Mission on staff for 33 years as the Speakers Bureau and PIM share coordinator. Before that, she spent several years serving in Annville, Kentucky, with Jackson County Ministries. Kathy retired on September 30, 2023, and our team misses her dearly and wishes her all the best in this next chapter!

Cheryl Barnes

Cheryl served in partnership with RCA Global Mission as the education facilitator with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) General Assembly from April 1,

2019, through March 31, 2023. In that time, her transformative work helped improve the educational systems of CCAP in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This work was and still is essential in breaking the cycle of poverty and providing children, especially girls, with the opportunity for a better quality of life. Cheryl transitioned into a new role as the Africa Area Coordinator of PC(U.S.A.) World Mission; Global Mission is working on filling her previous role to continue to carry out the important mission.

Isaías Colop-Xec

For 30 years, Isaías worked in Guatemala with Rutzij Tijonic (Teaching His Word Ministry) before retiring in October 2023. David Colop, Isaías's son, has already begun carrying out the ministry in his place. David has exciting dreams and plans for where God might be taking the ministry in the coming years to grow the global church and raise up leaders in the Maya K'iche community.

John Hubers

John has had a long career history of serving with RCA Global Mission, but his most recent retirement on December 30, 2023, is from his four years of service to revitalize the Christian-Muslim Relations program at Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. John made wonderful advancements for the program over the last four years and set up the program to hire the first director of the proposed Christian-Muslim Relations training center that is set to open in the near future.

GM 24-2

Be it resolved that the 217th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona, from June 13-18, 2024, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Isaías Colop-Xec, Kathy DeKock, John Hubers, and Keith Krebs, and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission.

New Mission Assignments

Missionaries Serving in Thailand

New missionaries are starting a Mandarin Chinese-language gospel ministry and church planting initiative in Thailand. Due to the sensitive nature of their work and the people they serve, we are unable to share their names in this space, and their ministry will be considered "do not post," meaning no updates from them or information about them should be shared online. Please contact mission@rca.org for more information.

Grace Newhouse

Grace serves as the coordinator of young adult global engagement. Grace connects young people with RCA mission partners through travel experiences that bring their

faith to life through real-world experiences and interactions. Her goal is to help young people understand what it means to be a Christian in different parts of the world in hopes that they will understand their faith and community in different ways.

Tara Woodward

Tara serves as a missional networker in South Africa. Tara builds bridges between churches on the African and North American continents to address the challenges of urban poverty in the Gauteng Province and to unite local churches and leadership toward a shared vision for the spiritual and social transformation of neighborhoods. Tara also connects South African young adults to a diverse diaspora network focusing on mentorship, job skills, and practice-based urban workplace theologies.

Jeff and Chelsea Lampen

Jeff and Chelsea have been called to co-pastor RELISH, the Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover (Germany). Jeff and Chelsea will also partner with the World Communion of Reformed Churches to support the ministry of unity and interdenominational collaboration within the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC) region.

Deaths*

Adeline Sybesma passed away on April 8, 2023. Adeline Sybesma served as a teacher in Hong Kong, New York City, and Japan. We praise God for her faithful witness even after leaving the mission field. She will be deeply missed.

Phyllis Vander Werff passed away on August 20, 2023. Phyllis will be remembered for her role as the family storyteller, her heart for mission, and her dedication to the Reformed Church in America. Phyllis served for three years in Kuwait alongside her husband, Lyle, from 1961 to 1964.

Arlene Schuiteman passed away on September 21, 2023. Arlene devoted her life to serving others. After a spiritual calling, she ventured to South Sudan and later Ethiopia, establishing nursing schools and providing medical care. Her unwavering faith guided her through challenging times, leading to leadership roles in Zambia before her retirement in 1989. Arlene's legacy lives on through her impact on healthcare and her biographer's works based on her experiences. She was honored with an honorary doctorate from Northwestern College in 2020.

Henry (Hank) Stegenga passed away on November 6, 2023. Hank spent two decades in Chiapas, Mexico, serving alongside his wife, Charmaine, teaching at the Ch'ol Bible School and providing vital services. Fluent in Spanish and Ch'ol, he used technical skills from Pullman Tech to maintain equipment and assisted Mission Aviation Fellowship pilots. Besides teaching, he offered medical aid, from stitching hands to mending a three-month-old's broken leg. After 20 years, health reasons brought him back to the U.S., where he served as an associate pastor and later as pastor at various RCA churches. After retirement, he continued his spiritual journey, serving in

interim roles and working odd jobs. In retirement, he and Charmaine explored the world, making special trips to Mexico and sharing captivating stories of their mission work.

Lavina “Vi” Block passed away on December 15, 2023. Alongside her husband, Robert, Vi began her mission service teaching English at the School of High Hope in Iraq, where she fostered friendships and shared her faith. After their time in Iraq was cut short, they embarked on a path of service across churches in different parts of the U.S., where Vi’s talents as an organist, choir director, and educator flourished. Her passion for teaching extended to an Arabic bilingual role in New Jersey, impacting students’ lives for 14 years. In retirement, Vi and Robert ventured to Oman, contributing to the Al Amana Centre’s mission of interfaith understanding and language education.

Lorraine Joyce Sikkema passed away on January 28, 2024. She was a devoted RCA missionary who, alongside her husband, LaVerne, spent over 40 years serving the Lord in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. They first served rural communities through agriculture and later through aviation in partnership with Mission Aviation Fellowship. Her passion for God, hymns, and playing piano touched many lives, especially those attending mission gatherings. Lorraine’s favorite verse, Psalm 27:1, encapsulates her unwavering faith: “The Lord is my Light and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the Strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

**This report acknowledges known deaths that occurred from spring 2023 until spring 2024. We recognize that some people may have been unintentionally forgotten and for that, we greatly apologize. If you know of names we have missed, please contact us at mission@rca.org.*

Report of Words of Hope

Words of Hope believes that all people in all places should have access to God's Word. With Words of Hope, people are connected daily to the truths of Scripture so that they can grow in faith and share it worldwide.

Words of Hope works to share the good news in all ways possible in order to provide access to Scripture in heart languages, remote locations, and a variety of media types. Where poverty, geography, or persecution hinder the spread of the gospel, Words of Hope partners with indigenous Christian leaders to equip them to more effectively minister in their own language and context, among their own people.

Words of Hope's regions of ministry include Albania, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Niger, North America, South Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda. Each ministry field requires its own unique media outreach approach. Depending on the variety of resources and challenges in a given region, an assortment of radio programs, text messages, social media, print materials, and satellite television are all used to proclaim the gospel.

Some notable highlights from Words of Hope's ministry in the past year include a successful fundraising initiative to help translate the New Testament into the Ugandan tribal language of Kuku for the first time, an assessment trip to Indonesia to learn more about the need for tribal language ministry there, and celebrating the impact of Christian after-school programs in India.

The Kuku tribe, divided by colonial boundaries between South Sudan and Uganda, has long faced marginalization and violence. Due to their status as foreigners, members of the Kuku tribe have had their houses burned and have been denied education in both countries where they live. Sixteen years ago, Words of Hope initiated radio broadcasts in the Kuku language. These broadcasts helped to provide a sense of cultural pride for this marginalized community. Now, in this past year, Words of Hope entered into a partnership with Word for the World to undertake the monumental task of translating the New Testament into the Kuku language for the first time ever.

All necessary funding was raised last year, and the ambitious project is now underway, led by Words of Hope program producers who have already been translating the Bible for radio programs for years. The translation process involves multiple steps, including exegesis, proofreading by additional Kuku speakers, and back translation to English for thorough checks. Our prayer is that having the Word of God in their heart language will instill confidence in the Kuku people's identity in Christ, countering the societal mistreatment they have endured. The Kuku are created in the image of God, belong to God's family, and are united through Christ's sacrifice. Thanks be to God that soon every Kuku individual will have access to the New Testament.

Staff members from the United States recently had the opportunity to travel to Indonesia alongside members of ReFrame Ministry's staff to complete a ministry assessment for our joint work in that country. It was an inspiring time to see how the team in Indonesia is partnering with local churches to build up community groups and disciple the people in their faith.

In particular, Words of Hope supports the work in Indonesia of translating radio and YouTube programming into many small tribal languages. In remote parts of the island country, pastors are so few and resources so scarce, that one pastor is responsible for leading as many as three congregations. Pastors travel from church to church on a given Sunday and must rely on lay leaders in the congregations to run services when they are not there. The Words of Hope small language programming is being used by these pastors to disciple and train leaders in their congregations when they must be absent from them. The program content aims to teach basic apologetics in a location where Christian faith is routinely mocked by the media.

Unique ministry opportunities exist in India as well. In response to the pressing issue of under-schooled and non-enrolled children in India, Words of Hope has now established over 30 after-school tutoring centers across the country. These centers play a vital role in inviting children who are not attending school or who are struggling academically to free tutoring classes. Caste barriers are broken down as children from all backgrounds are seated together. Remarkably, several families, touched by the positive impact of the tutoring services, have now embraced faith in Christ and regularly attend church.

Some of the tutoring centers have also initiated nutrition programs to address the health concerns of malnourished students from impoverished slums, providing wholesome foods like fruit and eggs three times a week. Words of Hope donors are making a profound difference in the lives of these children, offering them hope, education, and a path toward a brighter future.

Words of Hope is deeply grateful for the support of RCA churches that continues to sustain this outreach ministry. We celebrate this generosity, knowing that these dollars are allowing people to be introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thank you for sharing hope worldwide as we work together to proclaim the good news in all ways possible.

Report of The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc.

The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. (CGF), is a non-profit corporation that functions under the supervision of the RCA General Synod. The CGF supports the work of the denomination by making affordable rate loans to current and former RCA churches and related agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings and other properties used in ministry. The CGF offers unsecured loans up to \$200,000 and secured borrowing up to \$5,000,000.

As a primary source of funding for loans, the CGF sells interest-bearing investments called savings certificates. The CGF offers two types of savings certificates:

1. Term savings certificates, which are available in maturities from one to ten years.
2. Demand savings certificates, which allow the investment and redemption of amounts in the certificate at any time (subject to the limits described in the CGF Offering Circular).

As a way to support the denomination, the CGF contributes a portion of its earnings annually to the General Synod Council (GSC), which awards the funds as ministry grants for three RCA programs:

1. Church Multiplication, which provides grant funding to church plants. In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2023 (FY23), the CGF contributed \$400,000 for church plant grants.
2. Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund (Next Gen), which provides scholarships to middle school-age children through post-college young adults to cover part of the cost of mission trips and internships, disaster response work, vision and study tours, and missional training experiences. In FY23, the CGF contributed \$30,000 to benefit youth missional engagement.
3. Flourishing Churches grant program, which provides grants for facility improvements to economically challenged RCA congregations whose ministries are thriving. In FY23, the CGF contributed \$203,500 for this program.

More specific information on CGF loans and how to invest in savings certificates is available on the CGF webpage at www.rca.org/cgf.

Assets

In FY23, total assets decreased by \$1.2 million to \$79.4 million, driven primarily from a reduction in the loan portfolio of nearly \$2.2 million. CGF assets at the end of FY23 consisted primarily of loans of over \$49 million and cash and investments of \$31.3 million. The CGF funded \$3 million in new loans to 11 churches in FY23 while receiving nearly \$5.2 million in loan principal payments from existing borrowers.

Despite national and global economic challenges, the overall financial health of CGF church borrowers remains strong. This has resulted in few delinquent loans in the CGF portfolio and has contributed to the CGF continuing its long history of never having experienced a loan principal loss. We continue to have a few church borrowers that are challenged to repay their loans, and the CGF works in partnership with these affected congregations to ensure viable continuance of their ministries.

Savings Certificates

At the end of FY23, CGF investors held savings certificates of nearly \$28.4 million, representing a decrease of \$3.3 million from the previous fiscal year end. In FY23, the CGF received \$3.8 million in new savings certificate investments and reinvested interest of \$541,000, which was offset by redemptions of \$7.6 million. Savings certificate investors continue to recognize the favorable return received on their funds as well as how their investment supports the mission of the CGF. Funds received from investment in savings certificates are used by the CGF to make loans to current and former RCA churches throughout the United States and Canada.

CGF savings certificates are state-regulated securities. Currently the CGF is authorized to sell savings certificates in 27 states, which are listed at www.rca.org/cgf. Rates of interest paid on savings certificates, along with other information on the CGF and how to invest in savings certificates, can also be found on the webpage.

Earnings

In FY23, the CGF achieved net earnings from operations of \$2.1 million compared to \$1.7 million the previous year (FY22). Included in FY23 results was a one-time, non-recurring gift from the Ralph Guarno Living Trust in the amount of \$450,000. Excluding this amount, net earnings from operations would be down 6 percent compared to the previous year but still 11 percent above budget. The decrease in earnings from operations was the result of several factors. Even though there was a decrease in average loans outstanding as described above, loan interest income increased from the previous year due to an increase in the average portfolio yield from the previous year. The revenue from interest and dividends received on the CGF's investment portfolio also increased significantly (68 percent) from the prior year. The average savings certificate portfolio balance was down from the previous year, but interest expense increased by 48 percent due to a higher average cost of funds in FY23. Finally, operating expenses increased by 18 percent, driven by higher travel expenses, software costs, and personnel expenses due to filled vacant positions for eight months of the year.

Total earnings for the year were \$2.3 million, compared to a loss of \$1.6 million in the previous year. The loss in FY22 was due to net unrealized losses on the CGF's investments as all major stock and bond market indexes were down significantly for the year. In FY23, the market conditions improved, leaving us with unrealized net gains on investments of \$833,000. The total earnings figure for FY23 is after contributing \$633,500 to the GSC for ministry grants.

Ministry Grants

In 1999, the CGF began contributing a portion of its earnings to the GSC to be used for grants to new church plants. From 1999 through FY23, the CGF has contributed nearly \$8 million to support RCA church multiplication. In that time, 459 New Congregation Plans have been approved, and the majority of them have received grant funds to help start their ministry. In FY23, the CGF contributed \$400,000 to support church multiplication efforts.

In FY14, the CGF began contributing annually for support of Next Gen by providing financial assistance to RCA youth for mission trip experiences. Since the inception of the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund, the CGF has been its primary financial supporter, making contributions totaling \$480,000. Since the program has been in place, 2,908 young people have benefitted from scholarships awarded. In FY23, the CGF contributed \$30,000 to benefit youth missional engagement via an RCA Global Mission event in Europe.

In FY18, the CGF launched the Flourishing Churches grant program, which provides grants of up to \$50,000 to economically challenged churches for facility improvements necessary to continue and grow already successful ministries. To date, 49 RCA congregations have been Flourishing Churches grant recipients, and the CGF has contributed a total of \$1.65 million to this program.

As stated earlier, the CGF contributed \$633,500 in FY23 to fund RCA ministry grants.

Financial Strength

A measure of financial strength of an entity is its level of net assets, also known as capital or equity. As of September 30, 2023, the CGF had net assets or capital of \$50.9 million. This represents the accumulation of earnings and contributions received over its years of operations.

The funds received from savings certificates are used by the CGF primarily to make loans to current and former RCA churches. The ability of the CGF to repay savings certificate investors is related to its level of capital and net earnings, as well as repayment of the loans funded from certificate investment dollars. CGF loans typically are secured by first mortgages on church facilities. The CGF follows strict guidelines in approving loans to make sure congregations can sustain such debt payments. While past performance is no guarantee of future events, the CGF has never experienced a loss of principal on any loan. No CGF savings certificate investor has ever experienced a loss of investment or missed receiving an interest payment.

Financial Highlights	FY 2023	FY 2022	FY 2021
Total Assets	\$79,392,621	\$80,587,349	\$85,167,480
Net Assets (Capital)	\$50,877,539	\$48,582,717	\$50,162,464
Savings Certificates Outstanding	\$28,369,966	\$31,672,760	\$34,878,929

Number of Borrowers	90	98	105
Dollar Amount of Loans Outstanding	\$49,027,439	\$51,185,285	\$57,216,216
Number of Loans Funded in Year	11	7	9
Dollar Amount of Loans Funded in Year	\$3,025,856	\$1,091,112	\$6,913,058
Net Earnings from Operations before Ministry Grants	\$2,053,393	\$1,702,643	\$2,109,725
Contributions to GSC for Ministry Grants	\$633,500	\$800,000	\$780,000

Future CGF Activity

The CGF will continue to follow its mission of providing affordable rate loans to current and former RCA churches and affiliated agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings used in ministry. The CGF will look for opportunities to promote its savings certificate and loan programs both within the denomination and with former RCA churches, raising a greater awareness of the benefits of borrowing from the CGF and investing in its savings certificates. This will in turn allow the CGF to contribute funds to the GSC for RCA ministry grants to support church planting initiatives, Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund scholarships, and grants to flourishing but financially challenged churches in need of building renovation for ministry.

The CGF is grateful for the support of its investors and borrowers as we continue in ministry together. Your partnership is essential for the CGF to accomplish its mission, and we are blessed to have your involvement in our ministry.

Report of the Board of Benefits Services

The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and incorporated and approved by an Act of the Assembly of the State of New York on April 16, 1923, under the original name “The Ministers’ Fund of the Reformed Church in America, Inc.” Later, the name was changed to “The Board of Pensions of the Reformed Church in America.” It had operated continuously as a New York not-for-profit corporation until 2019, when the board of directors voted to redomicile to the State of Michigan. This action was approved by the General Synod during its 2019 session.

In the fall of 2019, The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America, Inc., (BOBS) was incorporated as a Michigan domestic nonprofit corporation. Thereafter, all operations, assets, liabilities, and contract rights of the New York corporation were transferred to the Michigan corporation. Dissolution of the New York corporation was approved by the State of New York, effective August 31, 2022.

As an agency of the General Synod, BOBS is subject to the provisions of the *Book of Church Order*. The General Synod has delegated to BOBS the responsibility to manage and administer the retirement and insurance programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5, to manage and administer the BOBS’ retiree chaplains and assistance programs, and to ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits, long-term disability benefits, and any other programs or services related to the financial well-being of eligible RCA-ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the RCA.

The board met on October 12, 2023, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and on March 14, 2024, in Orlando, Florida. The volunteer board consists of at least eight but not more than sixteen directors, including pastors and professionals from business, finance, investments, and law. The composition of the board is as follows: the general secretary of the General Synod or his or her designee, one member of the General Synod Council (GSC) with interest and experience in the work of the Board of Benefits Services, one person designated by the GSC from among its moderator or the president or vice president of the General Synod, and at least five and no more than thirteen directors-at-large.

Ends and Policy Governance

BOBS, like the GSC, utilizes the principles of policy governance to conduct its work and to guide its oversight of its executive director in the fulfillment of the purposes it was established to accomplish by the General Synod. Key to its use of the principles of policy governance is the responsibility to state clearly the reasons BOBS exists. In policy governance, the reasons are stated as “ends.”

The board provides direction to and oversight of the executive director’s work through the following ends that were adopted at the October 2023 board meeting:

E-1 Manage and administer the retirement programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-1.1 Participants have a means to wisely set aside funds at a rate commensurate with other church plans.

E-1.2 Participants have a means to convert accumulations into retirement income choices including guaranteed lifetime income options.

E-2 Manage and administer the insurance programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-2.1 Reasonable health insurance benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants through our partnership with Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). Recognizing that the partnership with RBA is a board decision, the executive director is tasked with the following end: "Advocate for the purposes of E-2.1 and monitor and report the effectiveness of current partnership with RBA to the board."

E-2.2 Ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants.

E-3 Manage and administer the retiree chaplains and assistance programs.

E-3.1 Retired RCA-ordained ministers, or surviving spouses and other eligible retirees will have access to an assistance fund that is available based on demonstrated need and is limited by available funds.

E-3.2 Employ a network of retired pastors and elders who maintain contact with and provide pastoral care for retired ministers and their spouses or surviving spouses and with lay missionaries who served for 10 or more years, and with former employees of the Southern Normal School.

E-4 Provide other programs or services related to the financial well-being of eligible RCA-ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.

E-4.1 Participants and eligible participants have access to and are encouraged to use educational resources and tools and to participate in financial counseling that allows them to make timely financial decisions

regarding their retirement and their health, life, and disability-related benefits.

E-4.2 Ensure availability of programs or services related to multidimensional wellness and well-being.

E-4.3 Active RCA-ordained ministers and commissioned pastors who express a long term commitment to the RCA have access to debt relief and other grants that are available based on demonstrated need and are limited by available funds.

Required Benefits for Ministers

As stated in the *BCO*, a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Formulary No. 5) for retirement and insurance for all ministers serving the church under call or contract by paying the stipulated contributions to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. In addition, consistories must provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance for a minister and his or her immediate family (*BCO* Appendix, Formulary No. 5). The requirement also states that if the minister and his or her family elect medical coverage through a spouse's employer-sponsored group plan, the church will compensate for "any medical premium costs incurred by [the pastor's] immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated" (*BCO* Appendix, Formulary No. 5). These required benefits apply equally to full-time and part-time ministers under call or contract.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this general rule. The *BCO* states that "a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Appendix, Formulary No. 5) for retirement and insurance for all ministers serving the church under call or contract unless (a) regarding retirement, the minister is covered by the retirement plan sponsored by the Regional Synod of Canada or the retirement plan of the communion where the minister's membership is held, (b) the classis determines that the minister is serving the church part-time, as defined by the Board of Benefits Services, and that circumstances warrant that the consistory be exempt from this requirement, or (c) the minister is serving less than part-time as defined by the Board of Benefits Services" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 [2023 edition, p. 15]).

Furthermore, "the classis is responsible to care for the pastoral care of each minister and their immediate family" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 55]). In that role, it is the classis that must assure that the provisions of the call form are fulfilled for all its ministers serving in congregations or employed by an assembly, institution, or agency of the Reformed Church in America full-time and part-time under call or contract as noted above.

Retirement Services, Fidelity Investments, and Fund Management

To participate in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program (“RCA 403(b) plan”), employers must have a completed Adoption Agreement on file with the Board of Benefits Services. The adoption agreement is a compliance document that recognizes the RCA 403(b) plan as the retirement plan of the employer and allows the employer some flexibility to make certain elections with respect to the provisions of the RCA 403(b) plan. If an employer submits funds on behalf of its ministers, the board also recognizes this action as evidence that the employer has adopted the agreement. Employers should update this agreement whenever the information they submitted becomes outdated. BOBS will continue to request adoption agreements from employers as required by the plan. The adoption agreement can be downloaded from the employer section of the BOBS’ webpages (www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/RCA-403b-Adoption-Agreement.pdf).

The contribution amount payable to the RCA 403(b) plan account of full-time RCA-ordained ministers must be at least the amount of the effective buying power per household (EBPH) or 11 percent of eligible pay, whichever is greater. The EBPH amount for 2024 is \$8,236. The EBPH does not apply for part-time ministers; however, churches are still required to contribute 11 percent of eligible pay for part-time ministers. It is important that ministers review their quarterly statements from Fidelity Investments to ensure that the church is contributing the appropriate amount to their account. A contribution calculator is available on the BOBS website to assist in calculating the required contribution amount (www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/contribution-limits).

All employers are expected to use Fidelity’s Simplified Contribution Platform (SCP) or Plan Sponsor WebStation (PSW) to remit their contributions electronically to Fidelity.

BOBS creates a shell account within the Fidelity system for new participants and then Fidelity invites each new participant to complete their enrollment online through the Fidelity NetBenefits website. Participants are automatically enrolled in the appropriate target date Freedom Fund and have the option to allocate their contributions to other available funds in the lineup or select funds available through the Fidelity BrokerageLink that became available in April 2024.

Fidelity is the primary point of contact for distributions related to the RCA 403(b) plan. NetBenefits has an automatic withdrawal tool that allows participants to select the best withdrawal option for them by modeling different scenarios. This provides participants with a meaningful experience and helps them determine how much they might choose to receive, how long their money will last, and what might be left upon death. Participants are also directed to NetBenefits to set up employee contributions, change investment options, provide tax information, and list and update beneficiaries. If participants prefer, they can opt to call Fidelity and speak with a service representative who will assist them in accomplishing these tasks.

In order to maintain security and reduce fraud, Fidelity uses two-factor authentication for participants and employers performing certain high-risk transactions (password and user ID requests, rollover requests, etc.).

Fidelity provides the recordkeeping services and investment management services for both the RCA Retirement Plan and the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. In its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options available in the two retirement programs in collaboration with the GSC Investment Advisory Committee (IAC). BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by BOBS retirement consultants from Creative Planning Retirement Services, who take an active role in monitoring the investment options and administrative expenses associated with our retirement plans.

Because of a fund review with the IAC and our retirement consultants from Creative Planning, BOBS recently made changes in its investment lineup. Effective April 1, 2024, the PIMCO Total Return ESG Institutional Fund was removed from the portfolio due to poor performance. The fund has been on the watch list for several quarters. Added to the available investment options is the Fidelity BrokerageLink that offers hundreds of mutual funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs), including environmental, social, and governance (ESG) funds for those who want to invest in funds that align with their personal values. It is important for participants who use the BrokerageLink to understand that the fees associated with funds in the brokerage account are retail share class, which means they are typically higher than the institutional share funds that are part of the current fund line-up. Also, the funds in the brokerage account are not screened and monitored by BOBS, the IAC, or BOBS' retirement consultants. As such, any risk lies solely with the investing participant. Finally, Fidelity is discontinuing the Freedom Fund 2005 in June 2024. Participants who are not satisfied with their current elections are able to make changes any time by logging on to NetBenefits at netbenefits.com or by calling Fidelity at 800-343-0860.

Seventy-three percent of participant funds remain invested in the target date Fidelity Freedom Funds, and an additional six percent of participants are enrolled in the Fidelity Personalized Planning and Advice (FPPA) program. (FPPA is an optional fee-based service that provides ongoing investment management and financial planning support that aligns with the participant's personal goals and is adjusted based on the market or life changes.) Other diversified mutual funds, including three ESG options, are available to participants, as well as the newly introduced BrokerageLink.

BOBS owns 22 annuities on behalf of our participants or their beneficiaries. These annuities have been purchased with funds from the non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan and were purchased in the name of BOBS to avoid immediate taxation for the participant. In 2021, the purchase of annuities in the name of BOBS has been suspended through 2025. Participants can still purchase an annuity by taking a taxable distribution and then purchasing an annuity in their name.

Thos Shipley, retirement plan administrator, and Feifei Liu, benefit actuarial analyst and project coordinator, are in regular contact with any number of participants, beneficiaries, church administrators, clerks, and Fidelity representatives to service the needs of our participants from pre-enrollment through retirement.

Fund and Administrative Fee Changes

Effective January 1, 2022, the administrative fees charged to participants on employer contributions were reduced from 19 basis points to 10 basis points. Earnings from the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund and other corporate investment sources, a decrease in operational expenses, and an increased value in retirement plans allowed BOBS to administer its programs by collecting fewer administrative fees. Participants were not charged administrative fees for July, August, or September 2023. We are grateful that the administrative fee remains at 10 basis points for 2024.

Housing Allowance Designation

At its October 2023 meeting, the board approved the following housing allowance designation for eligible participants taking distributions from the RCA retirement plans.

For calendar year 2024, to designate up to 100% of distributions from the RCA Retirement Plan and the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program as housing allowance for participants in the plan(s) who are eligible for the housing allowance under relevant provisions of the United States Internal Revenue Code.

Housing allowance letters are emailed and mailed to retirees who have money in either plan at the end of each calendar year and are available on the BOBS' retirement webpage.

Directive from General Synod 2023

At General Synod 2023, a motion was made from the floor during the Finance report and was ultimately adopted as follows:

To instruct the Board of Benefits Services to clearly communicate to participants in the RCA Retirement Plan and in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program that the default investment options (Fidelity Freedom Funds) do not follow the current RCA investment policy statements, and may include investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production and distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms (*MGS 2023*, BBS 23-2, p. 152).

As part of the continuous education of our participants and to respond to this recommendation, BOBS wrote the following article that was published in the monthly e-newsletter and is also available on the BOBS' retirement webpage.

Did you know that BOBS has separate investment policy statements that govern corporate investments and retirement plan investments?

The investment policy statements for BOBS' corporate investments mirror the investment policy statements of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and have specific social screening constraints that have been adopted by General Synod going back to 1985.

BOBS' corporate investment portfolios must seek to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol, the business of gambling, the business of for-profit prisons, adult entertainment and pornography and firearms. The socially responsible investment guidelines for BOBS' corporate investments are not intended to be a "zero tolerance" policy and the determination, implementation, and ongoing monitoring of these guidelines is a shared responsibility of the Investment Manager and the GSC Investment Advisory Committee.

However, as stated in the retirement fund investment policy statement, the social screening investment guidelines apply only to the BOBS' endowment and operating reserve investments and do not apply to the RCA Retirement Plan and RCA 403(b) Retirement Program assets. Except for the funds as part of the Fidelity BrokerageLink, the investment options in the retirement plans, including the Freedom Funds, are monitored by the Investment Advisory Committee and BOBS' retirement consultant to ensure the objectives of the retirement fund policy statement are being achieved.

Social Screening Constraints and Environmental, Social, and Governance Investing

BOBS' corporate investments follow the current investment policy statements that require investment managers to seek to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production and distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms. These policy statements do not apply to the RCA Retirement Plan and RCA 403(b) Retirement Program assets.

BOBS currently offers three environmental, social, and governance (ESG) funds to its participants in the retirement program. In addition, the newly offered brokerage account offers a greater variety of ESG funds for participants interested in investing in funds that align with their personal values.

General Synod 2021 took two actions regarding ESG investing: CA 21-6 (*MGS 2021*, p. 206) and ONB 21-9 (*MGS 2021*, p. 119). As a result, the GSC Investment Advisory Committee (IAC) created an ESG subcommittee to discuss these two

recommendations. Two BOBS board members with professional experience in retirement plans and investing are members of the IAC and of this subcommittee.

The ESG subcommittee recognizes that the industry standards for ESG ratings and definitions are a work in progress and that the criteria and scoring methods are constantly evolving. There is also significant political and regulatory pushback of ESG standards. The subcommittee believes that the RCA is not behind the industry on incorporating ESG criteria into our corporate investment policies. In this frequently changing environment, the IAC is being cautious and prudent and continues to believe that it is not a good time to integrate ESG criteria into our corporate investment policies. The committee remains committed to balancing investment growth, fiduciary responsibility, and our ESG impact.

Selecting Investment Options

BOBS' retirement plans offer a broad array of investment options. This variety enables participants to select options that best suit their individual preference and goals. To assist with participants' selections, the investment options have been organized into four separate categories:

1. Target date funds: an asset mix of stocks, bonds, and other investments that automatically become more conservative as the fund approaches its target retirement date and beyond.
2. Core investment options: allows participants to construct a basic investment portfolio utilizing low-cost funds.
3. ESG investment options: environmental, social, and governance-themed investment options help participants find investments that align with their principles.
4. Brokerage account: provides access to a wide range of mutual funds, including ESG options, beyond those that have been designated for the retirement plans.

This approach allows participants to more easily select those investment options that are appropriate for their individual goals, values, time horizon, and risk tolerance.

For additional help with determining an investment strategy, participants should work with their personal financial advisor, visit Fidelity NetBenefits at netbenefits.com, or meet one-on-one with a Fidelity retirement consultant by calling 800-642-7131.

Additional educational resources about the various investment options can be found on the BOBS' webpages at www.rca.org/benefits/investment-options-in-the-retirement-plans.

RCA 403(b) Retirement Contribution Verification Project

The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program holds funds for 2,227 participants with a value more than \$319.8 million as of March 28, 2024. The contribution verification project

was initiated in 2012 to verify the participation and payment of the required employer contributions related to the retirement accounts of eligible ministers under call or contract. Many employers were out of compliance with the plan document and the *BCO* by not contributing the required 11 percent of compensation to the retirement accounts of eligible RCA ministers. Almost \$2 million has been collected and added to the retirement accounts of RCA ministers since this project has begun. However, as of March 31, 2024, there is still a shortfall of an estimated \$610,443 that churches should have contributed to these accounts.

The necessary information to verify the contribution amounts is requested annually from employers through the Retirement Security Form (RSF), a confidential portion of the Consistorial Report Form (CRF). Each year we request ministers' salary information, review the data, and communicate the results to the churches, collecting shortfalls in contributions as they are discovered. The process was enhanced in 2024 to better capture salary information from ministers who are also working for regional synods and classes.

Unfortunately, a significant number of churches fail to complete the RSF or do not respond to the requests for payment. Without the needed information, it is impossible for BOBS to verify that the proper contributions have been made. The plan documents and the *BCO* are clear that the responsibility for making contributions lies with the church employer. Staff feel confident that we have made reasonable efforts to collect these contributions on behalf of our participants, but we cannot do this without the cooperation of the churches.

Churches, delegates, and participants can help BOBS by:

1. Completing and submitting the Retirement Security Form in its entirety with accurate information.
2. Responding to inquiries from BOBS and, if needed, contributing the amount requested to cover the shortfall in contributions.
3. Reviewing quarterly statements to ensure that the church has made the required 11 percent contribution.

Reallocation Program

The RCA Retirement Plan is a non-qualified deferred compensation plan that holds funds for 1,158 participants with a market value of almost \$184.6 million as of March 28, 2024. This plan was closed to new participants and contributions as of December 31, 2004.

BOBS implemented a process in the summer of 2015 for participants to reallocate their retirement savings from the RCA Retirement Plan to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. This reallocation requires participants to provide relevant information to confirm their eligibility and determine the dollar amount that can be reallocated. Staff work closely with Fidelity Investments in the process and the review is completed in strict compliance with the IRS 415(c) rules.

The reallocation program was completed in the summer of 2023 in connection with the 2022 tax year. One hundred and sixty-six participants were able to reallocate \$6.7 million from the RCA Retirement Plan to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program.

The reallocation program will be conducted again in 2024 in connection with the 2023 tax year. Information about the program was sent to potentially eligible participants beginning in April 2024, and relevant data is due to BOBS by July 31, 2024. Final eligibility and the amount that can be reallocated will be determined by BOBS based on the information provided by the participant and in accordance with the IRS regulations and annual contribution limits.

More information about the reallocation program is available on the BOBS' webpage at www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/reallocation or by contacting BOBS at retirement@rca.org.

Insurance Programs

BCO Formulary No. 5 requires that churches “promise to pay the stipulated contributions to the Reformed Church in America retirement plan and provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance” for RCA-ordained ministers of Word and sacrament and their families. BOBS and the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) provide a number of insurance products so that consistories can easily fulfill this promise.

Group Life and Long-Term Disability Insurance

BOBS contracts with Lincoln Financial for both group life and long-term disability (LTD) plans that include voluntary options if participants would like to purchase increased coverage for themselves, their spouses, and their children. All eligible actively working RCA-ordained ministers who are regularly working a minimum of 17.5 hours per week are automatically enrolled in LTD insurance administered through BOBS. Those who are not enrolled in group life insurance through the RBA are also enrolled in group life insurance administered through BOBS. In providing these benefits, churches have access to an affordable group plan that allows them to easily fulfill the requirements of Formulary No. 5 for their ministers.

Commissioned pastors, while not mandated to have coverage, are eligible to enroll in BOBS' group life and LTD plans. Our policies allow an RCA-ordained minister to continue participating in the life and LTD insurances as long as he or she is actively serving as a minister and their church (whether it is an RCA church or not) pays the quarterly premiums. Beginning January 1, 2022, BOBS expanded its coverage to include ministers ordained outside of the RCA who are serving in an RCA church. Due to agreements already established by the denominations involved, this coverage does not include ministers ordained in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) or Formula of Agreement partner churches.

Ministers without charge can be covered by group life and LTD for 90 days after their last day of work. The most recent church where the minister served is

responsible for paying the premiums for this extended period. Upon termination, policies can be converted or ported to an individual plan.

Although participation in BOBS' group plans has decreased 27 percent since 2021 because of the large number of churches and ministers who have left the denomination, the budget was trimmed proportionately to maintain the same premiums rates for 2024.

Churches are billed quarterly for BOBS' group plans. In order to not jeopardize the terms of a group plan, a church must pay the premiums directly to BOBS for their pastor's coverage. Reminders are sent to the church if an invoice is not paid by the due date. If payment is not received, a notice of cancellation is sent to the minister, to the treasurer, and to the classis. The loss of or lack of coverage leaves the minister without financial security, is a violation of the *BCO*, and puts church employers out of compliance with Formulary No. 5.

To assist BOBS in administering these benefits with high integrity, churches should:

1. Keep BOBS' staff aware of current salary information. This information is requested at the time of enrollment, during each open enrollment period following and through a special campaign each summer. This information is essential so that ministers are enrolled in the proper amount of long-term disability coverage.
2. Make quarterly payments for insurance through electronic fund transfer (EFT) or by credit card instead of sending manual checks. This can be conveniently done by completing the ACH form that is part of the church's quarterly invoice or by contacting Terri Boven at tboven@rca.org.

All participants are encouraged to keep their beneficiary information up to date by using the beneficiary designation form (www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Life-Beneficiary-Form.pdf).

Cineca Anthony, BOBS' life and LTD administrator, works with churches to ensure proper insurance coverage is available and provided to eligible RCA ministers. She also guides pastors and/or their beneficiaries as they navigate the insurance system when claims need to be filed.

Reformed Benefits Association

The Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) was created in 2013 by The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America, Inc. (BOBS) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) for the provision of health and welfare benefit plans for ministers, lay employees, and retirees of each denomination and other eligible employers.

BOBS continues to collaborate with the CRCNA for the provision of medical benefits through the RBA. RCA and CRCNA entities are eligible to participate in RBA benefit offerings by agreeing to the Terms of Participation. The terms require that entities

enroll all eligible full-time staff in health insurance (unless the employee has coverage through a spouse, parent, or retiree health insurance plan). The RBA currently offers three medical insurance plans for its members: the premium plan, the consumer plan, and the Surest Plan, which replaced the previous co-pay plan in 2024. Part-time employees working a minimum of 20 hours per week are eligible to participate. Two group life insurance options are available as well as dental, vision, supplemental life, accident, and critical illness insurance.

The RCA is represented on the RBA board by Ervin Anderson, Doug Struyk, and executive director of Benefits Services Kelly Oliveira.

Minimum Standards for Insurance

As stated in Formulary No. 5 of the BCO, “Such insurance coverages shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services” (2023 edition, p. 139). For 2024, the minimum standard of coverage established by BOBS is met by offering coverage that approximates the consumer plan, as offered by the RBA.

- A coinsurance of 80 percent, an individual deductible of \$2,000, and a family deductible of \$4,000
- A maximum in-network, out-of-pocket cost of \$5,000 for an individual and \$10,000 for a family
- Coverage that is 80 percent after the deductible has been met and until the out-of-pocket maximum has been reached
- 100 percent coverage of eligible medical expenses once the out-of-pocket maximum has been met

Definition of Part Time

Similar to the requirement that BOBS set the minimum standard for medical insurance, BOBS is also required to establish the definition of “part time.” Because each provider has varying eligibility requirements, the definition of part time varies based on the product.

- For life and LTD insurance purchased through BOBS, part time is defined as working a minimum of 17.5 hours but not more than 29 hours per week. Those working 30 hours per week or more are considered full time.
- For the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, part time is defined as anyone working 1 to 29 hours per week; however, consistories are required to make contributions for all ministers serving the church under call or contract. Those working 30 hours or more are considered full time.
- For medical insurance, part time means anyone working a minimum of 20 but not more than 29 hours per week. Those working 30 hours per week or more are considered full time.

These definitions are published in the “Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information” document that is updated and distributed to ministers, churches, classis

clerks, and regional synod executives each fall. The electronic version of this document is available on the RCA website at www.rca.org/airb.

Benefits in the Future – What Will They Look Like?

Currently, the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* requires that a consistory provide the same benefits for part-time or full-time ordained ministers of Word and sacrament under call or contract. If one digs deep enough, this seems to be true for ordained ministers serving in church plants as well. The language in the *BCO* is not very clear, and people across the denomination interpret the *BCO* differently.

In the current reality of the RCA where our churches are smaller and where giving and membership is down, is the requirement of today sensible for the future? We know that many churches are struggling financially and paying for the required benefits adds to that struggle. We know that churches are hiring retirees or preaching elders to avoid the need to offer the required health, group life and long-term disability, and retirement benefits.

We are experiencing new concerns with international churches forming that are subject to the terms of the *BCO*, yet BOBS does not have a method in which to administer benefits for ministers serving in churches outside of the United States.

We are seeing newly organized churches in the United States that do not have knowledge as to what the consistory's promise to its minister should be, as outlined in the call form. Many of the newly ordained ministers in these churches are not being provided the mandated benefits as required by the *BCO*. Many are not even meeting the minimum salary guidelines established by their classis.

The danger in not providing benefits is that the minister and his or her family can be put in significant financial jeopardy should a medical crisis take place. How can they look forward to any level of financial security, either while serving the church or afterward, in retirement?

BOBS has begun exploring what a benefit package might look like for ministers of Word and sacrament who are serving in the denomination part time. Other denominations and non-profit organizations offer a different level of benefits for full-time and part-time employees. What might that look like for the RCA?

An Equitable Future

The paper "An Equitable Future" documents a conversation that took place in May 2022 in the Board of Benefits Services' office in New York City. Six people openly discussed some of the challenges that many racial and ethnic churches in the RCA face in providing the required benefits for their ministers. The paper outlines how the required benefits for RCA ministers should be studied and potentially adapted to create a system that provides more flexibility and honors cultural traditions, while also maintaining a high standard of care for RCA pastors. The paper highlights some of the realities that are preventing some churches from adequately providing for

their minister's financial well-being and realities to consider as the denomination seeks to be a multicultural denomination freed from racism.

The full paper is available on BOBS' website (www.rca.org/benefits/an-equitable-future) and was included in BOBS' report to General Synod 2023 with the following recommendation, which was adopted.

BBS 23-1

To commend "An Equitable Future" to all RCA assemblies in the United States; and further,

To direct the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, in its role as advisor to the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism, to study the paper, to partner with the racial and ethnic councils and the Board of Benefits Services to seek ways to address a more equitable future, and to report back to General Synod 2024 (*MGS 2023*, pp. 151-152).

BOBS met with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in September 2023 to discuss how we might partner together for positive change in the RCA. In a letter of response that CORE wrote to BOBS dated February 2024, CORE acknowledged the importance of this work, offered a couple of suggestions, and encouraged BOBS to continue this work as CORE's current priorities are directed in different areas. CORE left the door open to potentially working together in the future.

As stated in the paper, "The Board of Benefits Services maintains a commitment to keeping this conversation alive and to working with willing partners to create a more equitable future for all of the RCA's pastors."

Retiree Chaplains and Assistance Programs

Through the retiree chaplains program, BOBS employs a network of retired pastors and ordained elders who visit, befriend, assist, and maintain contact with over 1,100 retired RCA ministers and their spouses or surviving spouses, with lay missionaries who served for ten or more years, and with former employees of the Southern Normal School. This ministry, coordinated by Mornier Rich, has been in existence since the early 1970s and is intended to keep retirees connected to the RCA and to communicate the needs of our retirees back to BOBS. The retiree chaplains develop and maintain an intentional, personal, and pastoral relationship, especially when the retiree lives in a community where there is not an RCA congregation. As retiree chaplains meet with retirees throughout the year, they are able to identify when there is a financial need and are often the first point of contact in distributing the assistance application for new needs.

The retiree chaplains met in Holland, Michigan, on April 29 and 30, 2024, for their annual gathering. They enjoyed connecting and praying with each other and expressed their appreciation for the time to discuss their joys and challenges, both professionally and personally.

The retiree chaplains are instrumental in coordinating annual luncheons for retirees with the regional synods. The Michigan retiree luncheon took place on May 1, 2024, at the DeWitt Ministry Center. The retiree chaplains who coordinated the event asked general secretary Eddy Alemán to bring an update about the restructuring team's work.

The *In Touch* booklet is a compilation of reflections from RCA retirees that is published and mailed to retirees three times a year. Individual reflections are posted on the BOBS' webpages: www.rca.org/benefits/retirees.

The assistance program is a ministry available to eligible ministers, their surviving spouses, and dependents who are experiencing long-term or immediate financial need. Lay missionaries with ten or more years of services and former employees of the Southern Normal School are also eligible for grants from the assistance program.

- Financial assistance grants are primarily awarded for needs related to housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, funeral grants for surviving spouses, and EBPH retirement contributions for disabled ministers. At times, a one-time grant is provided for an immediate, unexpected, or urgent need.
- Financial assistance is also available for costs related to the higher education of children of deceased ministers and to assist in the payment of medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church plant.

To be eligible for monthly grants, recipients must have exhausted their retirement account(s) and have established financial need through a formal assistance application. Each year, assistance recipients are required to complete and submit a new application. Mornier Rich, coordinator of retiree chaplains and assistance programs, and Kelly Oliveira, executive director of Benefits Services, review applications and award grants for the upcoming year. Applications are distributed and reviewed throughout the year as new financial needs are presented. Twenty-five monthly grants totaling \$12,546 per month were approved and are providing assistance in 2024 for essential needs or medical insurance premiums.

As of January 2024, the retiree chaplains and assistance programs is funded only through endowment earnings and contributions. We are grateful that assessments and administrative fees from the retirement plan are no longer needed to support these critical ministries. We are also grateful for the many churches, organizations, and individuals who donate to the Assistance Fund each year. (If you would like to be one of them, visit www.rca.org/give/bobs-assistance-fund.)

Well-being, Debt Relief, and Education

To address the emotional well-being of pastors, employee assistance program (EAP) services are provided through Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services or the Reformed Benefits Association. Active and retired RCA-ordained ministers and members of their households have access to free, confidential, short-term counseling

services that are available virtually or in person at a local clinic in their community. Ministers and members of their household are entitled to up to three face-to-face consultations per issue. In addition, clergy have access to assessments, articles, videos, templates for legal forms, and training via an online library. The EAP is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To learn about these programs and find contact information, visit www.rca.org/eap. This webpage also provides a list of retreat centers, therapy resources, and spiritual directors that have been utilized by pastors who have received a Clergy Revitalization Grant.

Through our partnership with Everence Financial, clergy can participate in a seven-part financial planning process with a team of Everence Certified Financial Planners. Topics include cash flow, protections, taxes, investing, estate planning, retirement, and charitable giving. The cost of the program is \$1,500 per household; however, BOBS is able to subsidize the cost, bringing the final cost to only \$375 for ministers interested in this yearlong experience. In 2023, 20 clergy households enrolled in and began the financial planning process.

BOBS also maintains a partnership with LSS Financial Counseling to provide ministers a free service that focuses on creating a budget, debt consolidation, student loan management, and improving credit scores. This service is available not only to our pastors, but also to anyone in their household. Each person who utilizes the service receives up to six sessions with a certified financial counselor. A student loan forgiveness program is available to clergy and others who work for nonprofit organizations. Because this has significant potential for our clergy, BOBS expanded our contract to cover all RCA ministers, commissioned pastors, seminary students, GSC staff, and their households. Eligible individuals benefit from consulting with a professional from LSS Financial to navigate the student loan forgiveness program.

With the knowledge that congregational financial health is directly connected to a minister's participation in benefits, BOBS partners with Everence Financial and the Lake Institute of Faith and Giving to host Cultivating Generous Congregations learning communities for RCA churches. The curriculum is provided by the Lake Institute and presented by BOBS, Advancement, and Everence staff through a hybrid of in-person and online gatherings. This project is funded by surplus money from a previous Lilly Endowment Inc. grant, Everence, and a small fee charged to each participating congregation.

The Ministerial Excellence Fund (www.rca.org/ministerial-excellence-fund) was created to reduce or eliminate ministers' personal debt and to give them a jump-start toward long-term financial health. Grant money is available from a combination of funds from the Lilly Endowment, BOBS, and individual donations. Grant recipients are expected to disclose their financial situation, meet regularly with an accountability partner, and participate in a financial educational program.

The grant process was open during the month of February 2024, and grant review teams met to review applications in early March. Four different types of grants were offered, and \$123,000 in grants were awarded. The four types of grants include:

- Debt Relief – helps ministers become free from significant and burdensome personal debt. Recipients are granted up to \$10,000 to pay down or eliminate their personal debt.
- Matching Grant – debt relief grant for previous grantees. This grant was new for 2024 and requires a matching contribution in order to receive the grant. The matching grant provides an additional one-time grant to help pastors who have been consistent about achieving financial independence.
- Retirement Kickstart – incentivizes ministers who are behind in saving for retirement to make or increase their employee contribution into their RCA 403(b) Retirement Program account. To qualify, clergy must contribute an additional two to four percent of their salary into their account. Those awarded the grant received a contribution between \$2,000 and \$4,000 directly into their RCA 403(b) Retirement Program account.
- Clergy Revitalization – offers ministers a three-week leave to participate in a revitalization experience that includes professional counseling or spiritual direction.

The Lilly Endowment Inc. believes that financial burdens carried by pastoral leaders are significant barriers to effective, faithful, and fruitful ministry. We have heard many stories from grant recipients how the Ministerial Excellence grants and the Clergy Revitalization grants have had a positive impact on pastors, their families, and their congregations.

BOBS encourages every church to take a special offering to give to their pastor in October, November, or December. As an extension of the Ministerial Excellence Fund, BOBS provides a matching grant of up to \$2,000 to pay down student loans or medical debt. Ministers are encouraged to take this opportunity to invest in themselves by using their own money to receive the matching grant if their church is not able to participate. We are pleased that, in total, over \$93,000 in student loans and medical debts was paid down for ministers in the 2023 Bless Your Pastor campaign (www.rca.org/bless-your-pastor). Since 2019, over 115 ministers have received a grant from the Bless Your Pastor campaign. This opportunity will be offered again in 2024.

BOBS continues to offer “Ready to Retire” workshops three times annually. The interactive online workshop helps attendees understand timelines, tasks, and resources available as they prepare to retire. Participants age 55 and above who are not yet retired are invited to attend. Spouses are encouraged to attend as well. Attendees have provided positive feedback through a follow-up evaluation and expressed their gratitude for the experience. These workshops have prompted ministers and other participants to engage BOBS in individual conversations that help them think through next steps for their particular situation.

In partnership with Fidelity, BOBS continues to offer complimentary one-on-one consultations with a Fidelity retirement advisor. For years, BOBS has offered in-person consultations at General Synod and sporadically throughout the year in

various locations. Due to an increased demand, BOBS expanded this offering through virtual appointments available over a two- to three- day period. Because of the high participant engagement, BOBS will offer these one-on-one consultations every other month in 2024 as well as the in-person consultations at General Synod.

Newly ordained ministers of Word and sacrament are invited into a conversation in which they learn about the benefits promised to them in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, are oriented to the services provided by BOBS, walk through the steps to complete their Fidelity enrollment, and become grounded in their benefits knowledge early in their ministry. These conversations also provide basic knowledge of clergy housing allowance and self-employment taxes. BOBS feel confident that when ministers enter the ministry talking about and understanding their finances, benefits, and retirement savings, they will be more equipped to lead their congregations in financial discussions. Through these conversations, BOBS has discovered when a minister's call did not include the required benefits, which provides an opportunity to further educate the church and classis or to learn about the church's barriers in providing the required benefits.

The Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information booklet is updated and distributed in September. This annual publication is a guide for ministers, consistories, classes, and regional synods that clearly communicates the benefit requirements for ministers, information about the benefits administered through BOBS and the RBA, and tips and tools for participating in these benefits. In September 2023, an email link was sent to all ministers, churches, classes, and regional synods, and a hard copy was mailed to each RCA church. A PDF copy of the booklet can be found online at www.rca.org/airb.

The Board of Benefits Services' monthly newsletter has a blend of critical information about our retirement and insurance plans, regular communication about clergy who have passed away, and financial health articles written specifically for clergy. Recognizing that clergy finance and church finance are interwoven with one another, BOBS continues to provide articles that relate to both personal finance for clergy as well as leadership topics about congregational stewardship and generosity. These articles are featured in BOBS newsletters, on social media, on the BOBS financial health webpage (www.rca.org/benefits/financial-health), and on Faithward.org.

The BOBS webpages (www.rca.org/benefits) are regularly updated with new resources that help participants understand how to navigate their insurance and retirement plans. Ministers, lay people, and employers can access the webpages to find forms, plan documents, policies, and educational materials. Key enhancements in this past year include:

- A new page detailing the four different investment options in the fund line-up: Fidelity Freedom Funds; Core Investment Options; Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) investments; and the new brokerage link that became available in 2024.
- A response to a recommendation from General Synod 2023 regarding the need to communicate that the investments in the retirement funds do not

follow the corporate investment policy statements and may include investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production and distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms.

- A distributions option page offers an easy-to-read summary of the elections available in each retirement plan.
- A custom webpage for classis clerks and regional synod executives that includes approximately 20 quick links to the most commonly requested BOBS information so they can do their work in caring for ministers.
- A webpage that contains the salary minimum guidelines from each classis and regional synod, designed to provide a resource for ministers, consistories, and classis leaders.
- A complete overhaul of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) webpage that now lays out a path for eligible participants to access important services offered. Additionally, a list of retreat centers, counselors, and spiritual directors was added for those seeking any of those services.

Board and Staff Transitions

The Board of Benefits Services expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Steve Giordano, Charles Kleinhesselink, Kelvin Kronemeyer, Gene Poll, Jane Richardson, and Bob Terwilliger for their faithful service as retiree chaplains. BOBS welcomes Douglas Banks, David Blauw, Carl Boersma, Edward Schmidt, Thomas Smith, and Paul Wernlund as new retiree chaplains.

BOBS also thanks Leanne Bough and Ralph Condis for their service as board members.

Annual Audit and Finances

For additional information about the annual audit and BOBS' finances, please see the report of the Office of Finance.

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The *Book of Church Order* states that “the [Commission on Christian Action] shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2023 edition, pp. 113-114]).

The Commission on Christian Action (CCA) takes seriously its role of calling the church to faithful and persistent witness and action in the world and so exhorts the church to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-10).

Work Assigned to This Commission by the 2023 General Synod

The General Synod of 2023 directed, through CA 23-2, that a member of the CCA meet alongside one representative each from the Commission on Theology, General Synod Council, RCA legal counsel, RCA human resources, and RCA financial offices related to investigating and understanding the denominational policies (if any) and use of nondisclosure agreements and other practices in the ending of staff relationships. This work was undertaken and a separate report from that ad-hoc committee may be found in this workbook on pages 99-103.

Peace in the Holy Land

In 2023, the CCA presented and the General Synod adopted recommendations related to praying for peace in the Holy Land (that is, the lands of Israel and Palestine) along with recommending resources and study trips that are often undertaken by RCA members with the leadership of mission partners.

Little did we know that not four months later, a horrifying terrorist attack and overwhelming retribution would violently, and perhaps permanently, destroy the fragile hopes for peace in the region. The CCA was asked at that time to write an amending preamble to the resources we offered the 2023 General Synod. We did this, but our conversations on this matter did not end there.

As people of faith thousands of miles away, many of us felt helpless to understand or act in regard to a war that was callously litigated in every corner of the media. Support for Israel’s right to defend itself was seen as supporting a genocide of innocent Palestinians. Attempts to underline that the majority of Palestinians are peaceful people not associated with terrorism was understood to be full-throated anti-Semitism. Those who argued for a ceasefire were often misunderstood as placaters and enablers. Amid the rampant misunderstanding and entrenched hostility, we saw glimmers of hope. One of these glimmers came to us from an event in the Albany, New York, area, where RCA leaders in coalition with other faith leaders, as well as by the Churches for Middle East Peace organization (cmep.org),

made space for one another. The Commission on Christian Action shares the following letter of this accidental hope from Rev. Mashona Walston, member of the CCA and senior minister of First Church in Albany, New York.

“Do your little bit of good where you are;
it’s those little bits of good put together
that overwhelm the world.”
- Desmond Tutu

The continuous tragedy occurring in the Middle East has pulled the world into wanting and calling for peace. Is our desire simply a cease fire? Is peace only the absence of bombs and gunfire? Oh, my dear siblings in Christ. We know that peace is about forgiveness, wholeness, and restoration.

So, what can regular, everyday Christians do? A few of us at The First Church in Albany are trying to do our little bit of good from where we exist in our everyday lives. As I share our “little bits” I encourage you to do what you can from where you live, work, and worship.

Our first “little bit” happened quite accidentally. The First Church in Albany is in the capital of New York State. Last year before the violence we agreed to host the January 2024 “Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Capital Area Council of Churches Annual gathering.” This event brings together several religious groups to remember the legacy of Dr. King. Well, on the night of the event, we all gathered in the sanctuary. Christians, Jews, and Muslims. During the ceremony I could feel a tension among the clergy. It was not the usual tension of nervousness. There was pain in the air. We gathered to remember America’s history of apartheid. We gathered in the history of rabbis and Jews marching and dying alongside African American Christians and Muslims in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. There we gathered as rabbis, cantors, ministers, and imams. The rabbi and the imam were very civil and cordial. That made it easy to seat them near one another without being side to side. Each spoke of peace during their time. The imam left early. We did not end the war in the Middle East that night. However, The First Church in Albany was neutral territory where all felt safe enough to attend and participate in remembering the cries for justice.

Our next acts include:

- Prayer for peace travelers to the Middle East.
- Talks with those in our congregation who are willing.
- Keeping our ears open as to how we can support the peace efforts. We are planning on hosting another community gathering led by John Paarlberg where congregations for peace will gather.

Finally, I invite you to join in overwhelming the world with whatever you can contribute for peace in the Middle East.

The CCA commends the leaders who made space for one another. We also commend the work being done by “regular, everyday” Christians across North America and in the Holy Land as well.

We encourage RCA members and friends far and wide to dig into the resources found on Churches for Middle East Peace’s website, cmep.org. We recommend further the work done by Revs. Joshua Vis and Chris DeBlaay, the RCA mission partners doing the denomination’s work in relation to the Holy Land. More about them, their work, and the immersion tours they lead can be found at www.joshvis.com.

In our ongoing efforts to encourage a just and lasting peace in the region, we offer the recommendation below. We fully understand that by the time June 2024 arrives, the situation will have evolved, and these words may no longer be relevant. We trust the body to amend or dispense with them as appropriate.

CA 24-1

To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States, the United States Secretary of State, and the United States ambassador to the United Nations advocating for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, as well as a letter to the prime minister of Canada commending his call for the same; and further,

To direct the general secretary to send a communication to the churches and assemblies of the Reformed Church in America, encouraging them to write to their representatives, senators, or members of Parliament to advocate for a ceasefire and recommitment to a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine.

Mental Health Awareness and Care

Churches play a vital role in the lives of many people and there are congregants attending every single one of our churches who are having struggles with their mental health. Many don’t know what to do, how to go about getting the help that they need, or what to do if they can’t afford that help. Since COVID the demand for mental health assistance has increased, with a 25 percent increase in cases of depression and anxiety.¹

¹ “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” World Health Organization, March 2, 2022, www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide

What if the church could be the first step in helping those who struggle by providing resources in-house or through partnership with other organizations? What if the church was seen as a place of safety and respite, and not only for the 64 percent of Americans² or 53 percent of Canadians³ who identify as Christians? This could look different from church to church depending on what skills and resources that congregation has. For some congregations it looks like sponsorship of community events, or making church spaces available for community group use. It might look like local advocacy for mental health care in schools or funding for local hospital resources. Perhaps it simply looks like congregations and their leaders getting education from local health care professionals. Whatever the situation for each church might be, connecting with mental healthcare professionals and building a plan to support your community is more important than ever.

Unfortunately, the stigma around mental health and the need for mental health care is overwhelming for many. The church could use this opportunity to peel back the curtain, removing shame from the equation, and allowing a space for true healing and transformation. This could look like any number of things:

- Pastors educating the congregation about the importance of mental health practices and the biblical case for caring for oneself and others
- Identifying ways that the church can support people with mental health concerns or mental illness
- Providing easy-to-navigate resources and opportunities for connection for those too overwhelmed or ashamed to seek help
- Working to promote acceptance of those with mental health issues by sharing personal stories more broadly

The commission wishes we could say that being a Christian means one doesn't struggle with mental health or mental illness. What we can say is that, as Christians, we can have and offer hope for those among us who do struggle with these things. One in four Americans⁴ has been diagnosed with a mental health illness—and that doesn't account for the number undiagnosed. So how do we offer hope to that many people? How do we offer that hope when we are among the one out of four?

² Sarah McCammon, Michael Levitt, Kathryn Fox, "America's Christian majority is shrinking, and could dip below 50% by 2070," *National Public Radio*, September 15, 2022, www.npr.org/2022/09/15/1123289466/americas-christian-majority-is-shrinking-and-could-dip-below-50-by-2070

³ Nicole Thompson, "More Canadians than ever have no religious affiliation, census shows," *CBC News*, October 27, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/canadian-census-religious-affiliation-none-1.6631293

⁴ "8 Eye-Opening Mental Health Statistics around the Globe," *Mighty Pursuit*, https://mightypursuit.com/blog/8-eye-opening-mental-health-statistics-around-the-globe/?gad_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA6KWvBhAREiwAFPZM7lcznTdelLsqX-G6995UZQRi7qxfwMZ9QuERvh9qrrlmGjgTp61DxoCuv8QAvD_BwE

Perhaps, like the poor mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 26:11, mental illness will always be with us. While the Commission on Christian Action is not at this time making a recommendation related to mental health and mental illness, we strongly encourage members of all RCA churches and assemblies to connect with the professionals in your community who are trained in these matters or the faith communities already doing this work, and seek ways to offer hope.

Spiritual Abuse

In 2022, the CCA began researching the topic of spiritual abuse, bringing a recommendation to the General Synod of 2023. That recommendation was adopted as CA 23-7: “To invite and welcome members of the congregations, classes, and regional synods of the Reformed Church in America to educate themselves on the resources highlighted in the CCA’s 2023 report as well as other resources on spiritual abuse in order to equip congregations and members to address spiritual abuse, both locally and systemically (ADOPTED)” (*MGS 2023*, p. 164).

At the conclusion of this section of the report, we will reshare those resources with some new additions.

The troubling phenomenon of spiritual abuse is defined as “when someone uses spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare or control you.”⁵ This specifically and often includes the misuse of religious authority for personal gain or control, and is increasingly being unveiled in the church. As congregants look to their church leaders for guidance and support, oft-unseen moments of abuse present a significant challenge to the spiritual health and well-being of those in RCA churches.

Spiritual abuse takes many forms, but common examples include manipulation, coercion, and the imposition of rigid, extrabiblical rules and regulations in the name of faith. These actions can result in emotional, psychological, and even physical harm to individuals who are led to believe that their spirituality and salvation are dependent on unquestioning obedience to their faith leaders. The power differentials inherent in the clergy-congregant relationship can exacerbate these abuses, leaving victims feeling isolated, confused, and powerless to seek help.

One of the contributing factors to the rise of spiritual abuse in the church may stem from cultures of authoritarianism that have taken root in various areas of the church, including within the RCA. This authoritarianism is often justified by strict adherence to a single interpretation of Scripture, which can be used to legitimize abusive behavior and control. In some cases, church leaders may exploit their positions of authority to silence dissent, enforce conformity, and perpetuate a climate of fear among their constituents.

⁵ “Spiritual Abuse,” 1800 Respect, www.1800respect.org.au/violence-and-abuse/spiritual-abuse#:~:text=What%20is%20spiritual%20abuse%3F,you%20don't%20want%20to

Furthermore, the lack of accountability mechanisms (or awareness of how to operate these) can enable spiritual abuse to go unchecked, including in the RCA. Without robust oversight and processes for addressing allegations of abuse, perpetrators may continue to operate with impunity, causing further harm to those under their influence. The complexities of navigating these issues within the context of a religious community can make it even more challenging for survivors to come forward and seek justice.

It is essential for the RCA to take proactive steps to address the issue of spiritual abuse within not only its congregations but the denomination as a whole. This may involve implementing training programs for clergy and church leaders on recognizing and preventing spiritual abuse, as well as creating safe channels where members can report instances of abuse without fear of retaliation. Additionally, establishing independent review boards or ombudsman offices to investigate allegations of abuse and hold perpetrators accountable could help to create a culture of transparency and accountability within the denomination.

As members of the RCA grapple with the rise of spiritual abuse, it is crucial for the denomination to uphold its commitment to justice, compassion, and the ethical stewardship of religious authority. By taking decisive action to address these concerns, the RCA can work toward creating a safer and more supportive environment for all its members, where the values of faith, integrity, and respect are upheld.

We encourage all those within the RCA to familiarize yourself with what spiritual abuse is, and to look into the resources the CCA offered last year and again below.

Online Resources

- Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (www.netgrace.org)
- The RCA's We Are Speaking statement (www.rca.org/we-are-speaking/)
- The RCA's Church Sexual Harassment and Abuse Policy Resources (www.rca.org/about/government/consistory/resources/church-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-policy-resources/)
- Faithward's "Addressing Sexual Abuse and Violence in Worship" Resources (www.faithward.org/addressing-sexual-abuse-and-violence-in-worship-resources)
- My Sanctuary Healing, Inc. (<https://mysanctuaryhealing.org/home-page/>): A therapy clinic owned/operated by members of RCA churches/pastors, specializing in spiritual abuse recovery
- Resources from CBE International (the RCA is a member organization)
 - www.cbeinternational.org/?s=spiritual+abuse
 - https://cbeinternational.christianbook.com/page/tcg/cbei/cbei-abuse?navcocat=cbeinternational_Relationships|Abuse
- RCA resources on racial trauma and dismantling racism (www.rca.org/about/dismantling-racism/anti-racism-policy)
- Tears of Eden (www.tearsofeden.org/resources)

Print Resources

- *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*, by Jennifer Baldwin
- *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse*, by Neil Damgaard
- *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, by Chuck DeGroat
- *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, by Diane Langberg

To underscore our deep concern regarding spiritual abuse, we offer:

CA 24-2

To direct the General Synod Council to undertake study on spiritual abuse, utilizing resources from CBE International, Tears of Eden, and others listed in the Commission on Christian Action's report to the 2024 General Synod, as well as opening communication with My Sanctuary Healing and other RCA-connected spiritual abuse professionals to explore resources that may be shared and/or developed for use in RCA congregations, assemblies, and affiliated institutions, reporting back to the 2025 General Synod.

With gratitude for the work of the CCA and my fellow commissioners, I submit this report.

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead
Moderator

Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

“The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families” (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition, p. 121]).

Future of the Commission

The role of commissions has shifted throughout the history of the denomination, and the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE) is no exception. This past year, the commission members have been asking if it is important to have denomination-wide, inter-classis conversations about education and discipleship, and the resounding answer is YES. The CCDE is a volunteer group with a budget much smaller than a single full-time staff person, and the commission wants to reiterate the value of a diverse and unique group of Reformed Church in America (RCA) leaders.

As the commission reflected on the changes throughout the denomination, it seems that the denomination needs to make a stronger case for the usefulness and value of a denominational structure to individual churches. Commissions have been doing good and important work, but how many churches and classes are aware of the work that is being done? Promoting the visibility of education and discipleship seems to be as important as the actual work so that churches and RCA organizations can see the value of belonging to an institution with resources and expertise. When it comes to facing the core issues of the early 21st century, the RCA is well-equipped to engage with the mental health crisis, intergenerational mentoring, and intergenerational conversations.

The denomination has so much knowledge, training, and resources, as well as seminaries and institutions of higher learning, and the CCDE can be vital in connecting churches with these sources. There are conferences for continuing education like APCE, sabbaticals, and grant funding for research and programs. The denomination has a wealth of information on adult ministries, mentorship, and intergenerational conversations, as well as youth and children’s ministry curriculum. But how many individual RCA churches know about the CCDE or the larger RCA resources?

The CCDE would love to raise the visibility of this commission by making a more concerted effort to connect with individual churches in each of the regional synods and find out what they need to do their work in education and discipleship. This connection can also be a catalyst for fostering and opening relationships of support in overwhelmed and understaffed churches. While acknowledging the shared significant undertaking, the commission would love to expand its size to include members from each synod. The RCA version of the body of Christ may be smaller, but the work still requires unity among our diversity, and there is still much work to be done.

“The commission shall develop and advocate for strategies for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition, p. 121]).

“The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship with RCA congregations” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition, p. 121]).

Denominational Resources: Generation Spark and Renovations

At the commission’s January in-person meeting, Annalise Radcliffe and Ruth Langkamp were welcomed to share about the work they have been doing in education and discipleship through Generation Spark and Renovations. These are exciting programs that are bearing good fruit in many churches throughout the RCA. The commission is excited about the future of these programs but also concerned that many churches still do not realize they are eligible to participate. For example, Ruth shared about one church in the Generation Spark program with only one young person leading the program in her church. This young person was using Generation Spark to empower the older people in her congregation to share their stories of God’s faithfulness in their lives, as well as recognizing the continuing work they can be a part of in the church. The program also offers training for mentors and could be helpful for congregations looking for young people. These are both examples of churches that could participate in the program but might not have realized they were eligible. The commission would like to work with Renovations and Generation Spark to expand communication with churches.

Another way the commission envisions connecting churches with RCA staff, assemblies, and institutions is through conversations and resources about primary identity in Christ, as well as hospitality training for churches in discussing issues of gender identity. The commission has found that there are abundant resources and learning opportunities available to churches, but mentorship and connection to these resources are needed. The commission is working on a plan to make these resources more accessible to churches by offering them in “bite-sized” pieces.

The commission was encouraged by conversations with these RCA staff who, among others, are doing important and meaningful work throughout the country, partnering with churches, finding grant money, encouraging innovation and intergenerational ministries, and ensuring that people of all ages are welcomed into faith institutions. The commission looks forward to a continued partnership as we look for ways to help churches access the fantastic resources the RCA has available.

Denominational Newsletter and Faithward

Another way the commission has sought to collaborate with RCA staff in the work that they are doing is by reaching out to Christina Tazelaar, chief operating officer of the RCA, to ask if there was any way that the commission could assist in the RCA News and Resources email newsletter. As the commission is always seeking ways to serve and equip our churches in the discipleship and education work that is being

done, the commission realized that this was a resource that already existed as a way to connect, equip, and provide resources to churches, volunteers, and staff. The newsletter follows themes for each season and in each of these themes there are, of course, ways that all can be leaning into Christian education and discipleship. The commission's goal was to help partner in the wonderful work the RCA staff, like Christina Tazelaar and writer and editor Becky Getz, are already doing, in helping create content alongside each topic that would be easily accessible to the average volunteer or church staff. The commission was wisely advised that a lot of our people are tired, and therefore long, drawn-out lists, articles, etc. would not be helpful. Instead, quick, easy reads and accessible resources have been the goal.

Along with partnering whenever possible with News and Resources, the commission has been creating content for Faithward, writing not just for the RCA but for a wider ministry context. As the commission is made up of a variety of people—college professors, pastors, social workers, elders, deacons, and volunteers—it gives each the opportunity to share their own perspective and experiences around the themes for each season. The commission is able to write as those who are serving churches and as those who are serving Christ out in the world in other spheres. In doing so, the hope is to be able to connect with others who are, likewise, serving churches in a variety of ways, engaging in the varied topics together.

As the commission is seeking to help serve and equip churches and members in all areas of Christian education and discipleship, it has been a joy to partner with staff in the work that they are doing to care for churches and those who are leading them.

“The commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church's teaching ministry” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition., p. 121]).

Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE)

As a commission, we strongly advocate for professional development as a way to support and encourage Christian educators. The Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE) is doing this work faithfully and is an excellent source for curriculum and resources. The 2024 annual conference was held in St. Louis and included visible RCA participation from event co-chair Rev. Jon Brown from Jersey City, director of women's transformation and leadership Liz Testa, preachers Phil and Stephanie Doeschot, Children and Worship leaders Carol Jones and Ellen Vellinga, and others.

These events are useful ways for Christian educators, whether they are volunteers, working part time, or working full time, to connect with others, encourage each other, find inspiration and resources, and fellowship together. One resource promoted at the APCE annual conference that is aimed at faith formation leaders in the Reformed tradition is Opening Doors to Discipleship (www.odtd.net), which represents an enormous amount of work and provides a wealth of useful resources to educators of all positions. The commission would like to highlight this resource.

We continue to advocate for Christian educators to attend this conference. The commission urges each congregation to show their love and support for Christian education by sending at least one Christian educator to the annual APCE event next year and providing financial support for them to attend. Next year's APCE event will be held in Memphis, Tennessee, from January 29 to February 1, 2025.

Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA)

In conjunction with the APCE annual event in January 2024, the Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA) held its 43rd annual meeting. With some approximately 30 RCA educators present, hailing from from Washington to New Mexico to New York and many places in between, a new vision for the RCA and CERCA is being cast.

We recognize that the look of the RCA is going to be different going forward, and we will need to do some things differently. Denominational staff are attempting to navigate this and are committed to listening and working with our congregations during this time of restructuring. Interim director of the center Phil Assink, director of diversity and belonging Jeremy Simpson, director of future church innovation Annalise Radcliffe, and coordinator of next generation engagement Ruth Langkamp all expressed their conviction of the importance of discipleship and education in our churches as we work together moving forward.

The CCDE also encourages those working in RCA Christian discipleship and education ministries to consider applying for a CERCA scholarship to help defray the cost of an educational opportunity that will provide personal and professional growth. The scholarship application can be downloaded at www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CCDE-scholarship-application.pdf.

Respectfully submitted,
Mark Swart, moderator

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2023 edition, pp. 69-70]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, the General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the *Book of Church Order* in this way (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2023 edition, p. 114]):

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed newer ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how

best to witness to the gospel of Christ, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming the world at this point in history.

This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents yearly to General Synod. The report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but on the work and witness of the RCA.

World Council of Churches (WCC)

The World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.” The WCC gathers its fellowship from 352 churches in 120 countries, representing over 580 million Christians worldwide.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years. Between assemblies, the WCC is governed by the Central Committee. This body meets every two years and last met for its first session on June 21-27, 2023, in Geneva, Switzerland. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as the RCA’s delegate to the WCC Central Committee.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: The WCC invites Christians to join in prayer January 18-25 for the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” and offers resources for worship, prayer, and Bible study. This year’s materials were prepared by an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso facilitated by the local Chemin Neuf Community. The theme was “You shall love the Lord your God... and your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27). The commission urges churches, pastors, and elders to mark their calendars for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and make use of the rich resources created by the WCC each year.

Public Statements: This year, the WCC has made public statements on the war on Ukraine and the war in Israel and Palestine, among many other world issues. All the published WCC public statements can be read in full on the WCC website (www.oikoumene.org). The commission urges pastors and churches to read and engage these statements through discussion, prayer, and ministry contexts. Included below are segments from the WCC’s “Statement on the War in Palestine and Israel,” which was released at the WCC executive committee meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, on November 8-14, 2023, and which demanded an immediate ceasefire and opening of humanitarian corridors in Palestine and Israel.

We look to the Holy Land with a heavy heart for all the death, destruction, and trauma being inflicted on the people of the land. We listen to the cries of innocent children, women, and men who suffer so grievously and unjustly from this brutal violence. We lament with all who suffer – Israelis bereaved, held hostage, or otherwise affected by the attacks on 7 October, the people of Gaza displaced from their homes, grieving for loved ones buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings, and enduring continuous intense bombardment.

We yearn for peace and for justice, for an end to the seemingly endless cycle of violence and suffering, and for its fundamental root causes to be addressed. We lament the abject failure of the international community and of political leaders in the region who did not persist in the search for a sustainable peace founded on justice and mutual respect for the equal human dignity and rights of all, and who kept the cycle of violence turning. As we stand on this precipice of morality and faith, we pray for peace, for justice, for wisdom, for understanding, and for restoration of our humanity.

The World Council of Churches joins in the international shock and outrage at the brutal attacks on Israeli communities by Hamas militants on 7 October 2023. We condemn the attacks on civilians, the killing of so many innocent children, women, and men, as well as the taking of hostages and the use of civilians as human shields.

Examining the current situation in Gaza, under attack from Israeli armed forces, the WCC, together with the churches of the region, are outraged by and condemn Israel's disproportionate retaliation. We have seen the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, hospitals, churches, and mosques by Israeli forces. The death toll has surpassed 11,000 - over two-thirds of them children and women - and the number of injured 37,000. Attacks on churches and their institutions, including shelters for displaced civilians – especially children and women who have lost their homes due to Israeli airstrikes on residential areas since the war began – are totally unacceptable....

The executive committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, on 8-14 November 2023, lifts up before our loving and merciful God, the suffering and traumatized people in the land of Jesus Christ's birth. We highlight the lifelong and potentially inter-generational consequences of the terrible trauma that children in both Palestine and Israel are experiencing. We lament that the heads of churches in Jerusalem, due to the current circumstances of the war, concluded that they had to cancel the celebrations of Advent and Christmas. We pray for peace in the land, a sustainable and just peace founded at last on recognition and respect for the God-given human dignity and equal human rights of all people – Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians alike – rather than a false "peace" imposed by occupation and force of arms which cannot and should not be sustained.

The executive committee:

Appeals for respect by all parties for the God-given life and dignity of every human being.

Further appeals for respect for the principles of international humanitarian law, especially for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure – including hospitals (such as the al-Ahli, al-Shifa, and al-Quds hospitals), places of worship and holy sites (such as the St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church), and UN premises – and calls for full and impartial legal accountability for all violations of these principles by whomsoever committed.

Demands the immediate, unconditional release and safe return of all hostages.

Demands an immediate ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors and calls for guarantees of the unimpeded distribution and delivery of vital humanitarian assistance, including water, food, medical supplies, and fuel, and the reinstatement of electricity and internet services in Gaza.

Urges the UN and relevant authorities to investigate all war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law committed from 7 October 2023 until the end of the war, where truth must prevail and accountability must be ensured so that such crimes may not happen again and again.

Implores the UN Security Council to overcome the obstructive partisanship that is preventing it from fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to the current conflict in accordance with the principles of international law, including in relation to the need for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Refutes all those who seek to portray the current conflict in religious terms, misusing scripture to justify violence, killing, cruelty, and oppression; we reject and denounce all such efforts to distract from the root causes of the conflict in the region.

Stresses its grave concern about the proliferation of hateful acts and expressions of antisemitism and of hatred of Arabs and Muslims in the region and the wider world against the background of the current violence. In light of attacks on Jews all over the world who are falsely held responsible for the actions of the Israeli government, we reiterate the executive committee's acknowledgment one year ago of "the legitimate fears of Jewish people around the world of the shortness of the trajectory from antisemitic attitudes and hate speech to genocide" and its reaffirmation of "the categorical denunciation by the WCC's founding assembly in Amsterdam of antisemitism as sin against God and humanity."

Rejects any attempts to transfer Palestinians outside Gaza, permanently or temporarily.

Urges all members of the international community to re-engage in active and sustained support of efforts for a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, based upon an end to the illegal occupation and to the siege of Gaza, recognition of the equal human rights of all, and the applicable principles of international law. Without this, peace cannot be sustained and the recurrent cycle of violence is tragically likely to continue.

Reiterates the WCC 11th Assembly's categorical condemnation of all such deadly and destructive violence, whether perpetrated by Israeli forces or by Palestinian armed groups, which only perpetuates the cycle of violence and reaffirms the Assembly's observation that the situation in the region cannot ultimately be resolved by violence but only by peaceful means in accordance with international law.

Expresses the worldwide ecumenical movement's profound solidarity with all the people of the region in the midst of the current violent upheavals and uncertainty for the safety and security of their communities.

Invites all member churches and ecumenical partners, together with all people of goodwill, to pray for peace and to actively support the ministries of the churches of the region and ecumenical and interfaith initiatives for justice, peace, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

The full statement can be found at

www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-war-in-palestine-and-israel.

World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is a global Christian communion comprised of over 100 million Christians in 110 countries in more than 230 member denominations, including Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian churches. Members in North America include the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

The focus statement of the WCRC is "Called to Communion and Committed to Justice." Rather than a loose federation of churches ordinarily termed a "council," the WCRC takes very seriously the biblical concept of *koinonia*, commonly translated as "communion." In our diversity, we seek to be a living expression of "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC engages in theological dialogues on the global level.

In being committed to justice, the WCRC's justice work includes promoting ecological, economic, and gender justice. Further, it advocates for peace and reconciliation in the world's "hot spots." With all the partners God provides, we work

for the transformation of the whole world so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

In 2023, the WCRC held its first in-person Executive Committee meeting since COVID in Johannesburg, South Africa. The 2024 annual Executive Committee meeting will occur in West Michigan on May 18-22. Additionally, the regional expression of the WCRC, the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC), will meet in the Cayman Islands in October 2024. Finally, planning for the next General Council, scheduled for October 2025 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is underway, with many groups working at various components of preparation.

Since mid-2021, the WCRC has functioned with a “Collegial General Secretariat” model, which included the Executive Secretary for Communications, Philip Tanis of the Reformed Church in America. Phil has completed his second and final term, and we gratefully acknowledge his work on behalf of the WCRC and the RCA. The Rev. Setri Nyomi, from Accra, Ghana, has been named Acting General Secretary until a new General Secretary of the communion may be installed. The Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal continues as WCRC Vice President from the Caribbean and North America region.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal

As a sign of the RCA’s further commitment to the WCRC, Revs. Jeff and Chelsea Lampen have accepted God’s call to partner with RCA Global Mission and the WCRC and are in the process of relocating to Hannover, Germany, to pastor the Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover (RELISH)—a multicultural and multigenerational church seeking to disciple the English-speakers in Hannover to the glory of Jesus Christ—and to provide crucial support locally as well as internationally as the WCRC continues to bring Reformed bodies into unity and collaboration. To learn more about the Lampens’ mission and to discover ways to support them financially or in prayer, please visit www.rca.org/lampen or email jeffery.lampen@gmail.com.

Our participation in the WCRC consultation in Asia during the fall of 2023 provided another valuable occasion to come together and engage in global ecumenical work. We worshiped, delved into Scriptures during the gathering, and initiated discussions on important agenda items for the upcoming 2025 General Assembly in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Leaders from diverse Reformed traditions and continents convened at the consultation, fostering dialogue, prayer, and discernment on crucial topics leading up to next year’s assembly in Thailand. The RCA was well represented by two ministerial representatives, Rev. Laura Osborne and Rev. Carlos Corro. Additionally, we were grateful to see our fellow RCA colleague, Phil Tanis, participating in this consultation as one of his final ecumenical assignments before returning to the U.S. in 2024.

Global Christian Forum (GCF)

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) creates space for a new methodology of worldwide ecumenical dialogue based on relational fellowship. The Global Christian Forum seeks to widen the ecumenical table, drawing together world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches.

Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, the GCF is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the Global South, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF's work.

The Guiding Purpose Statement of the Global Christian Forum is “to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.”

The Global Christian Forum is planning its fourth Global Gathering on April 14-19, 2024, in Ghana. The theme of the gathering is “that the world may know” from John 17:23b. A Youth Pre-Assembly will also be held under the same theme.

Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the International Committee of the Global Christian Forum and on a task force planning the next Global Gathering. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as a youth delegate to the International Committee and as a consultant to the team planning the Youth Pre-Assembly to the 2024 Global Gathering.

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC)

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include over 40 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations nationwide. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC, and our general secretary, the Rev. Eddy Alemán, serves on its governing board. The RCA is also represented on the NCC's Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations, Christian Education, Faith Formation and Leadership, and Faith and Order.

In May 2023, the NCC launched a two-year celebration leading up to the organization's 75th anniversary in 2025. It held a special worship service at the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., on May 16, concurrent with the Spring Governing Board meeting. At that meeting, the Rev. Vashti Murphy McKenzie, a retired bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was announced as the new president and general secretary. She has been serving as interim president and general secretary since April 2022.

Looking toward the future, Bishop McKenzie plans to add more activism to the NCC's long history of advocacy on important issues such as world peace, gun violence, antiracism efforts, and economic and social justice. The NCC hosted its annual Christian Unity Gathering as a hybrid event in Nashville, Kentucky, in October, titled "Faith Under Fire: The Church in the Public Square." Session topics included "Courageous and Faithful Witness in the Public Square," "Christian Extremism and Christian Supreme-ism (i.e. supremacy)," "Faith Leaders Transforming Public Safety and Communities," "Religious Nationalism and the Persecution of Religious Minorities in Global Contexts, with a Focus on the Situation of Christians in India and Artsakh," and two sessions on gun violence.

The NCC's Faith and Order Convening Table met in person in May to review articles written by members of three study groups on issues relating to ending racism: "Awakening to the Reality of Racism as the Original Sin of the U.S.," "Confronting White Supremacy as the Defining Myth of the U.S.," and "Transforming the Church and Humanizing the Public Square." A book bringing together these articles is in the process of publication. Kitt Jackson has been representing the RCA at that convening table and submitted an article describing the steps our denomination has taken over the years to address and dismantle racism.

The members of the Faith and Order Convening Table have chosen the Nicene Creed as their next topic of study, concurrent with the World Council of Churches celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed in 2025. General headings of a planned publication would include the historical importance of Nicaea, the meaning of Nicaea for us today, and the importance of Nicaea moving forward.

Christian Churches Together (CCT)

Founded in 2006, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest ecumenical fellowship in the United States, representing over 57 million American Christians from Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, Historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations, such as Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, and Sojourners. This mix of churches and religious organizations is one of the characteristics that makes Christian Churches Together unique among North American ecumenical organizations.

Another distinction of Christian Churches Together is its intentional focus on relationship-building and mutual understanding instead of theological agreement. This feature has created the ideal context for Christians from diverse communities and often with very different convictions to come together uniquely and holistically.

The CCT process (based on loving relationships, learning theologically, and leading actions) allows CCT members to commit to working together in discernment to engage in steps that lead to beloved community.

Most recently, at the 2023 annual Forum in Savannah, Georgia, participants engaged in dialogue on their common baptism, the call to discipleship, and the nature and purpose of the church in a culture so divided over issues of politics, racial justice, and theology. The group of 65 church leaders (representing over 30 denominations) took a pilgrimage to the Historic Baptismal Trail in Georgia, where they heard oral histories of the Gullah/Geechee community that baptized its members in the local river there for over a hundred years. On the shores of the river, the group both lamented over the history of enslavement and racism in the U.S. and renewed their baptismal call to ministries of justice and peace. The RCA delegation consisted of General Synod president Rev. Judy Nelson (elected to serve on CCT's board), Rev. Laura Osborne, and Ruth Langkamp (who participated in the Young Ecumenists' panel discussion).

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, the annual Forum serves as an opportunity to build personal relationships with people across the church, to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between traditions, to grow together in Christ, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Dr. Monica Schaap Pierce is the executive director of Christian Churches Together. CCT's website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its history, mission, and work as well as common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

Judy Nelson submitted the following report regarding the work of the CCT Steering Committee:

The CCT Steering Committee met January 24-26 in Washington, D.C. Members were lodged at the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement Retreat House. Meetings were held at the USCCB offices nearby.

All participants enjoyed worship throughout the weekend led by the various Families present and in line with the Liturgy from the Week of Christian Unity.

Reports by director Dr. Monica Schaap Pierce and Committee moderators were given and well received. Reports indicated growth and sustainability.

Extended discussions regarding requests made by the Historic Black Church Family were enthusiastically participated in. As well, a lengthy discussion followed regarding the discomfort experienced by certain members of certain Family groups attending the 2023 Fall Forum.

Budget and finance reports were shared and deliberated, and recommendations were given.

Committee assignments were given and preliminary discussions regarding the 2024 Fall Forum started.

Representing the Reformed Church in America on the CCT Steering Committee is a pleasure.

Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the RCA, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC[U.S.A.]) and the United Church of Christ (UCC), approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. Leaders from within the RCA have historically served in positions with the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on the ecumenical committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Rev. Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula's provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a revised guide in "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament" document: images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches.

We are pleased to see that pastors from the ELCA, PC(U.S.A.), and UCC are serving many RCA congregations. We encourage congregations embarking on the search process to broaden their scope by considering candidates from the other Formula churches.

Testimonial from Rev. Dale Buettner:

I am thankful for the Formula of Agreement [FoA]. As a specialized minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA whose ministry is part-time, options are limited in my town. However, when a local ELCA congregation needed a part-time staff person to serve as a director of faith formation, not only did they hire me for that position, but the FoA also allowed me to preach, lead liturgy, and preside at the Lord's Table. This also opened opportunities for me to do pulpit supply at other ELCA congregations. I served at that church for two years before being called to a different ministry, but I still feel it is "my church" in many ways. We learned from each other about our respective traditions, and we served together for the common cause of the kingdom of God. I continue to be thankful for the partnership that was formulated in 1997!

Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP)

Through events, resources, and trips to the region, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) provides opportunities to learn about the Middle East and a holistic approach to advocating for peace. CMEP elevates diverse voices advocating for equality, security, and human rights for all people in the Middle East. You and your church can advocate for just U.S. policies toward the Middle East by contacting your members of Congress; participating in Hill and government meetings; and attending Advocacy Summits.

This past year has been focused on the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The RCA's coordinator for interreligious relations, Rev. Laura Osborne, joined the CMEP on their executive leadership trip in January 2024. The group visited with patriarchs and heads of churches, pastors and local Christians, political leaders and heads of state, peace activists, and human rights leaders in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, and Lebanon. CMEP leaders advocated for an end to all violence. They called for a comprehensive ceasefire, highlighting the massive number of deaths and demanding an end to the bombing and ground invasion and its effects on civilians in Gaza. CMEP also advocated for the immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas and other militant groups and the release of Palestinian prisoners. In addition, CMEP demanded immediate and adequate humanitarian access be granted to Gaza so that basic needs like water, food, electricity, and health care be provided and not utilized as leverage for political aims.

Creation Justice Ministries

Robin Suydam is the RCA's ecumenical representative to the Creation Justice Ministries (CJM) board.

Last year was truly monumental for Creation Justice Ministries (CJM), marking the organization's 40th anniversary. In October, CJM hosted a large celebration to reflect on where it came from and celebrate victories since 1983. Even in the past year, the

organization successfully protected, restored, and rightly shared God’s creation, making programmatic waves and new connections along the way. In the last twelve months, CJM hired three new employees, built its climate portfolio, expanded theological education programming, and more.

Ocean Conservation

This past year, CJM kickstarted a few ocean conservation-related programs and expanded on existing ones. First, CJM’s three-year “Participatory Education in Faith Communities for Climate Resilience” program (www.creationjustice.org/participatoryeducation.html), funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), launched in May, hosting webinars and workshops to build climate resilience in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina communities. CJM also continues to co-lead the Ocean Equity Collective (OEC), which strives toward a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable ocean conservation movement. In addition to co-leading the OEC, CJM’s policy advocate, Helen Smith, was appointed co-lead of the ocean workgroup for the America the Beautiful 4 All Coalition last fall and continues to co-lead that group. Finally, Blue Theology (www.bluetheology.com), a youth program designed to connect theology to the ocean, also had another successful year, and CJM continues to lead the program administration for three Blue Theology outposts from coast to coast.

Climate Portfolio

Building CJM’s climate portfolio is one of its top priorities because the climate and the health of God’s earth are so intertwined. CJM expects a new Farm Bill, which it has been closely following and advocating for. CJM representatives met with congressional agricultural offices, participated in multiple panels and workshops, and co-convened a webinar on the principles of a faithful Farm Bill. Between August and September, CJM met with House agriculture offices, and CJM plans to meet with Senate offices between now and the end of the year. The organization’s Farm Bill advocacy focused on supporting Black farmers, which CJM also prioritizes through other avenues of its work. For example, CJM consistently engages with Black churches and denominations and even partnered with two churches to expand the Black church programming and presence at the University of Maryland’s Environmental Justice Conference. Another climate issue CJM follows closely is the conservation of public lands. Its 30x30 work continues to grow; it has met with the Bureau of Land Management, and it continues to look for ways to expand this portfolio.

Theological Education

This year, CJM hired a full-time theological education and training coordinator, Derrick Weston, who has enabled CJM’s theological education program to expand significantly. On the training end of the spectrum, CJM hosted or plans to host six Pastoral Care for Climate workshops in 2023 and 2024, mobilizing pastors to preach about the climate-changing earth. Additionally, CJM hosted an ecumenical prayer service, which boasted over 300 registrants. On the education side, CJM launched

The Green Lectionary Podcast, a podcast focused on looking at climate change through a spiritual lens through conversations with other faith leaders (www.creationjustice.org/green-lectionary-podcast.html). Finally, CJM launched its 2024 Earth Day Sunday resource, *Plastic Jesus*, which features stories and other resources meant to guide Christians through a plastic-filled world plagued by overconsumption (www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html).

Reformed-Catholic Dialogue

The goal of the Reformed-Catholic Dialogue is to bring together Catholic and Reformed scholars to model and deepen a “dialogue of love” in which each tradition brings its own distinctive gifts to help each other pursue the truth and grow in the love of God and neighbor. The next meeting is scheduled for June 2024, and the commission will report at that time.

Meeting with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA

The CCU received the following directive from General Synod in 2023: “...to invite the leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA (UOC-USA) to meet with them, to hear about the Ukrainian Orthodox experiences of the war in Ukraine, to consider further ways of supporting and partnering with the UOC-USA in war relief, and to offer the RCA’s expressions of solidarity and support, with our prayers of intercession and prayers for peace in an in-person setting” (*MGS 2023*, CU 23-1, p. 181).

Commission on Christian Unity members had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the UOC-USA at the Metropolia Center in Somerset, New Jersey, on October 20, 2023, to carry out this General Synod recommendation. The commission met with His Eminence Archbishop Daniel, Ruling Hierarch of the Western Eparchy of the UOC-USA and President of the Consistory, and the Very Rev. Fr. Vasyl Pasakas.

While meeting in person, the commission took time to pray with and for these leaders, the UOC-USA church, and the people of Ukraine who are still immersed in a war they did not choose at the time of this writing, the two-year mark since the war began. Prayer was the number one request that Archbishop Daniel made of the commission and of the RCA. “Do not let the lamp of support for Ukraine stop burning,” he asked; “continue to tell the story of Ukraine and remind one another of this war—and so the need for prayer—as long as it may continue.”

The commission further explored options for what RCA support of the UOC-USA and the Ukrainian community could look like together. Financial donations are the best option for tangible war-relief support, which was encouraged as a better alternative than material donations, which must be shipped at great cost. We were also encouraged to continue with solidarity, such as using our voice at the World Council of Churches (WCC) where the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is present. To our surprise, Archbishop Daniel was against our former approach of asking that the ROC be suspended from membership in the WCC. He suggested that it is only together

with the Russians that a solution to this war will be found. Not only the healing of Ukraine but also the healing of Russia is required if there is to be a lasting peace.

Local RCA churches and members can also undertake actions—indeed, this may be the best sort. Solidarity and prayer are most meaningful when offered locally by connecting with UOC-USA churches or Ukrainians who may be present in your area. In partnership with these Ukrainians that you or your congregation come to know personally, further actions like letters to congressional representatives can be discerned.

You can read and see more about the CCU's visit with the UOC-USA in the RCA news story found at www.rca.org/rcas-commission-on-christian-unity-meets-with-ukrainian-orthodox-church.

Our meeting closed, per General Synod's instruction and our desire, with the following prayer:

God of peace, God of mercy,
We come before you today with heavy hearts as we see so much sadness in the world.
We thank you for this time together to listen and to learn.
We lament the suffering and destruction in Ukraine—
...so many lives lost, people displaced, families torn apart, children taken away, whole cities destroyed.

O Lord, we pray for peace...for an end to the fighting and a just peace.

We pray for world leaders to take bold and courageous steps to help end this war and the conflict in the Middle East.

We lift up those who have welcomed refugees, offered support, and who speak up against the war, and stand up against evil.

For those who have fled, grant sanctuary.
For those who have stayed, your protection.
For those who are fighting for their country, courage and strength.
For those who are wounded, healing.
For those who mourn, comfort.
For your Church and its leaders in Ukraine and here in the U.S., help us to be faithful witnesses and servants.

May all glory and honor be yours, Almighty God, now and forever.

We ask all of these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, now and forever. Amen.

It is the commission's hope that Archbishop Daniel or one of his representatives will be able to address the General Synod this summer so that delegates can hear the story of Ukraine through the eyes of the church directly and receive a much more up-to-date set of requests for prayer and action.

Anabaptist Rapprochement

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to explore possibilities for repentance and reconciliation, being particularly attentive to the ways in which our ecumenical partners have pursued rapprochement with Anabaptists, and report back to General Synod 2021 (*MGS 2019*, H 19-2, p 276).

In accordance with directive H 19-2 from General Synod 2019, the Commission on Christian Unity is coordinating with Christian Churches Together to facilitate a discussion with the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and Bruderhof. We hope this will begin the process towards rapprochement, repentance, and reconciliation.

The Interreligious Relations Subcommittee

Missional Mandate

The missional mandate for the work of the Interreligious Subcommittee of the Commission on Christian Unity of the Reformed Church in America's General Synod is found in the 2018 Report of the Interreligious Task Force.

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God's saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. In this sense, we are a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God's renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while embracing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) (*MGS 2018*, p. 92).

Summary of Where We Are and Where We Are Going

Rev. Laura Osborne was hired as coordinator for interreligious relations in June 2019. The Interreligious Subcommittee was formed in August 2019. Recruitment for the team began in the fall of 2018.

Last year (2023) brought many great connections, networks, building, and events through this office. The subcommittee met via Zoom four times this past year. During three of the meetings, the Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) interreligious committee joined us. We made a joint commitment to work together and share resources.

Urgency: There is an urgency to share Jesus with others and to love our neighbor. With those urgencies at hand, our team is working on a few items with the team from the CRCNA:

- A shared database of interfaith “champions” to show which locations in the U.S. and Canada have the most connections. With that information, we can help resource churches with these champions in their area and help find resources in those that don’t.

Our team from the RCA is working on these goals:

1. Statement work: as mandated by General Synod, we have worked on the joint statement with the CRCNA and are tweaking it as needed.
2. Resourcing churches trying to connect with their neighbors of another faith and elevating the stories of churches that already are connecting.
3. Collaborating with local missional engagement, refugee coordination, and other departments that intersect with other faiths to be a resource.
4. Observing how our colleges and seminaries are training the next generation of leaders in world religions. If this isn’t being done or can’t be done, then we can find a way to work closer with the churches nearby to help equip students. The subcommittee is working now to add a seminary student and an undergrad student to the committee.
5. Readyng volunteers to help love their neighbor of another faith as they serve at home and abroad.
6. Partnering with the Al Amana Centre in Oman to help train more groups in interfaith work, scriptural reasoning, and interfaith dialogue. This work has now included developing a new center at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Summary of Interreligious Work

This past year (2023) brought great challenges and also a deep sense of connection. The coordinator for interreligious relations has the opportunity to work together with many people. In conjunction with the Commission on Christian Unity’s Interreligious Subcommittee, this work connects churches and individuals to their neighbors of another faith. This takes shape in many ways: through partnerships, a rich history of interfaith work, and new initiatives. With continued wars around the world affecting our neighbors of other faiths and our faith traditions here in North America, this work has been all the more important.

Highlights from 2023

Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Photovoice — These tools help people engage with their neighbor of another faith. In partnership with the Al Amana Centre and Rose Castle Foundation, there have been a few trainings around scriptural reasoning. We have been able to train campus pastors from around the world in these techniques. Interfaith Photovoice is an amazing tool for groups to get to know their neighbors.

IRSC — The Interreligious Subcommittee (IRSC) of three people works in different parts of the U.S. and the world to help share their faith and connect to their neighbors of another faith through chaplaincy, counseling, teaching, preaching, bridge building, and so much more. This team met with the Interfaith Subcommittee

of the CRCNA and will continue to do so two to three times a year. We rejoice that our values and mission are quite similar.

Global Partnerships — The coordinator for interreligious relations shares in the work of RCA Global Mission. There is a great connection with the Al Amana Centre in Oman, and a few intercultural trips are planned for 2024. The timing of these trips has been affected by the war in Gaza. We partner with the Al Amana Centre through scriptural reasoning and share a few interns who work on similar projects. There has been much collaboration with the refugee ministries coordinator with an online workshop to help folks reach the diaspora in their neighborhood.

RFPUSA — A new partnership has been formed with Religions for Peace-USA (RFPUSA). This organization helps with awareness of other faiths and sometimes champions related justice issues. There are monthly gatherings to get people involved in the work. Religions for Peace had a strong presence at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Illinois, in August 2023. Their coordinator for religious relations sat on a panel with other religious leaders on the topic of religious appropriation.

National Council of Churches — A member of the subcommittee sits at the NCC's Interreligious Convening Table. This table coordinates dialogues with other faiths to raise awareness of various topics and issues. This table helps facilitate interreligious dialogues across the country and religions. Interreligious work is ongoing within our groups. Best practices, connections, and planning are all shared at the meetings. The RCA coordinator for interreligious relations now sits on the Theology Task Force. That task force is working on papers addressing the threat of Christian nationalism.

Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign — This campaign works to stop bias against our Muslim neighbors. The RCA has been a long-standing member and has a seat on the steering committee. Through the Kaufman Interfaith Institute in Grand Rapids and the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, the RCA has been present at Michigan interfaith gatherings for interfaith leaders. Continual training and connections are happening through these networks. Rev. Laura Osborne serves on the steering committee for Shoulder to Shoulder, our strategic partners in countering discrimination and violence against Muslims.

There is a strong RCA and CRCNA joint committee that helps bring programming to our communities to fight Islamophobia and antisemitism. An online webinar in the fall on evangelism and religious dialogue was very well attended.

Journeys Into Friendships — This is a collaborative network with the CRCNA and has been since its inception almost six years ago. This network invites people to walk together with others who work with diaspora people groups and those who need a place to start. Our focus has been on immigrants/migrants, refugees, international students, and Muslim-Christian relations. This network has shifted a bit because of staffing issues, but it is still working.

Learning Communities — Three learning communities have been focused on interreligious work: campus pastors and interfaith work, Journeys Into Friendships, and Michigan-based campus pastors who work with international students.

Our strongest partner in our interreligious work is the CRCNA. We have many joint communities of practice and sharing of resources. Journeys Into Friendship is a place for connection and mutual encouragement, prayer, and learning. We work together to develop a library of resources; to invite more people to join us; to walk alongside congregations stepping into ministry with refugees, immigrants, or international students; to support church planting movements among our new neighbors; and to promote a Reformed approach to interfaith dialogue that balances openness with an authentic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our goals are to align with where the larger RCA is headed, such as a future free from racism and a rich commitment to making disciples.

Working with folks from other faiths is a blessing, though such relationships can be tricky to navigate. We start in different places with regard to faith but are committed to trying to meet each other at the places we have in common.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Laura Osborne, on behalf of the Interreligious Subcommittee

One final item bears noting on our interreligious work:

As noted above, the interreligious subcommittee and coordinator role were established in 2018, and were fully funded from reserves for a period of five years per the directive of General Synod 2018 (*MGS 2018*, F 18-4, p. 66). Part of that recommendation from General Synod (RF 18-4, as referenced above) required an evaluation yielding a recommendation from the Commission on Christian Unity after five years regarding the future structure of this work. This past year was the five-year mark from the inception of this work, and so the CCU has conducted an evaluation, including a consultation with our partner in this work, the CRCNA. The commission reports that the present structure, including the work of our coordinator, effectively meets the mandate set forth by General Synod, as you can read above. We recommend that the work and funding continue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to share the Commission on Christian Unity's letter to the RCA restructuring team as it speaks to the importance of having a Commission of Christian Unity.

Editor's note: The following letter was written in response to the restructuring team's second draft proposal, published in the fall of 2023, and thus reflects the proposals as they were then presented. The restructuring team's final recommendations have changed and no longer recommend a reduction in the number of commissions.

Dear RCA Restructuring Team,

The Commission on Christian Unity met October 18-20, 2023, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In our meetings, our commission discussed the most current Restructuring Team update dated October 5, 2023. In recommendation 5, your team proposed to “*reduce the number of commissions as defined by the Book of Church Order.*” You continued to describe the specifics of this change and the reasoning:

Preserved commissions will be Theology, History, Church Order, Judicial Business, and Nominations, which are needed for the denomination to do its work as a whole. The other commissions (Christian Action, Christian Discipleship and Education, Christian Unity, Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity, Women) would no longer be staffed and resourced by the General Synod, since these areas are best done at a local level.

In conversations among our commission and with *ex officio* member Rev. Eddy Alemán, our commission named that while some ecumenical work should and can be done “at a local level,” nevertheless a majority of RCA ecumenical relations are not done at a local level; specifically our relations with the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, Global Christian Forum, the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, and other such groups.

Furthermore, the responsibilities of the Commission on Christian Unity, as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*, state:

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America’s membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 114])

In light of these things, our commission is significantly concerned with the Restructuring Team’s proposal to discontinue the Commission on Christian Unity. This would directly impact the RCA’s continued vibrant and historical relationship with national and worldwide ecumenical bodies.

Knowing that the RCA Restructuring Team has focused on certain principles and goals to guide their work, our commission would like to share ways our commission’s work intersects with these principles.

- Through our global connections (WCC, WCRC, etc.) we embrace God’s **mission** throughout the world.

- In collaborative endeavors we guide the RCA in being **aligned** with other assemblies.
- Because we sit at the table with **diverse** communities we invite the RCA to be accountable to all of Christ's family.
- Working together with the ecumenical community we can **efficiently** share ideas and resources for the blessing of all.
- Our commission's place at the world's table continues to provide the **Reformed** witness.

In light of all the above-mentioned, our commission is significantly concerned with the Restructuring Team's proposal to discontinue staffing and funding of the Commission on Christian Unity. This would directly impact the RCA's continued vibrant and historical relationship with national and worldwide ecumenical bodies. We hope that you will reconsider your direction with respect to the Commission on Christian Unity.

May God bless your continued work!

The Commission on Christian Unity

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to formally acknowledge and express its appreciation for the work of one member completing his term of service. Rev. Carlos Corro will have completed two full terms and three years as CCU's moderator. Kitt Jackson will assume the role of moderator of the commission for the 2024-2025 work year.

Respectfully submitted,
Carlos Corro, moderator

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The commission met via Zoom on October 19, 2023, and again in person on February 2-4, 2024, in Powell, Ohio, at the facilities of New Hope Church, where we were welcomed in worship.

Concerning RCA Restructuring

Editor's note: The following section reflects the restructuring team's proposals as they appeared in the team's second draft, published in the fall of 2023. The restructuring team's final recommendations have changed and no longer recommend a reduction in the number of commissions.

The commission spent time discussing the current work around restructuring the Reformed Church in America (RCA). While we concur that some restructure may be needed, we are concerned about the dissolution of some of the current commissions. The commission sees itself as the conscience of worship in the RCA. Previously our role was to write liturgies that were requested from the General Synod. Over the years our churches have moved away from utilizing those resources and we have found that our role has been changing. Those changes have certainly meant that the way we do our work is different than it was 20 years ago, but the need for the Commission on Christian Worship continues in the Reformed Church in America.

The commission is still convinced that worship—the assembling of God's covenant people around Word and sacrament—is the central activity by which the church encounters the triune God, who alone has the power to transform. The history of the church shows us that renewal and transformation of the church is nearly always accompanied by (if not actually occasioned by) a renewal of worship. Such renewal includes but is not limited to: a deeper understanding of the gospel, more courageous witness, more generous *diakonia*, more engaged prayer, and work in the world on behalf of the last, lost, littlest, and least.

All of these things, of course, are distilled and demonstrated in good worship—where we do both the sacramental “show” and the kerygmatic “tell,” where the church learns most effectively who it is and what it is called to do.

The commission is therefore committed both to provide resources and to encourage congregations in the RCA that wish to revitalize their common life and mission by deepening their worship life.

The commission is invigorated by work that helps congregations to see more clearly how the enthusiasm of passionate disciples is excited, nurtured, and shaped in worship, how intergenerational discipling relationships are modeled in the assembly at worship, and how local and global mission as well as testimony to God's justice and compassion and reconciliation can be embodied in worship. An increasingly diverse world urgently demands church and ministry be contextualized in new ways.

One of the challenges to resourcing the church has been collecting, categorizing, and disseminating the great resources that many of our churches are using. Our role over the coming years will hopefully focus on overcoming this challenge as the RCA restructures to step into God’s emerging future.

Bible Translation Resources

Our work around translations of the Bible continues to evolve. There has been some excitement around creating a resource that would enable readers to see at a glance how different translations relate to the reader and one another. We have included a table that shows the beginning of our work. We continue to engage pastors and scholars in this discussion as the work moves forward.

Version	Reading Level	Publisher/ Organization Dates	WFW/TFT Paraphrase (See explanations below chart)	Strengths/ Weaknesses
NRSV	8.0	Zondervan/Harper Collins Major revision to RSV published in 1989; most recent revision complete in 2020 (NRSVue)	WFW/Literal	Translators sought to create a translation that would serve all Christian churches (ecumenism) that was a literal as possible. Created for use in corporate worship and private devotion; popular in seminaries and academic circles; gender-inclusive language from 1989
NIV	7.0	Zondervan First published in 1978, most current revisions in 2011	TFT/Dynamic	Beginning in 2005 use of gender-neutral language, 2011 revision reversed some gender-inclusive changes; first “new” English translation since Reformation that didn’t use a previous English translation as its base or starting point

NLT	6.3	Tyndale House First published in 1996, most current revision complete in 2015	TFT/Dynamic	Meant to be thoroughly understood by a reader of modern English.
Message	6.0	Nav Press First published in 2002	Paraphrase	Intent is to provide a “fresh perspective” on Scripture. Not intended to replace other translations
First Nations		InterVarsity Press 2021		
Reina-Valera 1960		Most recent edition 2015		
Nueva Version International (NVI)		First published 1999		Gender-inclusive language

Word for Word (Literal): Often the closest English form of Hebrew or Greek word; really good for academic study and works well with interlinear Bibles

*Drawback: readers may misunderstand figures of speech, literary devices, and cultural references.

Thought for Thought (Dynamic): Place a higher emphasis on summing up the biblical author’s thoughts while still respecting the text. Perhaps might be more approachable, perfect for light reading or a devotion.

*Drawback: every tweak in the name of understanding is a step toward the translator’s interpretation

Paraphrase: focus on getting the general idea across with clear language; useful for those new to reading or new to their faith journey. May offer a fresh perspective.

*Drawback: not meant to stand alone

Litany of Lament

As reported to the General Synod of 2023, in the spring of 2023 the Commission on Christian Worship completed its work on the Liturgy of Lament for the Reformed Church in America’s complicity in the transatlantic slave trade and the dislocation of indigenous peoples. In the spring of 2023, the Commission on Christian Worship sent out the liturgy to various other commissions for their review and input. The reception of the liturgy was complimentary and generous. Two commissions, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity and the Commission on Christian Action, both wondered about the inclusion of a lament for Pacific Islanders. Although the Commission on Christian Worship understood and affirmed the spirit of the request by these commissions, it

was decided by the Commission on Christian Worship not to do so at this time. Our reason is that the General Synod of 2021 specifically requested for the liturgy to address the RCA's complicity in the slave trade and dislocation of indigenous peoples (*MGS 2021*, CA 21-3, p. 204).

We made no further changes to the liturgy at our spring 2024 meeting.

Worship with New Hope Church

The worship service was conducted by the youth of New Hope Church. They did everything: greeted, ushered, led worship, played in the band, assisted in communion, taught the children up front, gave their public testimonies to the congregation, and hosted and served a pancake breakfast for the upcoming mission trips and outreaches. Their pancake brunch had more than 200 people in attendance. Fellowship Halls A, B, and C were filled, along with the youth meeting room and narthex.

Youth Day displays the leadership of New Hope's youth. The reason for Youth Day is that New Hope Church holds the heritage of the RCA that teaches us to go above and beyond in investing in our youth. New Hope journeys the extra mile with each of them all year long through mentorships, small groups, service projects, community service, and numerous activities. New Hope Church provides education and development opportunities founded in biblical truths. New Hope's youth build lasting friendships with one another and the community they serve.

It is through these relationships that foundational paths connect for a successful Christian journey. They are studied up and prayed up on the subject or task placed before them. This is where their confidence comes from, and the ability in their public speaking affirms their personal relationship with Christ. The Scripture breathes through their words spoken and sung because they themselves believe them and have adopted them as their own. As Christ prepares them to become kingdom ambassadors in the world wherever their call takes them, they are equipped in the capacity of their giftings. New Hope acknowledges this by spending time and investing in its youth all year and, for many of them, most of their lives through parents, Sunday school, mentorships, vacation Bible school, volunteers, and community outreach projects beyond church walls. This engagement is never ending.

What was witnessed and experienced in Sunday worship with New Hope Church was evidence of Christ in each youth because of their trusted relationship with Christ and the body of Christ. They have grown up as eyewitnesses to true RCA values through real Christianity and what it means to lead in confidence. Everyone in the service experienced their calm and depth of confidence. It's easy to follow your GPS (global positioning system) because it knows where it is going—just like the New Hope Church youth, who knew where they were going because they have worshiped before in many places and spaces, and Christ has always met them there. The Youth Day service is available on the New Hope Church YouTube channel:

www.youtube.com/@NewHopePowell.

Thank You

The commission wishes to express gratitude to Kent Frens and Troy Van Beek, who are concluding their terms this year.

Respectfully submitted,
Troy D. Van Beek, moderator

Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) serves a supportive role for the church, “making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the *Book of Church Order*” (*BCO*) and providing “advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the *Book of Church Order*” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b [2023 edition, pp. 114-115]). To faithfully fulfill these responsibilities, the commission met in person at the Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids on September 18-20, 2023, and March 4-5, 2024, and via Zoom on May 31, 2023; August 10, 2023; November 30, 2023; January 10, 2024; February 5, 2024; March 19, 2024; and April 11, 2024.

On several other occasions, the commission consulted with General Synod officers, General Synod Council (GSC) staff, as well as officers and members of other assemblies, agencies, commissions, and institutions—both formally and informally—responding to requests for assistance in interpreting or applying the provisions of our order. Representatives from the commission also attended in-person and virtual meetings of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) restructuring team, serving as a resource following the mandate by the General Synod (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, RF 21-1, p. 94).

Advisory Responses to Requests for Interpretation

The commission received several inquiries related to the interpretation or application of the *BCO*. What follows is a summary of some of the more significant advisory responses provided by the commission.

Acceptance of Ministers from Another Denomination into a Classis

The commission received an inquiry into the appropriate process for receiving a minister from another denomination into a classis, and whether a call or contract is required to be in place prior to the acceptance (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, Section 5 [2023 edition, pp. 53-54]).

The commission agreed that the *BCO* process for the “Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations” generally presumes that the minister affiliated with another denomination would have a current invitation to serve in a ministry within the classis (i.e., either by call or contract) or be commissioned by the classis (i.e., specialized ministry) before the minister would be received as a member of classis—commonly spoken of as “transferring her or his ordination” (see especially *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, Section 5a-d [2023 edition, p. 54]).

Often it is the case that an RCA congregation expresses an interest in extending a call to such a minister who has already been serving the church under contract, or who has been preaching and/or providing other pastoral services at least occasionally. Without some reasonably sure prospect that the minister will receive an invitation to ministry within the classis, all the work necessary to receive an ordained minister affiliated with another denomination may be fruitless. While the order does

not expressly prohibit a classis from receiving such a minister who would be without charge, this scenario is not directly contemplated within the order because it would be unusual—and perhaps unwise. Ultimately, it is the prerogative of the classis whether to approve or refuse to approve a call or contract to a non-RCA minister, and the classis has to act as it sees fit.

Assuming the minister is not from a denomination “that the General Synod has declared to be in full communion with the RCA” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4 [2023 edition, p. 14]), a minister affiliated with another denomination may not receive a call from a consistory of an RCA church until the classis has preliminarily determined that the minister “is able to meet the requirements set forth in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, Section 5a [2023 edition, p. 53]). If those conditions have been met, the minister may candidate with RCA congregations within the bounds of the classis. Should then a consistory so discern, it may request of the classis to approve a call to the minister, and it is at this point that the minister should be examined for admission into the classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, Section 5d [2023 edition, p. 54]). Based on this principle, a similar process may be followed when a contract or specialized ministry is in view.

Regional Synod Executives as Corresponding Delegates to the General Synod

Can a regional synod executive appoint an alternative person to serve as a corresponding delegate to the General Synod if the executive is unable to attend? The commission affirmed that the provision that makes the regional synod executive a corresponding delegate to General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 11c [2023 edition, p. 124]) doesn’t include any provision that the regional synod executive may appoint an alternative person if he or she is unable to attend General Synod.

Service by Non-RCA Ministers on General Synod Commissions, Agencies, and Boards

Are ministers from other denominations serving an RCA congregation under call eligible for service on commissions, agencies, or boards of the General Synod? *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 15 (2023 edition, pp. 58-59) states that a minister of another denomination may hold membership in a classis upon request and with the approval of the classis for the period of the approved service, but “may not represent their classis in the higher judicatories, assemblies, agencies, or commissions of the Reformed Church in America.” Such ministers may not serve on commissions, agencies, or boards of the General Synod because of the temporary nature of their membership in the classis and because their primary ecclesiastical membership is with the denomination that holds their ordination.

Dual Affiliation of a Church Member

Is it possible for a member whose congregation left the RCA, and who now does not live within proximity of any RCA congregation, to “remain RCA” for purposes of staying connected to the denomination and continuing to serve on denominational

boards by finding an RCA church willing to hold their membership while also keeping membership with their home church—thus “dual affiliating”? *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 (2023 edition, p. 112) states that membership on a board, agency, or commission is open to all confessing members of RCA congregations. The *BCO* also assumes that a person will only be a confessing member of one congregation, which will be responsible for the care and discipline of that member. The only exception to this is in the case of a missionary holding membership in an indigenous church and their sending church.

When the classis transfers a church to another denomination, the entire membership roll of the church is transferred. In the case of the question at hand, the member has no other RCA church in close proximity to transfer to; however, there is no assumption of geographic proximity when it comes to membership. A person could become an active confessing member of an RCA church thousands of miles away, with the permission of that church’s board of elders. The member could participate in the full sacramental life of the RCA church electronically while still maintaining social and spiritual connections with the church that previously held their membership. All of this is at the discretion of the board of elders of the RCA church that would accept the member.

Commission, Board, or Agency Term of a Person Whose Church Leaves the RCA

When is a person disqualified from serving on a General Synod commission, board, or agency if the congregation of which the person is a confessing member leaves the RCA, and who is responsible for determining the disqualification? The commission understands the *BCO* to require that a person be a confessing member to be eligible, and that their eligibility terminates upon the departure of their church from the denomination.

In saying this, the commission also believes that neither the Commission on Nominations, nor any other commission or board, has the responsibility to monitor this requirement. Rather, the commission believes that this is a matter for personal accountability—a commission or board member who is no longer eligible should resign. In the case of the agencies, however, the commission believes that there should be additional scrutiny by the agency itself to ensure it is in compliance with its bylaws and the applicable law of the state in which it is organized. If an agency believes it appropriate, it could change its bylaws to alter or remove the requirement that all members of the board of that agency be confessing members. Such change must be approved by the General Synod. Under the current language, assuming that an agency’s bylaws require that a board member be a confessing member of an RCA church, that person’s eligibility would terminate immediately.

Circumstances for Request for Relief of Covenant Shares

How much latitude does or should the GSC have when considering requests for covenant shares relief? There is no constitutional basis for assessment relief; rather, it was authorized by an action of the 1991 General Synod and seems consistent with the responsibility of the GSC to “administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in

America between the sessions of the General Synod” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6d [2023 edition, p. 111]). The commission observed that the question presented does not involve a request for interpretation of the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4.b.2 [2023 edition, p. 115]). Rather, it seeks guidance regarding the application of the action of the 1991 General Synod. That action has not been affected by the adoption of an assessment method that is based upon a percentage of income. Consequently, the GSC should determine whether the justifications for assessment relief that are being presented by the classis are consistent with the action of the 1991 General Synod.

Referrals from Previous General Synods

Delegates to Classis Meetings

The 2023 General Synod voted to adopt OG 23-1, thereby instructing the commission “to consider the revision to the *Book of Church Order* requested in Overture 1, and report back to the General Synod 2024.” Overture 1 was as follows:

The Classis of Holland respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Section 1b, for recommendation to the classes for approval (proposed additions are underlined):

A church without an installed minister or a commissioned pastor appointed by the classis to serve as supervisor of the consistory shall have an elder delegate who shall not be counted as one of the above delegates in subsection (a).

Reasons:

1. Currently, a church served by one or more commissioned pastors and no installed ministers must send two elder delegates to stated sessions of classis in addition to their commissioned pastor(s), even if a commissioned pastor has been appointed by the classis to preside at meetings of the consistory (as provided for in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4a).
2. Commissioned pastors shall not serve as an elder delegate to classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4b).
3. It can be a significant burden for one church to send three or more delegates to classis meetings, especially if the congregation does not have many members. Adopting this amendment would decrease that burden for such congregations.
4. Because such churches often find it difficult to send all their required delegates (commissioned pastors and elder delegates), their classes may struggle to meet the requirements for attendance at stated sessions laid out in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1: “The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.”

5. If such a church were able to send all their required delegates, that would result in that one congregation having more representation than other churches with one installed minister and one elder delegate.
(MGS 2023, p. 95)

In response, the commission offers the following recommendation:

CO 24-1

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Section 1b for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

A church without an installed minister or a commissioned pastor appointed by the classis to serve as supervisor or presiding officer of the consistory shall have an elder delegate who shall not be counted as one of the above delegates in subsection (a).

Study of Policy Governance

The 2023 General Synod voted to adopt ONB 23-4, thereby instructing the commission

to review the two systems of government at work in the RCA, namely the centralized and directed government of the General Synod Council and the widely conversational and bottom-up government of our historic polity, to include:

- Re-examining the Carver model for policy governance, its principles in comparison and contrast to those of our polity, its costs and benefits after two decades of use, its critique from outside the GSC, with attention to its restrictions on interaction with the staff and on communication in general, and its effect on the organizational health of the RCA;
- Consulting the officers and stated clerks of all the classes and regional synods, as well as other General Synod commissions;
- Investigating the governance policies of our partner denominations in full communion; and further;

To offer a report and any recommendations to the General Synod of 2025
(MGS 2023, pp. 103-104).

The commission has been at work on this recommendation, consulting with the Commission on History, investigating the governance policies of our full communion partners, and preparing a survey to distribute to users of policy governance throughout the RCA. The commission will offer its report, along with any recommendations, to the General Synod of 2025.

Affiliation of Colleges with the Reformed Church in America

On August 30, 2023, members of the commission, along with representatives from the restructuring team and RCA staff, met with the presidents of Central College, Hope College, Northwestern College, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the nature of the relationship of the RCA and its colleges and seminaries.

In response to the Commission on Nominations' April 20, 2022, request for interpretation concerning a question from the Board of Trustees of Northwestern College about the status of General Synod-appointed board members who may no longer be members of an RCA congregation, this commission offered an advisory response. Given the attendant facts and circumstances, the commission expressed the opinion that the three required General Synod-appointed trustees for each of the colleges must be members of RCA congregations or classes. The *BCO* requires that "The governing boards of all institutions of higher learning in the United States which are officially related to the Reformed Church in America shall at all times include at least three members who are designated by the General Synod" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 5 [2023 edition, p. 74]).

At this meeting, the college presidents proposed a new category of relationship for the RCA colleges different from the "officially related" category that mandates RCA members serve on boards of trustees and institutional bylaws be approved by the General Synod. This new category of affiliation would allow each college to sign an agreement with the General Synod as to the nature of the affiliation and the rights and responsibilities of each partner in the agreement. This option allowing the colleges to redefine their relationship to the General Synod avoids the problems associated with the appointment of trustees and allows more flexibility in the nature of the formal relationships. In hopes of continuing the long history of relationship between the RCA and its colleges, the commission recommends the following:

CO 24-2

To adopt the following amendment to *Bylaws of the General Synod*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 3 for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 3. Colleges - Officially Related or Affiliated

- a. The presidents of the colleges officially related to the Reformed Church in America or other persons designated by the respective boards of trustees in place of the presidents shall be corresponding delegates.**
- b. Each officially related college shall appoint two students as corresponding delegates.**

c. The presidents of the colleges affiliated with the Reformed Church in America or other persons designated by the presidents will be invited as guests to the meetings of the General Synod and may be invited to present a report.

d. Each affiliated college shall sign an affiliation agreement approved by the General Synod and the board of trustees of the college defining the nature of the relationship.

Plan of Union Document for Union Churches

In preparing recommendations for the 2023 General Synod, the commission began working on revisions to *BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 7, which addresses union churches. A union church is formed when an RCA church unites with a church from another Reformed body. Section 2 of Article 7 presents the Plan of Union that the new union church shall adopt, which is 23 points long. Historically, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) had an identical Plan of Union in its church order, but over time, the nature of union churches has changed. The Presbyterians amended their order to account for changing times, but the RCA has not up to this point. As more churches are opting to unite with churches from other Reformed bodies, this section of the *BCO* is in need of amending. The commission offers the following recommendation:

CO 24-3

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 7 for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Article 7. Union Churches

Sec. 1. A church may unite to form a union church with one or more churches of other reformed bodies, with the approval of the classis.

Sec. 2. The plan of union adopted by the union church shall follow the minimum requirements:

a. The plan of union shall be subject to the constitution of each denomination involved. Wherever the constitutions of the denominations differ, the mandatory provisions of one shall apply in all cases when the others are permissive. Wherever there are conflicting mandatory provisions, the congregational governing body shall petition the next higher governing bodies to resolve the conflict.

b. The plan of union shall be approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of each of the congregations at duly called meetings of the congregation and by the classis

or equivalent governing body of each church. No provision of a plan of union shall be construed as modifying or amending the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

- c. Assessments shall be paid to each classis or equivalent governing body of jurisdiction on the basis of either total confessing membership or percentage of income of the union church, equally divided among the denominations involved.

~~Sec. 2. The following Plan of Union shall be adopted by the union church so formed:-~~

- ~~a. The following Plan of Union is adopted by the Reformed Church of _____, effective as of the date when each of the congregations have approved the plan by a two-thirds majority of those present at a regularly called congregational meeting with such notice and quorum as is required by the constitution of each church, and when the classis (presbytery) of jurisdiction of each church has approved the particular union and this Plan of Union.~~
- ~~b. The purpose of this union is to provide for the worship of Almighty God and instruction in the Christian religion by a united congregation which will share the property, real and personal, of the uniting churches and provide for the services of a minister or ministers for the united church.~~
- ~~c. The united church shall be known as the Church of _____.~~
- ~~d. The united church shall be subject to the constitution of each church involved as set forth in subsections r, s, u, and v.~~
- ~~e. The consistory or governing body shall submit its records annually, and whenever requested, to each assembly (judicatory) of jurisdiction.~~
- ~~f. The membership of the united church shall consist of those who were members of the uniting churches, plus those received by the consistory or governing body of the united church.~~
- ~~g. The consistory or governing body of the united church shall report an equal share of the total membership to each assembly (judicatory) and jurisdiction, and such~~

~~membership shall be published in the Acts and Proceedings (Minutes) of the general assembly, with a note to the effect that the report is that of a union church, and with an indication of the total actual membership. A similar report of church school enrollment, baptisms, etc., and financial expenditures shall be made by the consistory or governing body and noted by each general assembly in its minutes.~~

- ~~h. Initially the officers of the united church, elders and deacons, shall be those officers in active service of the united churches, who will undertake to perform their ordination responsibilities under the constitution of each church, as indicated in subsections d above and r, s, u, and v below.~~
- ~~i. At the first annual meeting subsequent to the effective date of the union, new classes of officers, to replace the officers noted in subsection h above, shall be elected by the united congregation according to the constitutional procedure in force as a consequence of subsection v below.~~
- ~~j. The pastoral relations of the ministers of the uniting churches shall be dissolved automatically by the action of the classis (presbytery) of jurisdiction in approving this plan, but they may be eligible to be ministers (pastors or associate pastors) of the united church according to the will of the united congregation and subject to the approval of the classes (both the classis and the presbytery).~~
- ~~k. The minister/s of the united church shall be full and responsible members of each assembly (judicatory) of immediate jurisdiction and shall be subject to discipline as provided below in subsection t.~~
- ~~l. The united church shall cause a corporation to be formed under the appropriate laws of the state or province where permissible. The corporation shall include in its articles or charter the substance of subsections b, c, and d above.~~
- ~~m. All property of the uniting churches, real and personal, shall be transferred to the corporation formed in subsection l above. The new corporation shall be the legal successor of the corporations, if any, of the uniting churches, and it shall be bound to administer any trust property or moneys received in accordance with the~~

~~provisions of the original establishment of the trust. All liabilities of the uniting churches shall be liabilities of the united church. In any state or province where a church corporation is forbidden, the purposes of this subsection shall be achieved in harmony with the law of that state or province.~~

- ~~n. Trustees of the corporation (or the unincorporated body) shall be elected in harmony with civil law according to the constitutional provisions outlined in subsection d above, as interpreted by subsection v below.~~
- ~~o. While recognizing the basic right of any giver to designate the cause or causes to which the gift shall go, the consistory or governing body of the united church shall annually propose to the congregation a general mission or benevolence program which shall be divided equitably among the officially approved causes of each denomination. The proportions shall be as the consistory or governing body shall decide in response to the request of the higher assemblies (judicatories).~~
- ~~p. Per capita apportionments or assessments shall be paid to each classis (presbytery) of jurisdiction on the basis of the total communicant membership of the union church, equally divided among the denominations involved.~~
- ~~q. All members of the united church shall be under the discipline of the board of elders or governing body according to rules agreed upon in harmony with the constitution of each denomination where they coincide, and in harmony with the mandatory provisions of the constitution of one denomination where the others are permissive, and at the choice of the board of elders or governing body where they may be contradictory.~~
- ~~r. Complaints against the actions of the consistory (or its equivalent) may be taken under constitutional provisions of only one denomination, according to the choice of the complainant, and once being complained to one judicatory, no other denomination shall accept jurisdiction in the same matter.~~
- ~~s. Appeals from the judicial actions of the board of elders (or its equivalent) shall be made to one judicatory only (classis or its equivalent) at the choice of the member(s) filing the appeal; and all subsequent appeals shall be in the courts of~~

~~the denomination where the original appeal was filed, and decisions so finally made shall be binding on the board of elders (or its equivalent) and on the members.~~

~~t. The minister/s shall be subject to the discipline of the classes (the presbytery and the classis) provided that when either shall begin an action, it shall invite a committee from the others to join the commissioner, prosecutor, or prosecuting committee in formulating and pressing the charges. In the event of appeal the case shall be finally decided by the highest court to which the appeal is taken in the church which commenced the action, and that decision shall be equally binding on the classes (both presbytery and the classis).~~

~~u. RCA ministers serving union churches shall participate in the RCA retirement and insurance plans as required by the *Book of Church Order*.~~

~~v. Wherever the constitutions of the denominations differ, the mandatory provisions of one shall apply in all cases when the others are permissive. Wherever there are conflicting mandatory provisions (except as provided in subsection q above), the consistory or governing body of the united church shall petition the assemblies (judicatories) of immediate jurisdiction to overture their respective highest courts to resolve the conflict either by authoritative interpretations or by constitutional amendment.~~

~~w. A union church may be dissolved by a two-thirds vote of two congregational meetings, held not less than one year and not more than two years apart, subject to the concurrence of the classes (presbyteries) involved. In case of dissolution of a union church, all property of the united church, real and personal, shall be divided equally between the classes (the presbytery and the classis) of jurisdiction.~~

~~**Sec. 3. No provision in this chapter shall be construed as modifying or amending the constitution of this church in its application to any but union churches organized under this chapter, their members, officers, or ministers.**~~

Restructuring Team Recommendations

The majority of the commission's work this year was dedicated to serving as a resource to the restructuring team and assisting it with understanding the ramifications of the various recommendations it has made for the future of the RCA.

The commission may need to devote a significant amount of time next year to additional *BCO* amendments if the General Synod approves the recommendations from the Restructuring Team's report this year.

In collaboration with the restructuring team, the commission has one significant set of amendments to the *BCO* to recommend this year in alignment with the first recommendation of the restructuring team: the shift from four levels of assemblies to three, and the addition of commissions on judicial business in classes as an additional judicatory to ensure the same number of appeals as within our current judicial procedures. The report of the restructuring team provides information and rationale for these changes on pages 109-118.

Explanatory notes for understanding and navigating CO 24-4:

1. *Because this set of proposed amendments is long and complex, each segment of the amendment (dealing with a specific article, section, paragraph, or Formulary) is labeled with a letter in the left margin—(a), (b), (c), etc.—along with the chapter, article, and section reference when applicable and the page number in the current edition of the BCO. These letters are not part of the proposed amendments and will not appear in the amended BCO; they are a navigational aid.*
 - a. *Amendments labeled (a) through (y) are amendments to the Preamble, Chapter 1 (Government) and Formularies. Most are related to the shift from four levels of assembly to three levels, except for (g), (i), (l), and (m), which are related to the creation of new judicatories.*
 - b. *Amendments labeled (z) through (cc) are amendments to Chapter 2 (The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures) and are related to the creation of new judicatories. An additional note for this section: the superscript numbers in these amendments are part of the existing BCO text; they refer to the Explanatory Notes on Chapter 2, which are not included here but can be found on pages 99-103 of the 2023 edition of the BCO.*
 - c. *Amendments labeled (dd) through (kk) are amendments to Chapter 3 (The Bylaws and Special Rules of Order). Some of these amendments are related to the shift from four assembly levels to three, and others are related to the creation of new judicial bodies.*
2. *Also to aid in navigation, proposed deletions are both ~~stricken and in red~~, and additions are both underlined and in green. Please note that this applies only to the digital version of the report; General Synod-provided print copies will be in black and white.*
3. *At several points in this amendment, the commission has provided explanatory text, which is not part of the proposed amendment, and as such is not set in bold because it is not being voted on. These explanatory comments will appear in roman type, will not be indented, and will be enclosed in a box.*

CO 24-4

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

(a) *Preamble, page 1, paragraph 2 (2023 edition)*

The ~~four~~ three basic or focal governmental units in the Reformed Church in America are the consistory, the classis, ~~the regional synod~~, and the General Synod. The consistory is divided further into a board of elders and a board of deacons. The board of elders, the classis, ~~the regional synod~~, and the General Synod exercise judicial as well as legislative powers. A governmental unit exercising its judicial powers is called a judicatory, and at all other times the governmental unit is known as an assembly. Deacons exercise a legislative function only in the circle of the whole consistory. Three offices are employed in the governmental functions of the Reformed Church, namely, the Minister of Word and Sacrament (hereinafter referred to as “minister”), the elder, and the deacon. A fourth office, that of the General Synod professor, is a teacher of the church with particular responsibilities for the preparation and certification of candidates for ministry.

(b) *Preamble, page 3, paragraph 2 (2023 edition)*

Consistories, classes, and ~~synods~~ the General Synod work together in mission and ministry within their shared boundaries.

(c) *Preamble, page 4, paragraph 2 (2023 edition)*

The local churches together delegate authority to classes and ~~synods~~ the General Synod, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern.

(d) *Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 1 (2023 edition, p. 14)*

...The consistory may institute and recognize such ministries that express the congregation’s faithfulness to the ministry to which Christ calls the church, provided the consistory does not infringe upon the prerogatives of other consistories, classes, and ~~synods~~ the General Synod.

(e) *Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 19 (2023 edition, p. 19)*

Sec. 19. The consistory shall make an annual statistical report ~~at the session of classis immediately preceding the stated sessions of the regional and~~ to the General Synods. The report shall comply with the requirements of the General Synod and

shall be accompanied by such comment on the spiritual state of the church as the consistory may deem proper.

(f) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1 (2023 edition, p. 31)

...The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or ~~synods~~ the General Synod.

(g) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 3 (2023 edition, p. 31)

Sec. 3. The classis shall exercise original and appellate supervisory power over the acts, proceedings, and decisions of the boards of elders and consistories, both in temporal matters and in those relating to Christian discipline. The classis exercises this power either by actions of the entire body or by actions of its properly constituted judicial commission.

(h) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 5 (2023 edition, p. 31)

Sec. 5. The classis shall have the authority to transfer a local church to another classis or denomination, together with all or part of its real and personal property. The transfer of a church to another RCA classis can be approved by mutual agreement of the church and the two classes involved.

(i) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 6, Section 6 (new) (2023 edition, p. 34)

Sec. 6. The classis shall constitute, by election or other appointment, a commission on judicial business. All of the commission's members shall be enrolled members of the classis or elders from the churches of the classis.

(j) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1 (2023 edition, p. 34)

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage its members and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the ~~synods~~ General Synod:

(k) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6 (2023 edition, p. 39)

Sec. 6. When an organizing church is initiated by a classis not within the classis's own geographic area, the initiating classis shall receive the permission of the classis in which it intends to

initiate its ministry. Since a classis is composed of “all the local and organizing churches within its bounds” (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1), normally an organizing church shall become a part the classis to which it is geographically most proximate within a period of ten years from the date of its first gathering for worship. ~~However, the transfer of the congregation to the other classis happens through consultation between the two classes and the regional synod or synods affected, and the vote of approval by both classes, acting for the best interests of the new congregation. However, both classes, acting in the best interest of the new congregation, may approve the transfer of the congregation at any time.~~

(l) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4a (2023 edition, p. 43)

- a. The petition for withdrawal shall be promptly referred to the executive committee, the ~~Committee~~ Commission on Judicial Business, or a special committee, as shall be determined by the classis or its executive committee.

(m) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4h (2023 edition, p. 45)

- h. Any complaint by the church, or by any other aggrieved party, against the decision of the classis on a petition for leave to withdraw from the denomination, shall be ~~taken submitted to the regional synod, and any appeal from the ruling of the regional synod shall be taken to~~ the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business. ~~The decision of the General Synod, and any decision of a lower judicatory that is not appealed within the specified time for appeals, shall be final and binding upon all interested parties.~~

(n) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4b (2023 edition, p. 62)

- b. The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, and shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to ~~a regional and/or~~ the General Synod.

(o) Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4g (2023 edition, p. 62)

- g. Upon request of ~~the regional synod~~ the General Synod, the classis shall submit to a review of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision.

(p) *Chapter 1, Part II, Article 19 (2023 edition, p. 63)*

Article 19. Relation to ~~Regional Synod and~~ the General Synod

Sec. 1. The classis shall report annually to the ~~regional synod and~~ General Synod upon the state of religion within the bounds of the classis, and any statistics on the form prescribed by the General Synod. ~~Such statistics as the General Synod shall require from time to time shall be presented in tabular form.~~

Sec. 2. The classis shall report ~~annually~~ to the ~~regional synod~~ General Synod the names of persons who have been examined and licensed or ordained, all admissions and dismissions of ministers, all changes of pastoral relations, and the deaths of ministers within its bounds as soon as possible ~~since the last session of the regional synod.~~

Sec. 3. The classis shall appoint delegates to the ~~regional synod and~~ General Synod.

(q) *Chapter 1, Part III (2023 edition, pp. 65-68)*

~~Article 1. Regional Synod Defined~~

~~Sec. 1. The regional synod is an assembly and judicatory consisting of ministers and elders delegated by each of the classes within the bounds determined for it by the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving under the jurisdiction or with the approval of the classis.~~

~~Sec. 2. Each regional synod may determine the method of selection and the number of delegates from each classis within its bounds.~~

~~Sec. 3. The regional synod is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees.~~

~~Sec. 4. A regional synod may retain its designation as a particular synod for its legal documents.~~

~~Article 2. Responsibilities of the Regional Synod~~

~~Sec. 1. The regional synod shall exercise a general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the classes within its bounds.~~

~~Sec. 2. The regional synod shall exercise an appellate supervisory power over the acts, proceedings, and decisions of its several classes.~~

The amendments in Sections 3 and 4 below of Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2 that are deleted here are added to the Responsibilities of the General Synod (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2) and the Responsibilities of the Classis (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2) in amended form.

~~Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after consultation with the classes and consistories involved, form, combine, or disband classes. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a stated session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum that meets the requirements for a stated session of classis is present (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).~~

~~Sec. 4. The regional synod, after consultation with the classes and the consistory involved, may transfer a church from one classis to another classis within its bounds. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a stated session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum that meets the requirements for a stated session of classis is present (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).~~

~~Sec. 5. The regional synod shall create whatever organization it desires for the furtherance of the work of the gospel within its bounds, provided such organization does not infringe upon the prerogatives of the several classes or churches.~~

~~Article 3. Delegates~~

~~Sec. 1. The delegate shall be a member of regional synod from the date of election or appointment and shall continue in that responsibility to the regional synod until the effective date of election or appointment of a successor. If, however, ministerial membership in the classis represented or confessing membership in a church within the classis represented shall be terminated during the period of appointment, the delegate shall cease to be a member of the regional synod.~~

~~Sec. 2. The elder delegate to regional synod shall be chosen from the entire body of elders in a church whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders.~~

~~Article 4. Sessions of Regional Synod~~

~~Sec. 1. The regional synod shall meet annually at such time and place as it may determine. All sessions of regional synod shall begin and end with prayer.~~

~~Sec. 2. The president of the regional synod shall call a special session of the synod upon receipt of a written request of one minister and one elder delegate from each of the classes within its bounds. At least three weeks' notice of the session shall be given, such notice stating the purpose of the session.~~

~~Sec. 3. The presence of a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder delegates is required to constitute a quorum at any session of a regional synod.~~

~~Article 5. Officers of Regional Synod~~

~~Sec. 1. A president shall be elected to preside at sessions of the regional synod. It shall be the duty of the president to state and explain the business to be transacted, to enforce the rules of order, and, in general, to maintain the decorum and dignity belonging to the church of Jesus Christ.~~

~~Sec. 2. A copy of the minutes of every session of the several classes held since the last stated session of the regional synod shall be produced for inspection at a stated session of the synod.~~

~~Sec. 3. The president of the regional synod shall prepare a synodical report on the state of religion and present it at a stated session of the synod. The basis of this report shall be the reports on the state of religion of the presidents of the several classes.~~

~~Sec. 4. The regional synod shall have a clerk whose duty shall be to keep a faithful record of all the proceedings of the body, and to furnish official notices in writing to all persons directly affected by judicial decisions of the assembly. The clerk shall also be responsible for forwarding to the denominational archives minutes of the regional synod and subsidiary corporations.~~

~~Article 6. Transaction of Business~~

~~Sec. 1. The regional synod shall be guided in its transaction of business by such rules of order as it shall adopt from time to time, and which are in accord with the Government of the~~

~~Reformed Church in America. If state or provincial laws permit, the regional synod shall be incorporated.~~

~~Sec. 2. A delegate of the regional synod shall not have the right to protest against any act or decision of that body, but shall have the right to redress by appeal or complaint. A delegate shall also have the right to require that the names of all regional synod members, with their votes for or against a matter in question, shall be recorded in the minutes of the regional synod for the information of all; however, that request may be denied by a two-thirds majority of the regional synod.~~

~~Sec. 3. Only duly accredited delegates to the regional synod shall be entitled to vote.~~

~~Sec. 4. The regional synod shall constitute, by election or otherwise, a permanent committee on judicial business.~~

~~Sec. 5. Except as otherwise provided in the *Book of Church Order*, members of regional synod committees, commissions, or boards shall be confessing members of the churches in the regional synod.~~

~~Article 7. Relation to the General Synod~~

~~Sec. 1. The regional synod shall report annually to the General Synod upon the state of religion within its bounds.~~

~~Sec. 2. The General Synod may assist the regional synods in the fulfillment of common tasks of mission and ministry, provided that such assistance does not infringe upon the prerogatives of the regional synods.~~

~~Sec. 3. The regional synod shall appoint a delegate to the General Synod.~~

(r) Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 (2023 edition, p. 69)

The General Synod is the highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. It consists of two minister delegates and two elder delegates from each of the classes having four thousand or fewer confessing members on the roll of its churches, and one minister delegate and one elder delegate for each two thousand confessing members, or fraction thereof, from each of the classes having more than four thousand confessing members on the roll of its churches as computed in accordance with the Bylaws of the General Synod;

~~one elder or minister delegate from each of the regional synods~~; five General Synod professor delegates, drawn from each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; a number of missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the Bylaws of the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction or with the approval of an assembly. The General Synod is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through the General Synod Council, commissions, and agencies.

(s) *Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 (2023 edition, p. 69)*

~~Sec. 3. The General Synod shall form regional synods. It may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another.~~

Sec. 3. The General Synod shall, after consultation with the classes involved and upon a two-thirds majority vote, form, combine, or disband classes.

(t) *Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 12 (new) (2023 edition, p. 70)*

Sec. 12. Each classis shall produce annually to the General Synod a copy of the minutes of every classis session held that year.

(u) *Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 2 (2023 edition, p. 72)*

Sec. 2. The president of the General Synod shall call a special session of the synod at a place determined by the president, vice president and the general secretary of the synod upon the joint application of ~~three one~~ ministers and ~~three one~~ elders from ~~each of the regional synods at least half of the classes~~, all of them serving currently as accredited delegates to the General Synod. Three weeks' notice of the session shall be given to the members of the synod, such notice to state the purpose of the session.

(v) *Formulary 9, Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament (2023 edition, p. 142)*

Dismissal of a Minister

To the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS]:

From the [NAME OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS]:

This is to certify that the Rev. [NAME OF MINISTER] is a member in good and regular standing of the [NAME OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS], and is now requesting transfer to the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS], to whose Christian fellowship and care this minister is hereby affectionately commended.

When received by the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS], this minister's relation to this classis shall cease.

~~Last served as delegate to regional synod: [DATE]~~

...

- (w) *Formulary 13, Citation to an Accused Person or Consistory (2023 edition, p. 146)*

...

[NAME], ~~President~~ Presiding Officer

...

- (x) *Formulary 14, Citation to a Witness (2023 edition, p. 147)*

...

[NAME], ~~President~~ Presiding Officer

...

- (y) *New Formulary 19*

19. Certificate for the Transfer of a Church to Another Classis

(To transfer a church to another denomination, use Formulary No. 11.)

To the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS]:

From the [NAME OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS]:

The [NAME OF CLASSIS] of the Reformed Church in America hereby certifies that it has duly considered the petition of [NAME AND LOCATION OF PETITIONING CHURCH] to transfer to and to affiliate with the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS].

[NAME OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS] has duly ascertained the will of the members and consistory of that church, and after prayerful consideration it has determined that it is in the best interests of Christ's kingdom that the petition be granted. It

further certifies that the church has satisfied its financial obligations to our classis.

Therefore, the [NAME OF CLASSIS] of the Reformed Church in America does hereby dismiss the aforementioned church from its jurisdiction, subject to the provisions of the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and affectionately commends that church to the [NAME OF THE RECEIVING CLASSIS]. When received by the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS], this church's relation to this classis shall cease.

[NAME OF CLERK OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS], Stated Clerk
[DATE]

Receipt of a Church

To the [NAME OF TRANSFERRING CLASSIS]:
From the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS]:

This is to certify that the [NAME OF CHURCH] was received to unite with the [NAME OF RECEIVING CLASSIS] at the session of classis convened on [DATE].

[NAME OF CLERK], Stated Clerk
[DATE]

(z) Chapter 2, Part I (new)

A new Part 1 to Chapter 2 is proposed below to define the nature of judicatories, the composition of these judicatories, and general procedures.

Part I Judicatories

Article 1. Nature of Judicatories

Sec. 1. A governmental unit exercising its judicial powers is called a judicatory.

Sec. 2. The board of elders of each church shall function as a judicatory in all matters assigned to it as a judicatory by the Book of Church Order.

Sec. 3. Each classis and the General Synod shall appoint a commission on judicial business. This commission is a judicatory

and shall execute all judicial authority granted to each respective body by the *Book of Church Order*.

Sec. 4. Decisions made by the commission on judicial business appointed by the classis may be appealed to the classis as a whole. For purposes of this appeal, the classis is considered a higher judicatory.

Sec. 5. Decisions made by a panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business may be appealed to the full Commission. For purposes of this appeal, the full Commission is considered a higher judicatory.

Article 2. Composition of Judicatories

Sec. 1. The commission on judicial business appointed by a classis shall have at least three, but no more than nine, members and, in any event, must be less than half the number of members that constitutes a quorum for a regular session of its assembly.

Sec. 2. All members of a commission on judicial business appointed by a classis shall be an enrolled member of the classis or an elder who is a member of one of the churches of the classis. All members of the Commission on Judicial Business appointed by the General Synod shall be a member of a classis or an elder from one of the local or organizing churches of the classis.

Sec. 3. At least half of the members of any commission on judicial business shall be elders.

Sec. 4. The bylaws, rules of order, or similar governing document of the classis that authorizes the appointment of a commission on judicial business shall provide for the designation of several alternate members for the commission. The clerk of the classis shall maintain a list of the alternate members in an order established randomly. If any regular member of a commission on judicial business is unable for any reason to attend any meeting of or otherwise fulfill his or her responsibilities as a member of the commission, such regular member shall be replaced by the alternate member holding the same office whose name appears highest on the list and who is able to serve. Such replacement may be made by the action of the classis or its executive committee.

Sec. 5. The term of service for regular members of a classis commission on judicial business shall be three years. The classis

shall make reasonable efforts to stagger terms so that the number of terms expiring each year is the same. For the purposes of calculating terms of service, a partial term of two years or more shall be considered a full term. No person may serve on a commission on judicial business for a continuous time that exceeds two full terms. Any person who has served two terms shall be ineligible to serve thereafter for at least one year. If a regular member of a commission is unable to complete their term of office, then the classis shall appoint a replacement member at its next regular meeting.

Sec. 6. The clerk of the classis shall act as the clerk for its commission on judicial business, unless otherwise provided by the classis. However, the clerk shall not be a member of the commission. A classis commission on judicial business shall elect one person to act as presiding officer.

Sec. 7. When a panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business is needed, the moderator of the Commission will randomly select nine members and at least three alternates from the Commission, provided there are at least five elders and four ministers, to form a panel. If any member of a panel is unable to fulfill the member's responsibilities as a member of the panel, such member shall be replaced by an alternate member holding the same office.

Sec. 8. The moderator of the General Synod's Commission on Judicial Business shall act as the clerk and presiding officer at all judicial proceedings, unless the moderator designates another member to serve as presiding officer. The moderator shall be a member of the commission, *ex-officio* and without vote, and may attend all proceedings as an advisor to the panel.

Article 3. General Procedures for a Commission on Judicial Business

Sec. 1. The presiding officer shall be empowered to render a decision on all procedural motions or requests brought before the commission. A party may appeal against the decision of the officer to the entire commission.

Sec. 2. For the commission on judicial business of the classis, the presence of at least two-thirds of the members of the commission shall constitute a quorum to conduct all proceedings and to render any final decision not otherwise the responsibility of the moderator. The affirmative vote of at least a majority of the members of the commission who are present

and participating in any proceeding shall be required to render any decision. Only commission members or their properly appointed alternates who were present for the proceeding may take part in the deliberations and cast any votes regarding the proceeding. Alternate members may attend the proceeding but may not participate in the deliberations or cast votes regarding the proceeding unless duly appointed as a replacement.

Sec. 3. For a panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business, the presence of seven panel members shall constitute a quorum to conduct all proceedings and to render any final decision not otherwise the responsibility of the moderator. The affirmative vote of at least five panel members shall be required to render any decision. Only panel members who were present for the proceeding shall take part in the deliberations regarding the proceeding. Alternate members may attend the proceeding but may not participate in the deliberations or cast votes regarding the proceeding unless duly appointed as a replacement.

Sec. 4. For the full Commission on Judicial Business of the General Synod, the presence of at least two-thirds of the members of the Commission shall constitute a quorum to conduct all proceedings and to render any final decision not otherwise the responsibility of the moderator. The affirmative vote of at least a majority of the members of the Commission shall be required to render any decision. Only Commission members who were present for the proceeding may take part in the deliberations and cast any votes regarding the proceeding.

Sec. 5. A commission on judicial business shall establish such administrative rules for hearings and trials as it deems appropriate provided that all procedures be conducted in a fair and impartial manner.

Sec. 6. All deliberations and votes of a commission shall be conducted in a closed session, provided that counsel to the judicatory, if any, and the clerk of the judicatory may be present.

Sec. 7. A commission may impose discipline on behalf of its appointing assembly. Any discipline imposed shall be appropriate for the offense and consistent with Holy Scriptures and the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. A commission shall record its decision, stating the reasons. Decisions of a commission shall be reported in writing

to the assembly on behalf of which it acts at the next stated session. Official notification shall be provided to the parties within 30 days of the decision.

(aa) Chapter 2, Part II (formerly Chapter 2, Part I) (2023 edition, pp. 81-90)

Part II Discipline

Article 1. Nature of Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sec. 2. The exercise of discipline may take the form of admonition, rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership in the church or from office, deposition from office, or excommunication, as the gravity of the offense in the opinion of the assembly or the judicatory may warrant. Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings. All further steps of discipline—suspension, deposition, and excommunication—are judicial in nature and require the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory.¹ A judicatory may, in the judicial process, impose admonition or rebuke as a form of discipline.

Article 2. Nature of Offenses

Sec. 1. The only matters to be considered as offenses subject to accusation are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.²

Sec. 2. Offenses which are known at most to a very few persons shall be dealt with first in the manner indicated by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 18:15-17. If this procedure fails, the matter shall be presented to the body to which the offender is amenable.

Sec. 3. Notwithstanding Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 2, notorious and scandalous offenses require immediate suspension and/or other action as determined by the responsible body, pending review by the appropriate assembly or judicatory.

Article 3. Responsibilities for Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline of a Member

All members of a local church are under its care and are subject to its government and discipline, as administered by its board of elders. The board of elders may, upon formal presentation and trying of a charge, suspend from the privileges of membership in the church a member who persistently rejects its admonitions or rebukes. If a member fails to show marks of repentance after suspension, the board of elders may, with permission of the classis, proceed to excommunication. The board of elders shall publicly notify the congregation of its intention to excommunicate, and later, after a hearing, of its final action. The board may omit such public notification, if such omission will not impair the purposes of discipline and will best serve the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Such omission shall require a two-thirds vote of the board of elders.³

Sec. 2. Discipline of an Elder or Deacon

The board of elders shall have jurisdiction in the case of a charge against an elder or deacon. If the charge is proven, the elder or deacon may be suspended or deposed from office together with such other discipline as may be imposed in accordance with Chapter 2, Part II, Article 3, Section 1.⁴

Sec. 3. Discipline of a Commissioned Pastor

Elders who are serving in a classis commission as a commissioned pastor are subject solely to the government and discipline of the classis. Commissioned pastors shall be subject to the same rules as ministers within Chapter 2, Part II.

Sec. 4. Discipline of a Minister of Word and Sacrament

- a. Ministers are under the care of the classis and are subject to its government and discipline.
- b. The consistory has the right to close the pulpit to a minister who has been accused of any notorious or scandalous offense which would render appearance in the pulpit inappropriate. Proceedings of the consistory in such a case are at its peril, but are undertaken to prevent scandal. This action is not to be considered a trial. The

consistory must report its action to the classis immediately.⁵

- c. The classis **commission on judicial business** shall have exclusive jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a minister with the single exception noted below. If the charge is proven, the minister may be suspended or deposed from office, suspended from the privileges of membership in the church, and/or excommunicated.⁶
- d. In the case of charges against a minister who is also installed as a General Synod professor, charges concerning doctrine must first be considered by the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business**. Either the accused or the classis may request the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business** to review a charge, in order to determine whether the case concerns doctrine and thus must be heard at the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business**. The classis shall stay further judicial action until the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business** has made its determination over jurisdiction and completed any other appropriate judicial work related to the charge. The decision of the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business** on jurisdiction is final. Once the General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business** has completed its judicial work, any further or remaining charges are the responsibility of the classis.

Sec. 5. Discipline of a General Synod Professor

- a. General Synod professors are amenable to the General Synod for their ministries of teaching and of certification of candidates for ministry, and in these ministries are subject to its government and discipline. The General Synod **Commission on Judicial Business** shall have original jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a General Synod professor only if that charge concerns matters of doctrine. If **a panel of** the Commission on Judicial Business determines that the charge concerns matters of doctrine and has merit, the **General-Synod panel** shall hear the case, but shall render judgment only on matters of doctrine. In all other cases, the **General-Synod panel** shall either dismiss the charge or, if appropriate, remand the charge for consideration by the classis in which the General Synod professor holds membership as a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

- b. ~~If the General Synod hears the case, the vice president of the General Synod shall not participate.~~ If the charge is proven, the General Synod professor may be admonished, rebuked, or removed from the office of General Synod professor. Any other discipline shall be determined by the classis in which the General Synod professor holds membership.
- c. When a charge against a General Synod professor is proven and discipline is imposed by the panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business, the professor may appeal the decision, within sixty days of the conclusion of the original trial, to the ~~next stated session of the General Synod~~ full Commission on Judicial Business.⁷ ~~The General Synod Executive Committee shall appoint a committee to consider the appeal, which shall report its recommendation to the General Synod. The General Synod's action on the committee's recommendation shall be the final disposition of the case. All members of General Synod who participated in the first trial shall recuse themselves from consideration of the appeal.~~

Sec. 6. Discipline of a Consistory

Consistories are under the care of the classis and are subject to its government and discipline. A classis commission on judicial business has the authority, after trial, to suspend a consistory accused of unfaithfulness to duty, or of disobedience to the classis, or of violation of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or the laws and regulations of the church. If a consistory is suspended, all of its members shall be disqualified for re-election until the classis has removed the disqualification. The classis shall fulfill the responsibilities of the consistory (including those of the boards of elders and deacons) so suspended until a new consistory has been legally constituted.⁸

Article 4. Procedure for Bringing a Charge⁹

Sec. 1. A charge is a written accusation of an offense filed with the clerk of the responsible judicatory specifying the name of the accused, the nature of the alleged offense, and the time, place, and attendant circumstances of the alleged offense. (For the form of the charge, see Appendix, Formulary No. 12). The clerk of the judicatory shall provide a copy of the charge to the accused within three days of its receipt.¹⁰

Sec. 2. A charge may be brought by an individual who is subject to the jurisdiction of the responsible judicatory. If the charge is brought by an individual, it must be signed by and made in the name of the individual who must come forward openly to support the charge(s) throughout the proceedings.¹¹

Sec. 3. A committee designated by the responsible judicatory may also bring a charge.

Sec. 4. If filed by an individual, the charge shall be referred to an investigative committee appointed by the judicatory to determine whether there is sufficient merit to the charge to warrant further consideration. If a charge is filed by the committee designated by the judicatory, that same committee shall continue its proceedings to determine whether there is sufficient merit to the charge to warrant further consideration. In either case, in making this determination, the committee:¹²

- a. May interview the accuser, the accused, or any witnesses.**
- b. Shall consider the number and credibility of witnesses and the length of time between the occurrence of the alleged offense and the date when allegations were made.**
- c. If the alleged offense occurred more than five years prior to the date of the charge, the charge shall be dismissed by the committee unless the committee concludes that circumstances prevented the accusation from being brought earlier. In considering whether such circumstances exist, the burden is on the accuser to provide the committee with information sufficient to support why the charge was not brought earlier. If the decision of the committee is that such circumstances exist, the committee shall state the reasons why it believes such circumstances exist in its report to the judicatory. If the committee fails to provide the reasons for such a decision in its report to the judicatory, the judicatory shall dismiss the charge.**
- d. Shall determine whether efforts to resolve the matter short of trial would be appropriate. Such efforts may include mediation, admission by the accused that the charge is true and acceptance of appropriate sanctions, or any other disposition to which the committee and the accused may agree. Any ~~demission, suspension, deposition, or excommunication~~ agreed-upon resolution must be approved by the appropriate judicatory.¹³**

Sec. 5. The committee shall conduct its work in a confidential manner in order to protect the reputations of all persons involved and to preserve the impartiality of the judicatory if the charge moves forward.

Sec. 6. If the charge is not otherwise resolved, and the committee determines there is sufficient merit in the charge, the judicatory shall proceed to trial. If there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge.¹⁴

Sec. 7. The action of the committee shall be reported to the judicatory.¹⁵

Article 5. Trying a Charge¹⁶

Sec. 1. The clerk of the judicatory shall issue a citation (for the form of the citation to an accused person or consistory, see Appendix, Formulary No. 13) signed by the **president presiding officer** and **the** clerk, requesting the accused to appear before the judicatory at a specified time and place. The citation and a copy of the charge shall be provided to the accused.¹⁷

Sec. 2. The accused shall file a written reply to the charge with the clerk within twenty days of the receipt of the citation and a copy of the charge. If the accused acknowledges guilt or fails to file a reply to the charge, the judicatory shall impose the appropriate discipline.¹⁸

Sec. 3. The judicatory shall try the charge within thirty days of the filing of the reply, unless the trial is postponed to a later date by consent of the parties and the judicatory involved.

Sec. 4. The judicatory may try the charge, even though the accused is not present, if it is satisfied that proper notice was provided.

Sec. 5. The clerk of the judicatory shall issue citations to persons who are requested to appear as witnesses for or against the accused and, at the same time, shall provide a list of the witnesses to all parties. Persons who have not received a witness citation may be permitted to testify at the trial, if the presiding officer concludes that to allow the testimony is not fundamentally unfair.

Sec. 6. Neither the accuser, accused, counsel for any party, witnesses, clerk of the judicatory, members of the committee of

the judicatory as described in Chapter 2, Part II, Article 4, nor any person with a conflict of interest shall participate in the deliberation or the decision of the judicatory at any stage of the trial.¹⁹

Sec. 7. Unless the accused refuses or fails to appear after proper notice, witnesses shall be examined in the presence of the accused. The accused shall be permitted to cross-examine adverse witnesses. No affidavits shall be admitted.²⁰

Sec. 8. The judicatory may, at its discretion, appoint a committee to take testimony of a party or witness at a location other than that of the place of hearing, upon request of any party. Ten days' notice shall be given to all parties of the appointment and membership of the committee and of the time and place of its meeting. The parties shall examine the witness(es) and shall have the right of cross-examination.²¹

Sec. 9. A verbatim record of the trial, including the judgment, shall be preserved and entered into the records of the judicatory. Parties to the case shall be given reasonable access to the record.

Sec. 10. Parties and the judicatory may be represented by counsel of their own choosing, provided that such counsel is a minister, elder, or confessing member of the Reformed Church in America. Counsel shall not be compensated for their time or efforts but may be reimbursed for expenses.²²

Sec. 11. Procedural Rules²³

- a. The judicatory shall establish such administrative rules for the trial as it deems appropriate to ensure that the trial will be conducted in a fair and impartial manner.
- b. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person connected with the case, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any charges before the final disposition of same, including appeals, if any.
- ~~c. The required quorum for a judicatory conducting a trial shall be the same as is required for a stated session of that assembly.~~
- ~~d.~~ The accuser shall be responsible for moving forward with the evidence.

- ed.** The charge(s) must be proven with a high degree of probability.²⁴
- fe.** Receipt of evidence shall not be controlled by formal rules of evidence. However, the presiding officer may exclude any evidence if the officer determines that to admit such evidence would be fundamentally unfair.
- gf.** The only persons who may attend the trial are the parties, their counsel, the members of the judicatory, and such other persons as the judicatory deems appropriate.²⁵
- hg.** Only members of the judicatory shall be present for the deliberation on the evidence. However, the counsel for the judicatory, if any, may be present.²⁶

Sec. 12. Procedural Rules for Trying a Charge against a General Synod Professor

- a. A charge that a General Synod professor teaches doctrine contrary to Holy Scripture or the Standards of the Reformed Church in America may be submitted to the General Synod by filing the charge with the moderator of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business by a member of the synod. If a charge is brought against the professor at the classis level, either the professor or the classis may request a panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business to hear the case.
- b. ~~The charge shall be referred by the synod to~~ A panel of the Commission on Judicial Business, ~~which~~ shall determine whether there is sufficient merit to the accusation that it be heard ~~by the full synod.~~
- c. If the charge goes forward, it shall be heard by a panel of the synod Commission on Judicial Business.
- d. ~~The executive committee of the synod shall establish administrative rules for the hearing.~~
- ed.** The burden of proof shall be on the accuser, who is responsible for moving the charge forward.
- fe.** The accused shall have the right of cross-examination of adverse witnesses.

- gf.** Affidavits may not be used, but written evidence may be introduced, provided proper foundation has been laid. Written evidence may include arguments that support the accuser's charge as well as arguments from the accused.
- hg.** Either party may invite expert witnesses to testify on their behalf. Each party shall have the right to place questions to any expert witnesses.
- ~~**i.** The charge shall be considered as sustained with the vote of two-thirds of the synod. The vote shall be by written ballot.~~
- jh.** The ~~synod~~ panel of the Commission on Judicial Business shall state its reasons for its decision.
- ki.** Should the charge be sustained, the ~~synod~~ panel of the Commission on Judicial Business shall impose discipline. ~~The decision on discipline shall take place in such a manner that at least one calendar day shall have expired following the decision on the charge.~~

Sec. 13. Decision by a Board of Elders

- a.** The vote on whether the charge(s) has been proven shall be by written ballot. A simple majority of those present and voting shall be required to reach a decision.
- b.** The **judicatory** Board of Elders shall record its decision, stating the reasons therefor. A copy shall be provided to the parties.

Sec. 14. Imposition of Discipline

- a.** The judicatory shall impose such discipline as is appropriate for the offense and as is consistent with the Holy Scriptures and the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.²⁷
- b.** The judicatory shall record its actions, stating the reasons ~~therefor. A copy shall be provided to the parties.~~ Official notification shall be provided to the parties within 30 days of the decision.

Sec. 15. The recorded decision and the disciplinary action shall be made available upon request to other assemblies within the Reformed Church in America and other appropriate

ecclesiastical bodies. In addition, the judicatory, at its discretion, may distribute the recorded decision and disciplinary action to assemblies within the Reformed Church in America.²⁸

Article 6. Restoration and Reinstatement

Sec. 1. A member who has been suspended or excommunicated may be restored to the privileges of membership in the church upon repentance expressed before the judicatory which suspended or excommunicated the member. If public notice of the judgment of excommunication had been given, due public notice of reinstatement shall also be given the congregation.

Sec. 2. A person who has been suspended or deposed from office may be restored to office upon repentance and renewal of vows before the judicatory which suspended or deposed that person, provided that the judicatory is satisfied that the honor of the office will not be impaired and that the welfare of the church will be served by such a restoration, and provided that the restoration is approved by a two-thirds vote of those present at the meeting of the judicatory. Restoration after deposition shall include reordination to office.²⁹

(bb) *Chapter 2, Part III (formerly Chapter 2, Part II) (2023 edition, pp. 91-93)*

Part III Complaints

Article 1. Nature of Complaints

Sec. 1. A complaint is a written statement alleging that an action or a decision of an assembly or its officer has violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or other laws and regulations of the church.

Sec. 2. Grounds for complaint include any action or decision that is harmful to the church, whether the alleged error of the assembly or its officer is procedural or substantive, and specifically would include, but are not limited to, irregularity in the proceedings; refusal of reasonable indulgence to any person or entity involved in or affected by the decision or action; manifestation of bias or prejudice in the decision or action; and manifest injustice.

Sec. 3. A complaint may be filed only with the appropriate judicatory; ~~that has immediate superintendence of the assembly.~~

- a.** In the event of a complaint against a consistory or its officer, the complaint is filed with the clerk of the classis that has immediate superintendence of the consistory.
- b.** In the event of a complaint against a classis or its officer, the complaint is filed with the moderator of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business.

Sec. 4. A complaint may be filed only by:

- a.** One or more confessing members in good and regular standing against the consistory or board of elders having superintendence over them.
- b.** One or more members of an assembly against that assembly of which they are members.
- c.** An assembly against that assembly having immediate superintendence over it.

Sec. 5. Neither notice of intent to complain nor the complaint itself shall have the effect of suspending the action against which the complaint is made, unless within thirty days one-third of the members of the assembly complained against who were present when the action was taken file with the clerk of the judicatory in which the complaint is filed a request for such suspension until a decision is made in the higher judicatory. The clerk, upon receipt of the request for suspension, shall immediately notify, in writing, the clerk of the assembly complained against, and shall request the clerk of the assembly to certify a list of those members of the assembly present when the action complained against was taken.

Article 2. Process for Complaints

Sec. 1. Written notice of intent to complain shall be filed with an officer or with the clerk of the assembly which took the action in question. This filing shall be completed not later than twenty days after having received official notification of the action taken. In default of this requirement, the case shall not be heard.

Sec. 2. The complaint and the reasons therefor shall be filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory within twenty days after the filing of notice of intent. In default of this requirement, the complaint shall be considered to be dismissed and the clerk of the higher judicatory shall notify the parties involved.

Sec. 3. Within twenty days after receiving a copy of the complaint the clerk of the lower assembly shall file with the clerk of the higher judicatory the original record of all the proceedings pertaining to the complaint, including the notice of intent and any other documents bearing on the complaint. These constitute the record of the case. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall forward upon receipt to each of the parties a copy of the record of the case and all documents subsequently submitted in the case to the higher judicatory.

Sec. 4. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall, upon receiving the record, promptly notify its judicial business **committee commission**, call a meeting of the **committee commission** at a suitable time and place, and give notice of such meeting to all the parties involved. The **committee commission** shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The **committee commission** shall promptly advise the **several** parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to correct such irregularities. The **committee commission** may request further written response or arguments to be submitted within the same twenty days. ~~If less than thirty days remain before the next stated session of the judicatory to which the committee is to report and the committee determines that it is unable to prepare an acceptable report, it shall immediately record this determination and the reasons therefor with the clerk of such judicatory and request permission to delay its report until the next session. The clerk shall promptly confer with the officers of the judicatory who shall promptly rule upon the request.~~

Sec. 5. If the case is in proper order, the **committee commission** shall then consider its merits. If the complaint is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the **committee commission** may dismiss the complaint without a hearing. If the complaint goes forward, the **committee commission** shall consider the record of the case and such additional arguments as may have been submitted and shall also hear the parties together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties. Counsel shall meet the qualifications set forth in ~~Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 10~~ **the Judicial Procedures**. This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and

impartial manner with all parties present. If the complainant in person or by counsel fails to appear, the ~~committee~~ commission may declare the case to be defaulted.

~~Sec. 6. The committee shall report in writing its findings and recommendations to its parent judicatory by a date determined by the parent judicatory prior to the next stated session or a special session and shall furnish a copy of its report to each of the parties. After receiving the report of the committee the judicatory may request to hear the original parties in the case with their counsel. The recommendation(s) of the committee may be adopted, rejected, amended, or referred back to the committee.~~ The judicatory may confirm or reverse, in whole or in part, the action of the lower assembly, or remand the matter to it with instructions. The commission shall record its decision, stating the reasons. Decisions of the commission shall be reported in writing to the assembly on behalf of which it acts at the next stated session. Official notification shall be provided to the parties within 30 days of the decision.

Sec. 7. Persons who have voted on the matter complained against in a lower assembly or who have a conflict of interest shall not vote upon the case in ~~a higher~~ another judicatory.

~~Sec. 8. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating the reasons therefor.~~

Sec. ~~9~~8. When a complaint is filed, the complainant has the burden of moving forward and proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the respondent has violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or other laws and regulations of the church.³⁰

Sec. ~~10~~9. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person connected with the matter, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any complaints before the final disposition of same, including appeals, if any.

Sec. ~~11~~10. No complaint can be taken against any action or decision of the General Synod.

(cc) *Chapter 2, Part IV (formerly Chapter 2, Part III) (2023 edition, pp. 95-98)*

Part **III** IV Appeals

Article 1. Nature of an Appeal

Sec. 1. An appeal is the transfer to a higher judicatory of a complaint, a charge, or an appeal on which judgment has been rendered in a lower judicatory. The right of appeal belongs to either of the original parties in a case. That right may be exercised when a party considers itself to be aggrieved or injured by a judgment of a judicatory.

Sec. 2. An appeal may also be a transfer of a charge against a General Synod professor on whom a judgment has been rendered. The appeal shall be made to the full General Synod Commission on Judicial Business **immediately following the synod that rendered the original judgment**. In an appeal of this nature, any reference in this Part to a “lower judicatory” shall be deemed to refer to the panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business that rendered the original judgment and any reference in this Part to “higher judicatory” shall be deemed to mean the full General Synod Commission on Judicial Business to which the appeal is made.

Sec. 3. The grounds of appeal include: irregularity in the proceedings of the lower judicatory; refusal of reasonable indulgence to a party on trial; receiving improper, or declining to receive proper, evidence; rendering a decision before all the testimony is taken; bias or prejudice in the case; and manifest injustice in the judgment.

Sec. 4. Notice of intent to appeal suspends the judgment of the lower judicatory until the appeal is finally decided. But when the judgment which is appealed from results in suspension, deposition from office, or excommunication, the person against whom the judgment has been pronounced shall be required to refrain from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and from the exercise of office until the appeal is finally decided, unless exception is made in the judgment of the lower judicatory.

Sec. 5. The **regional-synod** full classis shall be the final court of appeal for all cases originally heard by a board of elders. A panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business shall be the final court of appeal for all cases originally heard by

a classis commission on judicial business. The full General Synod Commission on Judicial Business shall be the final court of appeal for all other matters. ~~However, the General Synod may hear such an appeal if one delegate to the regional synod from each of the classes in that regional synod, with the exception of the classis from whose action the appeal is taken, shall give written notice to the clerk of the regional synod within thirty days of its adjournment that there is just cause for appealing a case to the General Synod.~~

Article 2. Process for Appeals

Sec. 1. Written notice of intent to appeal shall be filed with an officer or with the clerk of the judicatory which took the action in question. This filing shall be completed not later than twenty days after having received official notification of the action taken. In default of this requirement, the appeal shall not be heard.

Sec. 2. The appeal and the reasons therefor shall be filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory within twenty days after the filing of notice of intent. In default of this requirement, the appeal shall be considered to be dismissed and the clerk of the higher judicatory shall notify the parties involved.

Sec. 3. Within twenty days after receiving a copy of the appeal the clerk of the lower judicatory shall file with the clerk of the higher judicatory the original record of all the proceedings in the case, including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case. These constitute the record of the case. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall forward upon receipt to each of the parties a copy of the record of the case and all documents subsequently submitted in the case to the higher judicatory. The higher judicatory shall not admit or consider as evidence anything not found in this record without consent of the parties.

Sec. 4. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall, upon receiving the record of the case, promptly notify ~~its judicial business committee~~ the higher judicatory, call a meeting of the ~~committee~~ judicatory at a suitable time and place, and give notice of such meeting to all the parties involved. The ~~committee~~ judicatory shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The ~~committee~~ judicatory shall promptly advise the ~~several~~ parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to

correct such irregularities. The **committee judicatory** may request further written response or arguments. ~~If less than thirty days remain before the next stated session of the judicatory to which the committee is to report and the committee determines that it is unable to prepare an acceptable report, it shall immediately record this determination and the reasons therefor with the clerk of such judicatory and request permission to delay its report until the next session. The clerk shall promptly confer with the officers of the judicatory who shall promptly rule upon the request.~~

Sec. 5. In an appeal of a A General Synod professor, the clerk of the General Synod shall notify its executive committee, which will promptly appoint a new committee to consider the appeal may file an appeal of a decision of a panel of the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business with the moderator of the Commission. The committee moderator will call a meeting of all the members of the Commission on Judicial Business at a suitable time and place, and give notice of such meeting to all the parties involved. The committee full Commission shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The committee Commission shall promptly advise the several parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to correct such irregularities. The committee Commission may request further written responses or arguments.

Sec. 6. If the case is in proper order, the committee commission shall then consider its merits. It shall consider the record of the case and such additional arguments as may have been submitted. If the appeal is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the committee commission may dismiss the appeal without a hearing. If the appeal goes forward, the committee commission shall also hear the original parties, together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties. Counsel shall meet the qualifications set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 10 the Judicial Procedures. This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner. Either party may elect not to appear in person or by counsel at the hearing.

~~**Sec. 7. The committee shall report in writing its findings and recommendations to its parent judicatory by a date determined by the parent judicatory prior to the next stated session or a special session and shall furnish a copy of its report to each of the parties. After receiving the report of the committee, the judicatory may request to hear the original parties in the case**~~

~~with their counsel. The recommendation(s) of the committee may be adopted, rejected, amended, or referred back to the committee.~~ The judicatory may confirm or reverse, in whole or in part, the decision of the lower judicatory or assembly, or remand the case to it with instructions.

Sec. 8. Persons who have voted on the matter in a lower judicatory or assembly, or who have a conflict of interest, shall not vote upon the appeal in a higher judicatory.

Sec. 9. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating the reasons therefor.

Sec. 10. When an appeal is filed, the appellant shall have the responsibility to establish that the lower judicatory erred in its decision.

Sec. 11. The judicatory hearing the appeal shall give deference to the decision of the lower judicatory, particularly in the matter of credibility of witnesses, and shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole.³¹

Sec. 12. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person connected with the case, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any appeals before the final disposition of same.

Sec. 13. No appeal can be taken from any decision of the full General Synod Commission on Judicial Business.

The following segment of this recommendation involves amendments to Chapter 3 of the *Book of Church Order*. These are not constitutional, meaning that they do not require the approval of the classes, but only of two meetings of the General Synod (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 12 [2023 edition, p. 127]).

And further, to approve the following amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod (*Book of Church Order* Chapter 3) for submission to the 2025 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

(dd) Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1c (2023 edition, p. 107)

c. The configuration of classes ~~and regional synods~~ for determining delegates to the General Synod shall be as of

December 31st of the year immediately preceding the year in which General Synod is convened.

(ee) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 1b (2023 edition, p. 108)*

Sec. 1. Membership

The membership of the council shall consist of the following:

...

- b. ~~One~~ Eight members recommended by ~~each regional synod~~ the classes from among ~~its~~ their regular classical delegates to the immediately preceding General Synod, and elected by the General Synod upon nomination by the Commission on Nominations using an equitable rotation of the classes as determined by the General Synod.

(ff) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 3 (2023 edition, p. 109)*

Sec. 3. Term of Office

The term of office for the elected member shall be four years. Members shall be ineligible for two years after they have served their term. Members who have served a partial term of less than two years shall be eligible for an additional full four-year term. The term of office shall be from July 1 of the year they are elected and be completed on June 30. An employee of the GSC, ~~the regional synods,~~ or the classes of the Reformed Church in America may not hold membership on the council. General Synod officers shall serve as members of the council for one additional year following the expiration of their General Synod term of office.

(gg) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 (2023 edition, p. 112)*

Sec. 2. Eligibility

Membership on General Synod agencies and commissions shall be open to all confessing members of the churches of the RCA, with the exception of the voting members of the Commission on Judicial Business, which is open only to those in the RCA who are ordained either as elders or ministers. An employee of the General Synod Council may not hold membership on the agency or commission to which that person is accountable unless specifically provided in the agency constitution or bylaws; nor may an executive employed by the General Synod Council ~~or any of the regional synods~~ hold other than *ex-officio* membership on the General Synod Council.

(hh) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 6a (2023 edition, p. 116)*

Sec. 6. Commission on Judicial Business

a. **Membership**

~~The commission shall have eight members, one representing each of the regional synods. Each regional synod shall nominate a layperson or a minister in alternating six-year periods in order to ensure that the commission will have within its membership at least three laypersons and at least three ministers. Legal training and experience shall be required of lay members. A broad knowledge of and background in the structure, government, and function of the denomination shall be required of all members.~~

Each classis shall nominate one elder or minister, as determined by the Commission on Nominations, for election by the General Synod to form the Commission. The Commission on Nominations shall ensure equal representation of elders and ministers on this commission. Broad knowledge of and background in the structure, government, and function of the denomination shall be required of all members. Orientation and training of new members shall be provided by the General Synod. The term of office for a member shall be for three years, with one-third of the members' terms expiring each year.

The Commission on Nominations shall nominate a person to be the moderator of the Commission on Judicial Business, who shall not be a person nominated by a classis, to serve on the Commission. The moderator need not be an office holder but must have legal training and experience and/or significant experience with, knowledge of, and background in the structure, government, and function of the denomination.

(ii) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8a and c (2023 edition, pp. 117-118)*

Sec. 8. Commission on Nominations

a. **Membership**

The commission shall have thirteen members, eight representing ~~each of the regional synods~~ classes, one representing African-Americans, Hispanics, Native American Indians, and Pacific and Asian Americans, respectively, and one being the immediate past president of General Synod. Each ~~regional synod~~ classis shall nominate a layperson or a minister member of classis who is either a minister or commissioned pastor in alternating ~~six-year~~ periods of equitable rotation in order to ensure that the commission will have within its membership at least three laypersons and at least three ministers members of classis. The members representing African-Americans, Hispanics, Native American Indians, and Pacific and Asian Americans shall be nominated by their respective councils or representative bodies.

c. Responsibilities

1. The commission shall nominate members for the General Synod Council and all General Synod commissions and agencies, unless otherwise specified in the Bylaws.
2. The commission, in consultation with the general secretary, shall search the denomination for suitable nominees. In making nominations it shall consider the geographic location, occupation, and record of previous service to the denomination of persons suggested by classes, ~~regional synods~~, and other sources. It shall consider this and other pertinent data in light of each commission's or agency's responsibilities, membership needs, suggested nominees, and place and schedule of meetings.
3. The commission members shall, in consultation with the stated clerks of the classes ~~and regional synods from which they are appointed~~, be responsible for gathering information on nominees ~~within the bounds of the respective synods~~.

...

(jj) *Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 11 (2023 edition, p. 125)*

Sec. 11. ~~Regional Synods~~ Women and Youth Corresponding Delegates

- a. ~~Two women shall be appointed corresponding delegates by each regional synod; said appointments may be made in consultation with the Commission for Women.~~ Each of sixteen classes determined using an equitable rotation may appoint one woman as a corresponding delegate. These appointments may be made in consultation with the Commission for Women.
- b. ~~One young adult may be appointed as a corresponding delegate by each regional synod.~~ Each of eight classes determined using an equitable rotation may appoint one young adult as a corresponding delegate.
- c. ~~The regional synod executive shall be a corresponding delegate to the General Synod.~~ Each classis may only appoint one woman or youth corresponding delegate at each General Synod.

(kk) *Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 7 (2023 edition, p. 132)*

Sec. 7. Submission of Overtures

The General Synod may receive overtures from a classis ~~or a regional synod~~. It shall not receive overtures which deal with matters under adjudication or which make either direct or implied charges against persons. Overtures from classes shall be submitted to the General Synod office no later than two months before a session of General Synod. ~~Overtures from regional synods shall be submitted to the General Synod office no later than three weeks before a session of General Synod.~~

Elections and Appointments

The commission elected Christopher Jacobsen to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual term beginning July 1, 2024. Additionally, the commission appointed Philip De Koster to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2024 General Synod.

Report of the Commission on History

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

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

The Archives

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

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

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

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

H 22-2

To explore the establishment and incorporation of a Reformed Church Historic Trust as a 501(c)(3) organization to support and benefit the RCA Archives, and that the structure will be determined by the Commission on History in consultation with the RCA's general counsel, the RCA's chief financial officer, and others as needed, and reported to the 2023 General Synod (*MGS 2022*, p. 218).

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

H 23-1

That the General Synod hold in abeyance the proposal to develop a Historic Trust to support the Archives until such time as the denominational archivist should recommend that work be resumed on it (*MGS 2023*, p. 200).

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

The Historical Series

Rev. Dr. James Hart Brumm continues as the general editor of the Historical Series. Since the last commission report to General Synod, under Rev. Dr. Brumm's leadership, the series has published *Global Grace Café* by Elizabeth Estes; *The Canons of Dort: God's Freedom, Justice, and Persistence* by Eugene P. Heideman, edited by Donald J. Bruggink; and *The Church Speaks*, vol. 3, edited by David Komline.

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

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

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

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

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

On Matters of Historical Relevance

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

On RF 24-6: Changes to Commissions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,

Aric Balk
Corstian Devos
Katlyn DeVries, moderator
Daniel Meeter
Douglas Shepler
David Zomer

APPENDIX

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

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

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

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

The Commission on Christian Action

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

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

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

focus on temperance and Lord's Day observance (*MGS 1919*, pp. 860-864). "Public Morals" was a regular agenda item at General Synod from 1886 (*MGS 1886*, p. 156), when it replaced "Prevailing Sins," which first appeared at the synod of 1809 (*MGS 1809*, p. 408). The Social Welfare Committee also replaced the Committee on Social Service and Industrial Relations, established in 1931.⁸

The Commission on Christian Unity

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

The Commission on Church Order

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Commission on History

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

The Commission on Judicial Business

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

⁹ This regularized most of the commission names we now know.

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

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

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity was formed in response to a report from the Commission on Christian Action to the General Synod of 1998.¹¹ That commission had recommended a task force on race and ethnicity to be formed as the RCA sought to begin a decade freed from racism. The advisory committee presenting the Commission on Christian Action report to the synod amended the recommendation to create a Commission on Race and Ethnicity (*MGS 1998*, p. 131), which had as its responsibilities to “advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism,” “serve as an advocate for transformation,” “recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies,” and “monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives” (*BCO Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 5, Section 7b [2023 edition, p. 117]*).

This was not the first time the RCA created a commission for this issue. The General Synod of 1964 formed a Commission on Race (*MGS 1964*, pp. 99-100), which sought to spur dialogue and awareness in the denomination until it was discontinued upon recommendation of the General Program Council in 1970 (*MGS 1970*, pp. 182-183). In its final report, this earlier commission powerfully called upon the RCA to address its own institutional racism (*MGS 1969*, pp. 84-86). The term “institutional racism” did not appear in official church documents again until the Board of Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary took it up in 2009.¹²

The Commission on Nominations

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

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

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

The Commission on Theology

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

The Commission for Women

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

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

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

The Commission on Christian Worship

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

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

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

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

The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

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

Why Commissions?

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

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

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

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

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

Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Reformed Church in America's (RCA) Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) has eight members—one from each regional synod. The membership must consist of at least three ministers and three laypersons. Legal training and experience is required for those members who are laypersons.

The responsibilities of the CJB are to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it in the RCA's *Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures* (Chapter 2 of the *Book of Church Order [BCO]*).

Since the 2023 General Synod, the CJB has received no charge, notice of intent to complain, or notice of intent to appeal. Accordingly, the CJB has conducted no hearings and only one meeting. The meeting was conducted by conference call for the sole purposes of (a) approving this report, (b) electing a moderator and secretary for the annual period from July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025, and (c) selecting a corresponding delegate to the 2024 General Synod.

If an appeal is received prior to the 2024 General Synod and forwarded to the Commission on Judicial Business, it will be processed accordingly. Pursuant to *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 4, the Commission on Judicial Business will make a report and recommendation regarding any such appeal to the 2025 General Synod.

The General Synod receives this report for information only.

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... ” (Revelation 7:9).

“The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial future engaging all of God’s people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism” (GSC Ends policy E-5, 2023).

Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2023 edition, p. 117):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are Nathan Gullion, Rolfi Elivo Lopez, Stephen Kim, Riana Shaw Robinson, Young Na, Earl James (secretary), Nathan Pyle (vice moderator), and Kelvin Spooner (moderator). Alina Coipel faithfully serves as the General Synod Council support staff to the commission.

Antiracism Policy

Since 1957, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has endeavored to address the issue of racism in the church and world with a plethora of statements, programs, processes, and measures in its efforts to become a denomination freed from racism. And for the first time in the nearly 400-year history of the RCA, the 2022 General Synod overwhelmingly adopted its first denominational antiracism policy, which was presented and recommended by the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 2022, RE 22-1, p. 235*):

To direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary to strongly urge all entities of the Reformed Church in America (racial/ethnic councils, assemblies, commissions, institutions, boards, and agencies) to adopt the following antiracism policy:

The Reformed Church in America shall:

1. Build on the 2009 General Synod declaration that “racism is a sin because it is an offense to God” and declare that the sin of racism is expressed as a policy, behavior, and/or belief against a person or people based on their identification and/or membership in a particular racial or ethnic group that is considered a minority.
2. Define antiracism as the practice of confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.
3. Confess that our sin has led us to erect religious, cultural, economic, and political barriers along racial and ethnic lines and that these barriers have separated us from one another and deprived many of us of the right to develop our personal and corporate identities.
4. Respect the rights and freedom of all people of color regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality where the cries of people who have become victims of racial injustice and/or discrimination are to be taken seriously and are given full voice and opportunity to make their complaints, without retaliation, to their appropriate judicatories; and inform the Office for Advocacy and Race Relations as well as the Commission on Race and Ethnicity.
5. Support allies who speak out against persons and systems that perpetuate racial injustice.
6. Commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional synods, and General Synod).

In the two years since the antiracism policy was adopted, there has been a name change in the RCA office that addresses matters of racial justice. The name changed from the “Office for Advocacy and Race Relations,” formed in 2021, to the “Office of Diversity and Belonging.” The staff coordinators supervised under this office include those who lead the ministries of equity-based hospitality, disability concerns, and racial and ethnic councils. This office assists the RCA with “living into a multicultural, multiracial future freed from racism, sexism, and ableism.” The full-time director of the Office of Diversity and Belonging is the Rev. Jeremy Simpson. CORE understands that the RCA is in a season where it must do more with less, but CORE must name our concern with possibly overburdening one person to the detriment of all the ministries in the Office of Diversity and Belonging.

Nevertheless, with staying in alignment with current RCA terminology, CORE requests that wherever the RCA antiracism policy appears online and whenever it is used within the RCA, an editorial change be made by the RCA communication department, or whoever is responsible, to update the terminology to the Office of Diversity and Belonging.

The antiracism policy has been a catalyst for conversation, reflection, and action since its adoption. CORE is glad to report that for many, the policy is not just words in print or on paper; rather, it is a living principle the people of God are striving to achieve. To that end, more classes and regions have committed to intentionally include antiracism work in their contexts. These include the Regional Synod of New York and New Brunswick Classis. Last year, Hope Reformed Church in Holland,

Michigan, and North Grand Rapids Classis committed to doing antiracism work in their areas. CORE's hope is that we can name more and more churches, classes, and regions that are engaged in antiracism work.

As churches, classes, and regions strive to live out the principles of the policy, their judicatories must be open to taking seriously any reports of microaggressions and/or discrimination, and individuals must be culturally aware and sensitive to how they address one another. Just last year, microaggressions occurred at General Synod 2023: offensive comments were made to a Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries executive committee member, discriminatory comments were made toward visiting high school students from an Upward Bound program, and assumptions were made about another person's ethnicity/nationality, just to name a few. This is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. CORE has been informed that antiracism training will occur at General Synod 2024. We commend this effort to enlighten, educate, and edify the General Synod delegates and attendees to be more alert in their interactions and conversations, but CORE also hopes this training will become a resource and made available to churches, classes, and regional synods throughout the denomination.

The Reformed Church in America's antiracism policy, stated in full above, includes the following elements:

- "Define antiracism as the practice of confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions."
- "Respect the rights and freedom of all people of color regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality where the cries of people who have become victims of racial injustice, and/or discrimination are to be taken seriously and are given full voice and opportunity ..."
- "Commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional centers, and General Synod)."

Currently, the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* requires that only the Commissions on Race and Ethnicity and Nominations include people of color from the four racial and ethnic councils (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Sections 7a and 8a [2023 edition, p. 117]) as members. That inclusion allows those two commissions to fully embrace the word and intent of the antiracism policy.

Neither the *BCO* nor any other authority ensures that the attitudes or structures of the other General Synod commissions are influenced or impacted by people of color. The consequence of this lack of racial and ethnic representation is that the ongoing work of the commissions to guide and shape the discussions, decisions, and actions of General Synods might neglect the experiences, needs, wisdom, and desires of our diverse denomination. In short, this structural oversight may cause us to fall short of the denomination's goal of being free of racism. Therefore, CORE recommends:

RE 24-1

To direct each General Synod commission to annually seek advice and input from each racial and ethnic council in order to incorporate their experiences and concerns into the commission’s mission and goals. Each commission is to provide the General Synod Council (GSC) with its annual schedule of engagement with the councils. And further,

To direct GSC to monitor how each commission implements its engagement with the councils, and to include its findings in its evaluations of the commissions, as per *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2023 edition, p. 111).

This recommendation allows for the discussions, decisions, and actions of General Synods to be enriched by the experiences and wisdom of the wide racial and ethnic diversity of the RCA.

CORE also recommends that each commission be required to participate in antiracism training. At these events, commissioners should discuss the elements of the antiracism training and consider together how the policy intersects with their commission’s *BCO* mandates.

RE 24-2

To direct each General Synod commission to participate in an antiracism training at least once every two years. The training is to include discussion of how the RCA’s antiracism policy affects the commission’s work. This training can coincide with opportunities offered through or approved by the RCA Office of Diversity and Belonging; working through the staff office will enable commissions to find trainings that are both meaningful and do not have additional budgetary impact.

Antiracism Training and the Consistorial Report Form (CRF)

CORE is called to “recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church” as well as “monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b [2023 edition, p. 117]). To get a clearer idea of the denomination’s efforts to become a fully multicultural and multiracial church, CORE conducted research utilizing the Consistorial Report Form and one-on-one interviews.

The 2021 General Synod adopted the following recommendation presented by the General Synod Council serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod on behalf of the African American Black Council (*MGS 2021*, EC 21-22a, p. 44):

To include a question about participation in antiracism training in the annual Consistorial Report Form.

CORE received and reviewed the 2022 Consistorial Report Form (CRF), which contained the question: Did your church host or participate in antiracism training this year?

Throughout the eight regional synods, a total of 717 churches responded to this question; out of those, only 51 churches, or 7 percent of the respondents, stated they hosted or participated in antiracism training in 2022, while 666 churches (93 percent) stated they did not. The following chart shows the breakdown by regional synod.

Regional Synod	# of Responding Churches	Had Antiracism Training in 2022	Did Not Have Antiracism Training in 2022
New York	134	17	117
Albany	92	3	89
Canada	28	2	26
Mid-America	67	2	65
Far West	51	3	48
Great Lakes	109	9	100
Heartland	94	3	91
Mid-Atlantics	142	12	130
Totals	717	51 (7 percent)	666 (93 percent)

Based on the comments of some respondents in addressing whether their church hosted or participated in antiracism training in the past year, there are several factors that may contribute to these results, including:

- Addressing racism as a sin from the pulpit from some churches
- Lack of opportunities/resources to participate in antiracism training
- The church's location is in a non-diverse rural area
- Lack of interest of congregation and/or church leadership
- The "color blind" theology that all people are image bearers of God, therefore race has no significant bearing on relationships
- Seminaries do not prepare their students to live antiracist lifestyles
- Classes do not hold their students under care or their member ministers of Word and sacrament accountable for embedding antiracism into their ministries

Some viewed participating in the monthly antiracism prayer gathering as antiracism training, which, in CORE's opinion, it is not. CORE appreciates and values the monthly

antiracism prayer gatherings and all who participate and support it. These gatherings enlighten, generate conversation and reflection, and above all, prayer, to convict hearts to eradicate racism, which is sorely needed.

To supplement the information compiled from the Consistorial Report Form (CRF) regarding antiracism and multicultural work among churches, CORE conducted interviews with classis clerks and educational institution presidents (or their designees). Nine open-ended questions, two of which included sub-questions, were used to allow interviewees wide latitude on how they wanted to respond.

Letters and emails were sent to classis clerks and the RCA's educational institutions. Eleven leaders responded from various regions throughout the RCA, with two leaders being from the same classis. Only one college/seminary leader responded.

Regarding those who responded to our request, CORE found this method of information gathering to be much more illuminating than the CRF method. However, most classes and educational institutions did not respond to our request. While CORE recognizes there are several possible reasons for the non-response, ranging from overwhelming ministry responsibilities to an apprehension to engage the antiracism conversation, we were disappointed by the lack of participation.

Through the interviews, CORE discovered these important insights:

1. While some locations appear to have clear mechanisms in place to hold the assembly accountable to grow as an antiracist body, most appear to lack such a capacity.
2. While we have no information about whether or how pastors are trained to be antiracist, it appears, in many assemblies, they are not accountable to be, model, or expect people to be antiracist.
3. Antiracism can be thought of as an idea, as an organizational policy matter, and/or as a lifestyle. It appears that most interviewees assess their organizations as seeing antiracism at least as an idea. It appears that a few see antiracism as an organizational or policy matter. It appears that very few see antiracism as a lifestyle matter. It might be that the nature of the interview question itself influenced this observation.
4. Strategic focuses going forward might be to encourage assemblies to adopt an antiracism or similar policy and empower ministry teams to encourage the embedding of that policy into their respective assemblies' life at the levels of discipleship, leadership, and mission.

CORE concedes that the antiracism question has been on the CRF for only two years, and CORE has not yet reviewed the 2023 CRF. In addition, the antiracism policy has existed for only two years. Nevertheless, this research indicates that much work and greater effort is needed in all assemblies as well as RCA educational institutions to ensure that the denomination achieves its multiracial and multiethnic objectives. All of the interviewee responses have been anonymously documented. If anyone is interested in reviewing the responses, please contact the new CORE moderator, Nate

Pyle, at nathan.pyle@gmail.com. Also, CORE will continue to monitor the antiracism training question on the CRF with the hope that additional churches will be committed to antiracism work in their communities of fellowship.

Looking Ahead

The 2022 General Synod passed a recommendation funding three sankofa journeys and cohorts with the Institute for Healing Racism (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-2, p. 237). These experiences require significant time and energy to implement. Unfortunately, there have not been any sankofa journeys or Institute for Healing Racism cohorts yet. CORE remains in contact with the Office of Diversity and Belonging with the desire to assist in coordinating sankofa journeys that will be impactful for everyone who participates. More information will be shared in the coming months.

The Executive Committee of the African American Black Council (AABC) conducted an in-depth analysis of the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to “alter, eliminate, or replace any article or section that would result in making those portions of the *BCO* more antiracist and culturally inviting.” These recommendations were submitted to the General Synod Council (GSC) under two reports: Report #1 – Recommendations for Specific Changes to the *BCO* Related to Antiracism; and Report #2 – Recommendations on Extra-*BCO* Matters related to Antiracism. CORE received and reviewed these reports and commends the AABC for the time, effort, reflection, and conclusions that the council made. CORE fully endorses the reports and anticipates that GSC will bring related recommendations to the floor of General Synod 2024 for discussion and adoption.

CORE has met with representatives of the RCA Board of Benefit Services (BOBS) to discuss their paper “An Equitable Future,” which highlights institutional inequities in the benefit services of installed ministers of Word and sacrament of color in the RCA. CORE believes this is a matter that is important and requires attention. For CORE is committed to promoting equality and justice within our denomination, and it is with this commitment in mind that we fully commend BOBS’ paper “An Equitable Future.” The paper poses this question, “How do we provide a structure and accessible resources so that clergy have the option to save for retirement and receive other critical benefits, but in a way that fits their contexts and needs?” It is a question that needs to be addressed and resolved so that installed ministers of color have some assurance of stability when they reach retirement. However, it has been difficult for BOBS and CORE to gain traction from other assemblies and agencies in this area during this season of transition as other issues have taken higher priority. Moving forward, CORE will continue to collaborate with BOBS for an equitable future for its ministers.

General Synod 2022 overwhelmingly adopted the following recommendation:

To direct the General Synod Council to reinstate and recognize a fourth racial/ethnic council for Native American and First Nations Ministries as a council in the Reformed Church in America with all rights and privileges hereto

according to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2021 edition, p. 109) (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-3, p. 238).

To date, bylaws have not been completed, an official leadership structure is not in place, and the staff coordinator position for this council has not been filled. CORE acknowledges that there are individuals engaged in implementing these structures. However, CORE is disappointed with slow pace and hopes the Native American Indigenous Ministries Council (NAIM) will be fully functional by year's end.

CORE is excited that the Global Hispanic Ministries Council has been fully engaged in church planting, particularly in the Global South. The RCA has a rich history of Global Mission ministry, and the Word of God, through the Hispanic Council, is reaching countries such as the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, and other countries in the Global South. We are all called to be ambassadors for Christ and the Hispanic Council is truly living into that divine calling.

Conclusion

As the Reformed Church in America continues its transitional journey, which, we pray, will be more inclusive and empowering for people of color, CORE is committed to being a safe space for anyone who feels oppressed, discriminated against, wronged, or mistreated by a brother or sister in Christ because of race, ethnicity, or nationality. CORE is open to hear your story and address it accordingly and encourages anyone to come forward and speak your truth to power. For the only way that injustices come to light is that courageous people stand up and speak out against the sin of racism.

Lastly, CORE thanks Rolfi Elivo Lopez, who served one term and was instrumental in the creation of the antiracism policy. It is also with much gratitude that CORE thanks Kelvin Spooner for work for the last two terms and especially his leadership as moderator of CORE for the last four years. Kelvin has led with courage and humility, which enabled CORE to function as both a hospitable place for difference, and also a cohesive team that worked to see the RCA fulfill its Revelation 7:9 hopes. For that, we are grateful and pray God blesses Kelvin as he continues to serve God's kingdom.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Kelvin A. Spooner, moderator

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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

“The church is the cathedral of love.”¹⁹

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

¹⁷ Cited in BrainyQuote.com, accessed 27 February 2024.
www.brainyquote.com/quotes/winston_churchill_111316.

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹

²⁰ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.X.27.

²¹ 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.²²

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.²³

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

²² Belgic Confession, Art. 27.

²³ *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.²⁴

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."²⁵

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."²⁶

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."²⁷ 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.

²⁴ van Maastricht, Matthew. *Foundations of Reformed Church Polity*, 4-5.

²⁵ Coertzen, Pieter. *Decently and in Order*, 97.

²⁶ Coertzen, Pieter. *Church and Order*, 53.

²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹

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.”³⁰

²⁸ van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 5.

²⁹ van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 5-6.

³⁰ 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.”³¹

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.”³² 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.”³³ 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

³¹ van Maastricht, *Foundations*, 6-7.

³² Schweizer, Eduard. *Church Order in the New Testament*, 14-15.

³³ 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

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics 20. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960.

Coertzen, Pieter. *Church and Order: A Reformed Perspective*. Canon Law Monograph Series 1. Leuven: Peeters, 1998.

———. *Decently and in Order: A Theological Reflection on the Order for, and the Order in, the Church*. Leuven: Peeters, 2004.

Faith Alive Christian Resources, Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Reformed Church in America. *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources*. Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013.

- Janssen, Allan J. *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*. Second edition. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America 100. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Church Press, 2019.
- Koffeman, Leo J. *In Order to Serve: An Ecumenical Introduction to Church Polity. Church Polity and Ecumenism: Global Perspectives*. Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2014.
- Maastricht, Matthew J. van. *Foundations of Reformed Church Polity: The Rhyme and Reason of the Order*. RCA 400 Series 2. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Church Press, 2022.
- Meeter, Daniel J. *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government: The Bicentennial of the Celebration of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America*. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America 24. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Ruler, A.A. van. "De Kerk Is Ook Doel in Zichzelf." In *Verwachting En Voltooiing: Een Bundel Theologische Opstellen En Voordrachten*. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978.
- . *Ik Geloof*. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969.
- Schweizer, Eduard. *Church Order in the New Testament*. London: SCM, 1961.
- St. Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Translated by D. W. Robertson Jr. New York: Pearson, 1958.

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).

Report of the Commission for Women

Our Identity

The Commission for Women (CFW) seeks to understand the life of women within the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and is committed to the support and advocacy for the full inclusion and participation of women within all contexts of church life. The Commission for Women is committed to raising awareness, to providing opportunities for women in the church, and to providing information so that women can fully participate in the leadership and life of the church.

Celebration and Affirmation

Celebrating the past year can be a wonderful way to reflect on achievements, milestones, and personal growth.

We celebrate and give thanks for the time at General Synod plenary last year. The 2023 General Synod celebrated five decades of women's ordination to offices of elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America. It was a time of rejoicing over the ways God has created space for women and men in the church to live fully and freely into all of their gifts and callings.

We recognize that we couldn't have had this celebration without the support of Rev. Eddy Alemán. Eddy has been a champion for women in the RCA and in support of full inclusion of women. Along with Eddy, Rev. Dwayne Jackson (president of General Synod 2023) and the presiding 2024 General Synod president, Rev. Judy Nelson, have been encouraging and supportive to women. In 2022, we asked for 20 minutes at a plenary session to celebrate. Eddy, Dwayne, and Judy gifted us an entire plenary session.

We are also grateful for continued partnership with Rev. Liz Testa and her continued work helping the RCA pursue a vision for the full inclusion of the gifts and influence of women. Liz's work cultivating, empowering, and equipping women who are established and emerging leaders is a great partnership with us on the commission.

The Commission's Role

As the Commission for Women, we continue to provide opportunities and resources for developing awareness related to the role of women in church and society. We are energized about how this commission can continue to assist the church toward inclusive attitudes, images, and language in all materials published, designed, or provided for use in the denomination. We want to continue to grow and enable the full and complete participation of women in church and society.

The CFW is dedicated toward seeking systemic change in the church for the full inclusion of women. The commission recognizes there has been some progress, but there continues to be work to be done and we cannot work at this alone. This commission appreciates the collaboration with other RCA bodies working on issues

affecting women, and develops and maintains relationships with similar groups in other denominations, exchanging ideas and material regarding issues affecting women.

The commission is dedicated to fostering continued solidarity and partnership with the Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership to foster an environment in which everyone thrives. Throughout discussions with these partners in ministry, the CFW embraces the strength and trust that are built in these relationships, and we champion the value of this work together. As we embody discipleship with all people in the RCA, we see this value in all these relationships, both men and women, lay people and clergy, as a celebration of our collaboration for resources, networking, and equipping in our faith communities.

Over the years, there has been significant progress in the Reformed Church in America. However, we realize there are still areas where there is work to be done. There is still a need for education and empowerment. As women pursue theological education and training, they are better equipped to serve in leadership roles within the church. The availability of resources and support networks for women in ministry can also contribute to their empowerment and effectiveness.

We acknowledge that we have women leaving our denomination for other denominations because of a lack of call. We also recognize that we are a changing denomination with churches coming into the RCA. There is work for us to do in educating what it means to be an egalitarian denomination and what the continued flourishing of women looks like.

Concerns

Transfers out and demissions: We note that even after the gracious separation, some RCA women clergy have left for other denominations that may offer a more supportive climate for their ministry.

In the process of gracious separation, we would encourage speaking well of each other. While we differ on important matters to each of us, we recognize our shared identity as fellow believers and part of the holy catholic church. We have heard from women clergy and elders of difficult encounters with those who have chosen to leave.

Looking to the Future

The current emergence of attention to religious abuse and trauma leads us to recognize the importance of women clergy and leaders as those who can enter into the experiences of women who may have experienced such abuse and trauma. Some research indicates that many women are leaving the church and there is a need for further study and attention to this. The engagement of younger generations of women with the church will likely shape our future.

The possibility of “affinity” structures in the restructured RCA raises both opportunities and concerns as we think about women’s ministry. We would hope that we do not find women siloed or segregated in such structures.

Commission Meetings

The Commission for Women has met virtually several times since the 2023 General Synod: October 27, 2023; January 22, 2024; February 8, 2024; February 21, 2024; February 27, 2024; and March 7, 2024.

The Commission for Women is deeply grateful for the dedicated and faithful service of Barbara Spooner and Rev. Claudette Reid over the past three years. Their terms of service will be completed at the end of June 2024.

The Commission for Women is also deeply grateful for the dedicated and faithful service of Rev. Mornier Rich as our General Synod Council (GSC) staff liaison and for our continued collaboration with women’s transformation and leadership through Rev. Liz Testa.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Debra Rensink, moderator

Report of the General Synod Professorate

The office of General Synod professor involves representing “the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for ministry,” as well as exercising “the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole” (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8 [2023 edition, p. 74]). We fulfill this office both individually and collectively. Elected and installed by the General Synod, we remain amenable to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, striving at all times and in all ways to fulfill our calling faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully.

There are presently four General Synod professors:

Rev. Dr. Carol Bechtel
Rev. Dr. Jaeseung Cha
Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary
Rev. Dr. Chad Pierce

Each professor was nominated by a theological agent of the General Synod and then elected by the General Synod to exercise a substantial and continuing role in preparing candidates for ministry in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) under the authority of their nominating agency.

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The General Synod professorate is represented on the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) and continues to be in dialogue with that board regarding matters pertaining to the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE). Our work in this area has focused on the effects of the potential restructuring of the RCA on the ordination and supervision process for candidates under the care of classes. We are also working on creating and recommending potential guidelines for the ordination process as well as the transfer of ordinations into the RCA, particularly among candidates/ministers from Latin America.

Additionally, we continue to look for best practices regarding commissioned pastor training, the Approved Alternative Route through the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), as well as other areas pertinent to the reception, care, examination, and ordination of candidates into the RCA.

Denominational Commissions and Agencies

The General Synod professors have also been represented on a number of commissions and agencies important to the work of the church. Rev. Dr. McCreary has served on the restructuring team, providing his own theological insights as well as being the liaison to the team from the professors, particularly regarding the oversight of the professorate by the General Synod.

Members of the General Synod professorate are represented on the committees of the MFCA that recommend the granting of the Certificate of Readiness for

Examination to students at non-RCA seminaries and candidates pursuing the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) for ordination.

Finally, the members of the professorate are represented on the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team to create, facilitate, and monitor best practices among our classes for their commissioned pastors.

Professional Work

In addition to serving on denominational teams, the professorate continues to guide the education of students seeking ordination at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, at Western Theological Seminary, or through the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency. While our numbers are few, members of the professorate teach in areas of Old and New Testaments, Theology, and Practical Theology, helping to form our candidates for ministry in the RCA.

We are particularly excited for the new DMin cohort led by Rev. Dr. Carol Bechtel at Western Theological Seminary for women, called “Seeking Sabbath in a Frantic World.”

Conclusion

In all of our work, we continue to explore new possibilities for our collective role. We are grateful for having been charged with this call and are deeply sensible of our responsibility to the church. We solicit your prayers and your advice, and we are committed to engaging conversation at all levels of the RCA’s life and work.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce, moderator

Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) was formed by the General Synod to provide guidance to the General Synod concerning formation, oversight, and certification processes of commissioned pastors and ministers of Word and sacrament. All three Reformed Church in America (RCA) theological agents (New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Western Theological Seminary, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency) are represented on PFOB as well as General Synod professors and pastors and elders from across the denomination. A board membership list can be found in the online directory at my.rca.org.

Unifying Practices for Pastoral Formation and Oversight

Since the formation of PFOB, it has struggled to effect uniformity of pastoral formation and oversight in the RCA without authority to compel changes except via proposals to change provisions in the *Book of Church Order*. This challenge increased in recent years as the General Synod has affirmed through its various actions that each classis has primary authority for ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament and commissioned pastors.

PFOB has come to an overarching principle that will guide our work moving forward and foster uniformity *with* classis oversight. We see a parallel in the situation faced by the United States in regard to the regulation of selling securities. Each state had the authority to regulate as it saw fit, which led to a significant lack of uniformity in laws and regulations between states. The solution was the Uniform Securities Act of 1956, which proposed a model that each state could choose to adopt, in total or in part. Most states chose to adopt the model, often with some minor modifications that fit their context. In a similar manner, PFOB hopes to propose a model for pastoral formation and oversight that can be adopted by each classis, which would foster more uniform practices for pastoral formation and oversight across the RCA, while retaining classis authority to contextualize the model as needed.

PFOB has just started this work, and it will eventually be brought to the General Synod for approval. We have started brainstorming about an RCA Office of Licensure and Ordination. This could include the following:

- A single office or person who would assist classes and candidates to review educational background/trajectory to ensure they will meet the RCA requirements.
- Create and/or review best practices for licensure and ordination and for receiving ministers from other denominations, as well as for commissioned pastors. PFOB hopes to make it easy for each classis to access a staff person.
- Classes do a majority of their work through volunteers, and often the student supervision piece is also done through volunteers. The work of facilitating a “uniform model” includes resourcing the classis pastors and elders who do this work, not just setting a model standard.

PFOB has formed a working group of Eddy Alemán (general secretary), Chad Pierce (General Synod professor), Rick Clark (bilingual elder), Israel Camacho (commissioned pastor), and Dave Schutt (MFCA interim director) to develop this proposal. More personnel will be added to this team.

Other PFOB Work

There are other related issues to which PFOB has continued to turn its attention.

The MFCA has experienced significant changes over the last several years. The director position is now part time. The agency no longer offers RCA-specific courses but instead directs candidates to courses offered through New Brunswick Theological Seminary or Western Theological Seminary. In light of the many changes that have occurred within the MFCA, PFOB will be reviewing the MFCA's structure and plans to bring a report to General Synod 2026.

Connected to the MFCA is the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) for candidates who have ministry and life experiences, other degrees, or other denominational credentials that could be combined with additional seminary training in order to qualify for ordination as a minister of Word and sacrament within the RCA. PFOB and the MFCA recognize that the AAR process has been perceived as cumbersome, with heavy requirements. The MFCA is intent on streamlining their process and becoming much more user friendly, along with increasing cultural agility. Of special note is the intent to add bilingual personnel to the AAR team.

The AAR process is likely to experience more traffic in the years ahead. Two recent situations reviewed by PFOB point toward this potential increase.

The Classis of North Grand Rapids inquired as to the process needed for Calvin Theological Seminary students to come into the RCA. The RCA does not have a formula of agreement in place with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). The response of the PFOB and the MFCA was to assure the Classis of North Grand Rapids that the AAR would be an appropriate avenue for these students, and that the MFCA pledges to make the AAR a streamlined process.

A second situation involved the Classis of Central Plains and the Classis of the Americas. Several pastors who were ordained outside of the United States desired to become RCA pastors. Central Plains started a process that continued over several years. Due to language difficulties and some miscommunication, the process dragged on. This came to the attention of the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries, which advocated that the Classis of the Americas could assist in this process since the language barrier would be removed. Central Plains ultimately approved, recognizing that the pastors would be returned to the Classis of Central Plains. The candidates were extensively tutored, examined, and received as ordained ministers in the Classis of the Americas, then transferred to the emerging International Classis of Texas. The learning for PFOB was that in many countries outside the United States and Europe, the MDiv is not offered. It was also noted that, while the MDiv is the gold

standard for pastoral training in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, it is a relatively recent degree offering (60 years or so). This is an issue for further study.

PFOB also received a letter from Holland Classis that raised an important question regarding the 24-month requirement for a candidate to be under care before they can be ordained. Who has the authority to waive this requirement? PFOB further wondered if there needs to be a minimum amount of time for receiving ministers from other denominations. This question requires further consideration.

Following these conversations, PFOB has committed to studying the issue of ordination credential requirements and the processes for receiving ministers into the RCA with equity. Therefore, PFOB strongly supports RF 24-5, presented to this General Synod by the restructuring team (see pp. 131-133 in this workbook).

Theological Education Assessment

PFOB reviewed funding recommendations for the upcoming year and has recommended the following to the General Synod Council (GSC), which will be included as part of the GSC's overall covenant shares percentage to this General Synod.

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$415,000, allocated in the following manner:

- \$15,000 to cover the costs of meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and the collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split evenly between the three theological agents.

Commissioned Pastor Process

The commissioned pastor training process is an ongoing point of discussion by PFOB. Commissioning of commissioned pastors is a classis-based process. The education and training of commissioned pastors, while it can include some seminary coursework, is also classis-based. Sometimes the classis will engage an agency to train on behalf of the classis. PFOB surveyed RCA classes and learned that the training programs for commissioned pastors vary widely in content, philosophy, and pedagogy. Trying to bring some semblance of consistency to these varied geographies and programs has been daunting. After much study, PFOB has made the following recommendations to classes to help them train and educate commissioned pastor candidates and to help bring some uniformity to the various processes:

1. A letter from the general secretary has gone out to classis clerks and all churches with resources available for commissioned pastor training and education. This letter will also be posted on the RCA website.
2. PFOB's recommendation is that classes strongly encourage commissioned pastor candidates to take courses on polity, standards, and theology at NBTS or WTS.

- a. Alternate institutions recommended to meet other commissioned pastor competency requirements include:
 - i. Albany School of Ministry
 - ii. Coram Deo
 - iii. Evangelical Reformed College, Ontario (also offers classes in Portuguese)
 - b. Courses are available in Spanish through:
 - i. Western Theological Seminary
 - ii. Universidad Reformada Global
3. Dave Schutt, interim director of the MFCA, will be available to share further information during the classis clerks' meeting immediately prior to this General Synod.

While distributing these resources does not conclude PFOB's work on commissioned pastor training, it is a good start. We encourage each classis to participate and give input.

PFOB would like to thank outgoing members Kristen Johnson, Cora Taitt, and Kimberly Van Es for their faithful and insightful service as part of our board.

Respectfully submitted,
Dan Gillett
Moderator

Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

General Synod, for years, has exercised oversight of ministerial formation through its two seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA). Like the Reformed Church in America (RCA) seminaries, the MFCA has possessed a deep commitment to developing faithful, educated, and Reformed leaders. Its purpose is the preparation of men and women for the ministries of Christ and his church, most specifically those called to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

From its inception 25 years ago, the MFCA has been tasked with and has embraced a mandate to expand opportunities for RCA ordination to groups not previously served. This is clearly stated in the MFCA Board of Trustees' mission statement:

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) exists to strengthen the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by awarding Certificates of Readiness for Examination to specific groups of candidates and working cooperatively with partners inside and outside the RCA to broaden opportunities for diverse ministerial formation.

Given the authority delegated to it by General Synod, the MFCA Board, its Certification Committee members, and its staff continue to accomplish this mission by:

- Awarding the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE) to RCA candidates graduating from non-RCA seminaries via Reformed Candidates Supervision and Care (RCSC), or pursuing an approved alternate route (AAR).
- Through the certification committee and staff, evaluating the progress of candidates and their continuation in and completion of the process leading to the CRE, as their achievements dictate.
- Periodically ensuring that the RCA Standards for Preparation for Ministry are upheld in the oversight of the CRE and are reviewed, with recommendations made to the appropriate RCA body if the MFCA Board believes changes would be appropriate.
- Collaborating with the RCA seminaries to offer graduate-level courses designed to meet the standards for the CRE.
- Collaborating with and providing counsel to congregations and classes in the care and nurture of candidates for the ministry who are seeking the CRE through the MFCA.
- Interpreting and advocating for the work of the MFCA to the larger church.

The MFCA has evolved from its predecessor, the Theological Education Agency (TEA), which was established as an RCA institution to serve the then-growing Regional Synod of the Far West, with the largest number of its candidates, almost all of whom were white and male, attending Fuller Theological Seminary.

As of March 2024, there were 35 candidates enrolled in the Certificate of Readiness for Examination process; four (9 percent) of these are pursuing the CRE through the AAR, which did not exist until the MFCA was officially established in 1999.

Over 28 percent (28.6 percent) of the candidates are female, with one enrolled in the AAR and nine enrolled in the RCSC.

Forty-three percent (42.9 percent) of the total candidates represent racial and ethnic minorities.

Given the continuing significant changes in the RCA and the current church climate, the MFCA will continue to adapt and broaden its methods of accomplishing this mission and will seek to work with the partners God provides to accomplish this work, with special emphasis on the following:

- Adapting its operations and programs as necessary to embrace a multiracial future freed of racism.
- As appropriate, given our polity, working with the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), classes, and institutions to enhance educational opportunities for commissioned pastors and others and to encourage a seamless transition to study for the ministry of Word and sacrament where possible.
- Wherever possible, ensure that the Certificate of Readiness for Examination and ordination process is equitable across languages and cultures.
- Ensure the diversity of the MFCA Board of Trustees and Certification Committee.

How the MFCA Board Operates

By permission and approval of the General Synod Council (GSC), the MFCA Board of Trustees operates under Policy Governance. In accordance with the tenets of Policy Governance, the board intentionally focuses on visioning and policy development. It sets clear goals for the agency by delegating the means of achieving them to the executive director and staff, subject only to explicit executive limitations. The board stays abreast of the MFCA program through the monitoring reports of the director.

With the role of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB), the visioning and policy development may no longer be a main responsibility of the MFCA Board, as most policy and direction will come from PFOB. The board's experience has caused the board to revisit how it operates. The initial consensus regarding its role is that the main purpose is to award the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE) and oversee the program through its supervision of the director. The RCA chief financial officer (CFO) is the CFO of the MFCA. The director creates the initial budget each year and once the CFO approves it, the director manages the budget. There is little involvement in terms of budgets and finances on the part of the board.

The board is considering one of two things. The first consideration is to review the Policy Governance document and modify it in order to reflect current changes. The second is to move away from policy governance totally and to revisit the bylaws and adjust them to the matters that are important to the operation of the MFCA.

Budgets and Finances

The MFCA finances have been under strain for a number of years and the agency continues to draw from reserves on an annual basis. The MFCA receives minimal support from congregations and has no capacity to raise funds. The average candidate will invest approximately \$2,000, over and above regular education costs, in order to complete the requirements for the CRE.

The CFO of the denomination also serves in that capacity for the MFCA. Budgets, and particularly the reserves, are closely monitored by the CFO. The CFO reported that we ended the year with a loss, but it was less than originally budgeted. The budget for 2024 is set and there is a deficit expected. There remains enough money in the MFCA reserves to continue with similar deficits for approximately two or three more years.

Covenant shares became effective in 2024. One of the recommendations expected to be presented by the restructuring team to the General Synod in 2024 will be to cap the covenant shares at 2 percent.

Seventy-nine percent (79 percent) of the MFCA budget comes from the theological education assessment. The remainder comes from user fees and investment income. The MFCA Board of Trustees is grateful for the generous support of the churches by way of the General Synod assessments. The agency would not exist if it was not for the theological education assessment income.

The MFCA staff have continued to operate at a reduced budget.

Partnership with the RCA Seminaries

The MFCA no longer contracts with professors to teach courses to meet the RCA ordination requirements, but now has an agreement with both RCA seminaries so MFCA candidates can meet their course requirements for the Certificate of Readiness for Examination. Candidates still register through the MFCA office.

In the fall of 2023, MFCA registered five students to take courses at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and six students to take courses at Western Theological Seminary. In the spring semester, the MFCA registered seven students at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and ten at Western Theological Seminary.

This transition has gone well, and the MFCA is grateful to the seminaries for working with the MFCA and its candidates.

Certificates of Fitness for Ministry/Certificates of Readiness for Examination Awarded

The Board of Trustees awarded six Certificates of Fitness for Ministry/Certificates of Readiness for Examination since the last report in June 2023, one through the AAR and five through the RCSC process. Four candidates were awarded the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and two candidates were awarded the Certificate of Readiness for Examination.

Approved Alternate Route (AAR)

Jonathan Michael Craig	Classis of Central Iowa
------------------------	-------------------------

Reformed Candidates Supervision and Care (RCSC)

Jeffrey Brian Chu	Classis of Rockland-Westchester
Cecilia Go	Classis of Greater Palisades
Savitri D. Mark	Classis of Columbia-Greene
Peter K. Min	Classis of Queens
Narayana Das Rendla	Classis of Nassau-Suffolk

Alternate Means Petitions

The committee reviewed the following alternate means petitions and approved both:

The committee discussed the petition for Robert Janke to waive the 24-month requirement and recommended that this petition be accepted due to his history of beginning the process in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

The committee understood that Das Rendla intends to take the language tools courses and agreed that this would be an adequate substitute for the language requirement. The committee was also comfortable with relaxing the 24-month requirement.

Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I write to you this seventh year of my presidency with a sense of gratitude and humility as I reflect on the journey of New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) as the first seminary of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). As president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, it is both a privilege and a responsibility to offer this report, detailing the progress, challenges, and aspirations of our institution in service to the mission and vision we share with the RCA.

Our mission, rooted in God's grace, is to empower people and communities...

- to explore their calling and live into their futures by providing a place of connection and spiritual formation;
- to bring curiosity, openness, creativity, and logic to the critical examination of text and context; and
- to act with fairness and integrity through analyzing systems of power and privilege.

In the spirit of this mission, I present this report as a testament to our ongoing commitment to excellent theological education, spiritual formation, and engagement with the broader church community.

Academics

This year, we introduced our new 36-credit Master of Arts in Ministry Studies Program (MAMS). This program is designed as an entry-level degree for specialized ministries, nonprofit institutions, and personal development. It engages the learners to think critically and creatively about the church and Christian faith, is grounded in Scripture, and is committed to spiritual formation and personal growth. The MAMS program has suggested concentrations, but students can select a customized curriculum to meet their unique ministry needs and vocational interests.

Faculty Promotions

Dr. Jaeseung Cha was promoted to the Professor of Foundational and Constructive Theology. Dr. Cha helps students establish a solid grounding in the fundamentals of Christian theology and faith. Regular topics include doctrines of the Trinity, creation, human beings, salvation, the church and sacraments, and eschatology. His approach acknowledges that these key elements are not static but are continually reshaped within different socio-linguistic contexts.

Dr. Janice McLean-Farrell was tenured and promoted to the Dirk Romeyn Associate Professor of Metro-Urban Ministry and Associate Dean of Doctoral Studies. Dr. McLean-Farrell feels called to equip “leaders to join God in what God is already doing in urban spaces.” She draws on the experience and knowledge of not only diverse authors but also her own students, most of whom are adult learners. Her goal is to

“have students develop ministry practice that is contextually relevant, historically grounded, culturally competent, pastoral in nature, and prophetic in witness.”

Graduation – the Class of 2024

This May, NBTS will graduate 12 doctor of ministry students, 2 dual master of divinity and master of arts in pastoral care and counseling students, 2 master of arts in theological studies students, 2 master of arts in pastoral care and counseling students, 10 master of divinity students, and 13 certificate in theological studies students, and will award 2 Certificates of Readiness for Examination. This year’s baccalaureate preacher will be the Rev. Dr. Beth Tanner and our commencement speaker will be the Rev. Dr. Peter M. Wherry.

Reformed Church Center

New Brunswick Theological Seminary’s Reformed Church Center had a remarkable year of programming, offering enriching experiences that fostered spiritual growth, community engagement, and theological exploration. From insightful lectures and thought-provoking discussions to impactful service projects and meaningful worship services, the Reformed Church Center provided a vibrant and welcoming space for individuals to deepen their faith and connect with others. Looking ahead to the next year, the Reformed Church Center is excited to build upon this success, with plans to expand its programming, reach out to new communities, and continue its mission of equipping and empowering individuals for ministry and service in the Reformed tradition. For information on the Reformed Church Center, contact Dr. James Brumm at jbrumm@nbts.edu or 848-237-1760.

Administration

Administrative Transitions

After six years as vice president of academic affairs and dean of the seminary, the Rev. Beth L. Tanner, PhD, has decided to return to full-time faculty and spend more time writing and teaching. We are eternally grateful for her skilled academic guidance, coordination, and collaboration. Under her administration we received our ten-year Association of Theological Schools accreditation and a seven-year Middle States Commission on Higher Education accreditation.

NBTS academics will now be led by the Rev. Charles Rix, PhD. Dr. Rix, an NBTS alumnus, comes to us as the former dean of the College of Humanities and Bible, professor of Bible, and Baugh Chair of Preaching at Oklahoma Christian University; professor emeritus, Oklahoma Christian University; and director of MA in theological studies and ministry studies programs, New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Dr. Rix earned his PhD in Biblical Studies and Hebrew Bible from Drew Theological School. Dr. Rix also holds a master of fine arts in creative writing from Spalding University, a master of philosophy from Drew Theological School, and a master of arts in theological studies from New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

New Strategic Planning Process for 2024-2027

Building upon the branding work we did last year—articulating new values, vision, and mission statements—we are launching a new strategic plan in 2024. Our new strategic plan focuses on the key priorities that flow from the seminary’s core mission: (1) Review and refine NBTS’s core academic programs in light of changing student and church needs; (2) Increase student enrollment by focusing on and refining our many outreach efforts; and (3) Establish a strong and sustainable infrastructure that not only maximizes financial sustainability but also emphasizes empowerment and maintains a supportive infrastructure to optimize the student experience and ministerial formation.

Finances

This year, we have outsourced our accounting and payroll services to Miller Management. Our expenditures for 2022-2023 were \$4,441,193 and our revenues were \$3,810,403. Thus, we used monies from our reserves to cover the 2022-2023 fiscal year deficit of \$303,790. This year, we budgeted for that deficit and are introducing advancement and financial management strategies to eliminate the deficit. Specifically, we have contracted a consulting chief financial officer from another seminary to assist us in deficit-reduction measures. We are also in the process of reorganizing and training our admissions, advising, and student formation departments to increase enrollment and retention and decrease “stop outs.” We will continue to put in place measures that we anticipate will further rectify our deficit. For further information, see the NBTS 2023 Year in Review at <https://nbts.edu/nbts-2023-year-review>.

Advancement

We remain humbled and grateful for the continued support and generosity of our donors and partners. Your contributions have enabled us to fulfill our mission of educating and empowering people and communities in the Reformed tradition and beyond.

Scholarships

One of the cornerstones of our fundraising efforts has been the establishment and support of scholarships for our students pursuing theological education within the RCA as well as in partner denominations.

Over the past year, we have successfully raised funds to establish several new endowed scholarships as well as increasing already existing scholarships, including:

- Vernon and Margo Kooy Scholarship – named after a former RCA NBTS faculty member and his wife.
- Wilma and Patrick Harris Scholarship – named after a NBTS Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) alumna and her husband.
- Dr. Henry P. Davis Jr. Scholarship – named after the late Dr. Davis, a Baptist NBTS alumnus.

- Hattie M. Walvoord Scholarship – named after Mary Kansfield’s grandmother.
- Neal Busker Memorial Scholarship – named after the late Rev. Busker, an RCA NBTS alumnus.

Endowed Scholarship for the Late President Emeritus Gregg Mast

In recognition of the late president emeritus Gregg Mast’s distinguished service and leadership, we are pleased to announce the establishment of the Gregg Mast Presidential Scholarship. The scholarship will honor President Mast’s legacy and support students who demonstrate exceptional promise and commitment to the ministry.

We invite members of the General Synod to contribute to this scholarship fund as a tangible expression of gratitude for President Mast’s years of dedicated service to the RCA and its mission.

Upcoming Events

We are excited to announce two significant milestones in the history of New Brunswick Theological Seminary: the ten-year anniversary of our current building and the 150th anniversary of the Gardner A. Sage Library. These milestones present us an opportunity to celebrate our past and reflect on our present with initiatives planned to commemorate these milestones.

The mission and ministry of NBTS only happens because of the generosity of people like you. Please consider a gift to NBTS in your regular giving or through your estate planning. For more information, please visit www.nbts.edu/donors or contact Cathy Proctor at cproctor@nbts.edu or 848-237-1706.

Innovative Technology at NBTS

Over the last several years, the seminary has been developing innovative pedagogy. We are excited that all our programs now have fully online options, and many include hybrid learning experiences, making an NBTS education available and accessible to more students. We are continually refining and expanding our ability to meet students’ needs through adaptive course delivery strategies.

One example is the creation of Studio 35, a recording studio that provides a laboratory space for faculty and staff to prepare high-quality lectures and promotional videos. The use of this studio to produce professional content has enhanced our online education offerings and equipped our faculty to be academic, denominational, and community leaders, positioning them for innovative collaborations.

Another example is our state-of-the-art hybrid classroom, which is currently in final development. Our hybrid classroom harnesses the power of cutting-edge technology to bring a class together. Students can participate in real-time discussions, ask

questions, and engage with their peers and instructors as if they were in the same room, all while comfortably situated in their own environment.

The cornerstone of building hybrid classrooms lies in accessibility. Local students can physically attend classes, while remote learners can join in synchronously from anywhere, whether that is across town or across the world. Lectures, discussions, and activities are curated to cater to both in-person and online students, ensuring an equitable and inclusive educational experience for all. One important benefit of this kind of classroom is that it helps enrich and embed community and collegiality among all our students by fully integrating those in person with those who prefer an online-only classroom experience.

We are grateful to the generous donors who have made these projects possible. Their support has helped NBTS remain innovative, relevant, and sustainable in this competitive environment.

In Conclusion

I am deeply honored to lead New Brunswick Theological Seminary. We recognize the gift we have as the first RCA seminary and with a 240-year relationship with the Reformed Church in America. We remain New Brunswick Theological Seminary—a multiethnic, intergenerational, ecumenical theological institution of higher education that instills creative, contextual, and critical thinking and a passion for justice that reflects God’s transforming love in Jesus Christ.

We are honored to remain involved with the RCA in very important ways, such as educating RCA ministers, offering RCA-focused educational opportunities, and participating in commissions and denominational restructuring. We continue to see an increase in the number of RCA students at NBTS in all our programs. Since 2017, we have had a six-fold increase in RCA students—approximately 24 percent of our student body. We are excited to see this number continue to grow as we build connections with RCA colleges, classes, and churches. In addition to our beloved RCA students, New Brunswick Theological Seminary boasts a diverse student population, bringing together individuals from various cultural, ethnic, and theological backgrounds. This rich diversity enriches the learning environment, fostering a vibrant community of scholars and ministers who are equipped to serve in an increasingly multicultural world.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees for their governance and support. Particularly, I would like to thank our board moderator, Rev. Abby Norton-Levering, and the RCA’s general secretary, Rev. Eddy Alemán, for their partnership in this important ministry.

Finally, I solicit your prayers and support as we continue to live into our purpose as a seminary: Called in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, New Brunswick Theological Seminary participates in God’s own laboring to fulfill God’s reign on earth. Rooted in the Reformed tradition and centered in its trust of God’s sovereignty and grace, the Seminary is an inter-cultural, ecumenical school of Christian faith,

learning, and scholarship committed to its metro-urban and global contexts. Our purpose is to educate persons and strengthen communities for transformational, public ministries in church and society. We fulfill this through creative, contextual, and critical engagement with texts, traditions, and practices.

In Joy and In Justice,

Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary
President and John Henry Livingston Professor of Theology
General Synod Professor of the Reformed Church in America

Report of Western Theological Seminary

By God's grace, Western Theological Seminary (WTS) forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. We were reminded of this mission through the testimonies of the Doctor of Ministry students in the Holy Presence cohort. One student shared,

(When I started the program,) I was in a bit of a ministry crisis. I had experienced very close friends who had gone into major ministry catastrophes, moral failures, burnout...this (cohort) has given me a setting academically, a setting relationally, over these last three years, to really rethink a lot of things.

I think it saved my ministry life.

Another student shared,

In the past few months, I am praying as I've not prayed before. I am ministering as I have never ministered before. I feel transformed from the inside out. I am fixing my attention on God and, to my profound surprise, encountering God.

These quotes are reminders of the mission we strive to accomplish at Western Theological Seminary each and every day. We are an educational institution and a community of learning. Yet what sets us apart is that through all that we do, we seek to bring students into a genuine encounter with the holy Triune God, who, through the Holy Spirit, forms and shapes students into faithful pastors and leaders for the church. We do not form students alone. We do so in reliance and in step with the God who has demonstrated the fullness of his love through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

Reaffirmation of Accreditation

Over this past academic year, Western Theological Seminary successfully secured a ten-year reaffirmation of accreditation from the Board of Commissioners of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Ten years is the maximum number of years reaccreditation can be given. We give thanks to God for his faithfulness toward Western Theological Seminary over these past ten years.

In addition to granting WTS the maximum of ten years of reaccreditation, the evaluation committee also noted the following strengths and areas of growth for the seminary. The launch and continued development of the Hispanic Ministry program, the comprehensive nature of our spiritual formation program, ongoing progress toward financial equilibrium, and an increasingly diverse faculty who teach in the core curriculum were all noted as strengths of the seminary.

The evaluation committee also noted three areas needing special attention and three areas requiring a report in the next few years. Developing a written marketing plan,

attending to the sustainability of the high-impact Abbey program, and cultivating an environment where staff thrives, especially in light of recent staffing reductions, were identified as areas needing attention. We will have ten years to make steady and persistent progress on these things.

The evaluation committee also identified three areas that need more short-term attention. These areas are differentiating the various master of arts programs, the doctor of ministry program, and a comprehensive plan for institutional evaluation.

In the next few years, we anticipate accreditation visits from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) to secure CACREP accreditation for the MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program.

Yet, even though the work continues, securing successful reaccreditation from the Board of Commissioners of ATS allows us an opportunity to give thanks to God and celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of the seminary faculty and staff, without whom the reaccreditation would have been much more cumbersome to secure. In particular, I (Felix Theonugraha) want to express my deep and heartfelt gratitude to John Brogan, who chaired the self-study steering committee, as well as to the members of the steering committee—Tim Basselin, Andy Bast, Jon Dockery, Theresa Hamm, Rayetta Perez, Lindsay Porter, David Stubbs, and Suzanne McDonald. Kristen Johnson also served as our internal reader.

Enrollment

Western Theological Seminary is pleased to report another strong enrollment year for the 2023-2024 academic year, with a fall 2023 enrollment of 424 students. The fall 2023 enrollment is slightly lower than last year's record high of 433 students but still represents more than a 25 percent increase since fall 2019. Our enrollment growth continues to be driven by the Hispanic Ministries program and the doctor of ministry program. The new master of arts programs are also attracting new students and offsetting the slight decline in master of divinity enrollment. In particular, the master of arts in disability and ministry has continued to stand out as a unique degree offering.

Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program

We welcomed Dr. Elizabeth Pennock to Western Theological Seminary as our new director of the Mental Health Counseling program. Under Dr. Pennock's leadership and in collaboration with Dr. Chuck DeGroat, we have launched the application for the new MA in clinical mental health counseling program. As of March 1, we have received 12 applications toward our goal of 24 students for the first cohort. Dr. Pennock previously served as the program director for the Master of Counseling program at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. In addition to her teaching expertise, Dr. Pennock is also a licensed mental health counselor in Florida and a licensed professional counselor in Michigan.

Service to the Reformed Church in America

WTS continues to be committed to the formation and education of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). As of spring 2024, a total of 79 RCA students are enrolled at WTS. In addition, WTS, in partnership with New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), has made our courses available to MFCA candidates seeking to take courses in RCA polity, worship, history, missions, and Credo.

In March 2024, a delegation from WTS traveled to South America along with Rev. Dr. Andres Serrano, RCA director of church multiplication, and Rev. Fabio Sosa from the RCA's International Classis of Texas. The purpose of the trip was to meet RCA-ordained ministers of Word and sacrament as well as other candidates for ordination to discuss how WTS can be a partner in providing theological education for these individuals from the Global South. The delegation, which included Mr. Steve Spoelhof, board chair; Rev. Dr. Felix Theonugraha, president; and Dr. Alberto la Rosa Rojas, director of the Hispanic Ministries program, met with interested groups in Santiago, Chile; Mendoza, Argentina; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. There is a strong desire among pastors in these aforementioned cities to join the RCA. These pastors are excited about the possibility of joining a denomination with a rich history. They are committed pastors with a wealth of experience who desire further education and training so that they can be equipped to teach and pastor God's people in their locations.

Seminary Hymn

Dr. Carol Bechtel has composed a hymn text commissioned for the WTS community to sing on special occasions such as Convocation and Commencement. Unlike an "alma mater" hymn, which is a song to an institution, the Western Theological Seminary Hymn is a song for a school. It is a hymn that captures who we are as a seminary and who we strive to be. It is an identity-forming hymn that reminds our community who we are and to whom we belong.

"Before the Face of God"

Tune: AURELIA

1. With grateful hearts we gather
before the face of God—
a flawed, forgiven body,
yet gifted, formed, and called.
From many places gathered
as grain from many fields—
diverse, yet still united,
as grapes from many hills.
2. We seek no iv'ry tower,
no place in which to hide—

but rather through our study
your costly grace to find.
Your prophets and your gospels
equip us to relate
the advent of salvation—
the end of death and hate.

3. Through pulpit, font, and table
we grow in faith and grace.
In classrooms and in friendships
we glimpse your loving face.
O keep us ever learning,
and may your Spirit teach
through all of life's encounters,
through ev'ry word we preach.
4. Now send us out for service,
and lead us as we go—
so ev'ry heart that's hurting
your love and grace may know.
Make our whole lives a witness,
and keep us ever strong—
until with all creation
we sing your Sabbath song.

© 2024 Carol M. Bechtel

Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry

The Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry is named in honor of the late Rev. Leonard Foster Stoutemire, pioneer African American clergyman and church planter to Holland, Michigan. Although originally he wanted to enlist into missionary service in Africa, in 1944, Rev. Stoutemire moved to Holland, Michigan, to plant the city's first intentionally multiracial and multiethnic congregation, the All Nations Full Gospel Church of Holland, a church that continues to worship to this day.

These lectures equip seminarians, faculty, staff, alumni, and local congregations with resources for increased intercultural competence for greater effectiveness in Christian ministry.

This year, we were extremely blessed to welcome Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, to serve as the 2024 Stoutemire Lecturer. His lecture, "The Impact of Spirituality on Stress, Trauma, and Socio-Race," focused on signs and symptoms of socio-race trauma in African (Black), Latino/a/x, Asian, and Native American communities and how best practices from spirituality, clinical, and community psychology can lead to healing and well-being. President McCreary also delivered a powerful homily on "Power and Privilege" based on Psalm 62:5-9.

Compelling Preaching Grant

Dr. Ron Rienstra has been collaborating with Dr. Jon Brown of Pillar Church on planning for the \$1.2 million Lilly Endowment grant WTS received. This grant fits into Lilly's larger Compelling Preaching program. In light of changes at Hope College, which have meant that there is not as much bandwidth there to collaborate on the grant, some adjustments have been made. Currently, at least two important prongs are being planned. First, there are plans to establish college-town church cohorts, which will bring together chaplains and students at multiple Christian colleges and pastors of churches in collegiate towns that have special ministries to those institutions. There are also plans to reimagine the Bast Preaching Festival (to be brought back in 2025) as events of collaborative, cohort-based learning where chaplains, professors, pastors, and students of preaching gather to talk about what the church needs preaching to be in this cultural moment. The grant will also support a number of initiatives at WTS: new courses in homiletics; the production of new teaching materials (short videos, podcasts, other new modalities) to disseminate what the cohorts are learning; two trips to Israel/Palestine; and the creation of a co-curricular, collaborative opportunity—the Preach, Pray, or Die Club—for students interested in preaching and/or hearing good preaching. We gratefully thank our colleague Ron for his extra work on this initiative in addition to his regular contributions to the life of our community.

A Sampling of Significant Seminary Events

The first inaugural Great Lakes Theology Conference (GLTC) occurred on November 2-3, 2023, to great acclaim both at home and abroad. This conference, designed for people interested in attending seminary, attracted around 25 registrants and brought around 16 presenters to us. It was all the buzz at the American Academy of Religion! A highlight built into the schedule of the conference participants was the public Inaugural Lecture of Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst as the Richard C. Oudersluys Associate Professor of World Christianity (November 2). This was a wonderful way of showcasing our faculty and also generating energy and excitement for this important occasion to mark the gift of Dr. Padilla DeBorst's presence in our community. It was encouraging to see an excellent turnout at both the GLTC and the inaugural lecture. We are thrilled and excited at the prospect of seeing the GLTC grow in coming years. It expresses WTS's commitment to practice scholarly community in a way that is mutually encouraging and supportive and to empower students in their own theological research and discovery. We are deeply grateful to our colleagues Madison Pierce, Alberto La Rosa Rojas, Keith Starkenburg, Anne Chanski, and Lindsay Porter for their supererogatory labors and vision in leading us in these endeavors. In the words of one appreciative colleague, the Great Lakes Theology Conference is "a significant means for motivating students to grow in their theological articulation and a valuable means of recruitment."

On April 18, 2024, we will host our annual Founders' Day Lecture, followed by the President's Club lunch. Vern and Carla Sterk will deliver this year's lecture. Vern served in Chiapas, Mexico, for 41 years before returning to Western to serve as

professor of cross-cultural mission. Vern and Carla will share about the legacy of Western Theological Seminary in Chiapas.

On April 27, 2024, during this year's Commencement service, we will also honor this year's Alumnus of the Year, Dr. Peter Ford. Dr. Ford just recently retired as a missionary from RCA Global Mission, having served for 40 years all across northern Africa and the Middle East in places like Ethiopia, Oman, Sudan, and most recently, Lebanon. We will also have an opportunity to hear more from Peter during our board dinner on Friday, April 26.

Development

Both the Seminary Fund and Capital Campaign concluded the first two quarters of the fiscal year on a strong note. Our Seminary Fund giving is at 66 percent of the annual goal, while the Capital Campaign has surpassed its initial seven-figure goal. As of February 2024, the Board of Trustees has established a new eight-figure goal for the campaign.

The foundation of the Capital Campaign is to raise \$5 million for the new master of arts in clinical mental health counseling. The rest of the campaign will go toward scholarships as well as several key initiatives, such as the Hispanic Ministries program, the Center for Disability and Ministry, the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, and other intercultural and international initiatives.

In terms of overall giving, this fiscal year is on track to exceed the total giving of the previous three years and will likely conclude the year as the third-highest giving year of the last decade.

Finance

As a result of the strong giving year, we are pleased to report that our balance sheet is healthy. In fact, over the last 18 or so months, we have been able to pay off both our long-term and short-term debt and have remained out of our line credit since October 2023 until now. Our audited June 2023 balance sheet also showed a \$2 million increase in total assets since June 2022.

Faculty Achievements

- **Dr. Carol Bechtel**, General Synod Professor, represented the American Waldensian Society at the Waldensian Synod in Torre Pellice, Italy, from August 20-25, 2023. Dr. Bechtel is currently on sabbatical, doing research and writing on sabbath. She spent March and April back in Torre Pellice with the Waldensians, who are celebrating their 850th anniversary this year. She will be giving the Commencement address for Western Theological Seminary in late April.
- **Dr. Todd Billings**, Gordon H. Girod Professor of Reformed Theology, launched a new Faith and Illness Initiative. The initiative aims to discover a theology of

vocation and virtue for Christians living with chronic illness and will be an interdisciplinary conversation between pastors, scholars, medical professionals, Christians living with chronic pain and illness, and their caregivers. The hope of the initiative is that books and other resources will be developed as a result of these conversations. Our 2024 colloquy theme is “Chronic Pain and Christian Discipleship” (September 16-18, 2024). In addition to the core group’s meetings, each colloquy will feature one to two public events and virtual reading groups so that the wider church, especially people living with chronic illness themselves, are invited to participate in the conversation.

- **Dr. Travis West** had an eventful semester of writing and speaking. He spent much of the semester immersed in writing and speaking about the sabbath. He is enjoying the process of revising his sabbath manuscript (forthcoming from Tyndale in 2025, tentatively titled *Radical Rest*) and is working closely with a fantastic editor. He had an opportunity to travel to San Antonio on October 20 to visit our former colleague Dr. Daniel Flores, who invited him to be the keynote speaker for the Texas Library Association’s District 10 Fall Conference, where he delivered a lecture titled, “The Sabbath Way: Finding the Rest Our Souls Crave,” delivered at the Holocaust Memorial Museum of San Antonio. He also spoke on the sabbath at Christ Memorial Church’s CCLI (adult education) class on October 22 and presented to the Phelps Scholars at Hope College for their annual Wellness Night in a talk titled, “The Sabbath Way: Finding Sustainable Rhythms of Rest and Delight” (November 15). He returned to San Antonio in November to attend the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) conference and presented a paper in the National Association of Professors of Hebrew section on the curriculum for our summer Hebrew class, titled “Advanced Hebrew: How to Design L2 Input to Facilitate Comprehension of a Biblical Text.” Finally, he celebrated the release of his dissertation as a book, which was published through GlossaHouse’s dissertation series and released just prior to SBL. It is titled *The Art of Biblical Performance: Biblical Performance Criticism and the Drama of Old Testament Narratives*.
- **Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline** delivered a talk on “A Kenosis of Breastfeeding: Augustine, Feminist Critiques, and the Paradox of Christ’s Kenosis” at a lunch for Christian women theologians for the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature. She has also done interviews with the *Augustine* and *History of Christian Theology* podcasts and wrote a reflection for the Advent issue of the *Pillar Journal*. This semester, her primary scholarly effort has been completing an essay on Augustine for the *Cambridge Companion to Early Christian Theology*. The Great Lakes Theology Conference was one of her favorite parts of the fall term—thank you to the colleagues who organized this splendid event.
- **Dr. David Komline** has had a busy semester directing the ThM program and stepping into a new role as coordinator of strategic international initiatives. On the church front, in October, he spoke at an adult education class at Third

Reformed Church in Holland on the theology of John Hesselink and, in December, he preached at Freedom Village in Holland. His ongoing scholarly projects continue to progress: *The Church Speaks, Volume 3* should be published and physical copies should be circulating by the time of General Synod 2024. He also continues to edit book reviews for *Fides et Historia*.

- We are delighted **Dr. Madison Pierce** has recently come under care of the Holland Classis (RCA). Since WTS's last report to General Synod, she has delivered three research presentations: "Cultic Christologies in Hebrews," Scripture and Doctrine Seminar, Institute for Biblical Research (IBR) Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas; "Exodus 33 and the 'Greater Tent' in Hebrews," Intertextuality Section, SBL Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas; "Exodus 33 and the 'Greater Tent' in Hebrews," Hebräersymposium, Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach, Ewersbach, Germany (online). Dr. Pierce also preached at 14th Street Christian Reformed Church, taught a three-week adult education series on Hebrews at Thornapple Community Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan), taught an adult education class on the eschatology of Hebrews (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan), and continues to lead the consistory of Third Reformed Church through a conversation on communion.
- **Dr. Alberto La Rosa** served as a guest conference speaker for the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH) in their seventh annual Justo and Catherine Gonzalez Lecture Series. He presented on compelling preaching in immigrant communities to both Spanish and English audiences and received much positive feedback. He also taught on eschatology and migration at the adult education class at Kirk in the Hills in Bloomfield Township. Dr. La Rosa also shares the wonderful news that he has a book contract with Baker for a book provisionally titled *A Theology of a Home in an Age of Migration*. The manuscript is due December 2024.
- The \$1.25 million "Nurturing Children with Disabilities" grant, made possible by a generous gift from the Lilly Endowment, is underway. The Summer Symposium on Disability and Ministry, under the leadership of **Dr. Ben Conner**, was attended by over 150 people in person and online. Dr. Conner also reports that the first book in the co-branded series between IVP Academic and the Center for Disability and Ministry is out! This book, *Disabling Leadership*, includes (as will all books in the series) the purpose statement of the Center and a link to WTS's website. It was written by three authors with disabilities. The second book in the series (by Rochelle Scheuermann of Wheaton College, on evangelism and disability) is in the works, as is the next volume (co-authored by John Swinton and Dr. Conner, titled *Missing Voices in Disability Theology*).
- The Hope-WTS Theology Seminar, a colloquium that brings together faculty interested in theology from Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, continued to gather. On October 6, Dr. Steven Bouma-Prediger, Leonard and Marjorie Maas Professor of Reformed Theology at Hope College, presented a

paper entitled, “Does Anybody Feel At Home?: The Many Faces of Homelessness in a Culture of Displacement.” On November 10, David Komline presented a paper emerging from some of his sabbatical research: “The Puritan Teaching Office: Overlooked Evidence on the Salem-Plymouth Relation.” This colloquium continues to be a treasured opportunity for dialogue and exchange, not only with colleagues at Hope College but also with our own colleagues at “home” at WTS.

- This year’s Doxology gathering, hosted by the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, was attended by over 200 people and included a concert by The Porter’s Gate, who put Eugene’s *The Message* translation of the Psalms to music. We are pleased that in year two, we have reached our five-year attendance goal for the Doxology gathering. Doxology will once again be held on September 30–October 2, 2024. As of March 1, 130 of 240 spots have been reserved.
- WTS hosted the inaugural Great Lakes Theology Conference (gltc.westernsem.edu) on November 2-3, 2023. The conference is a recruiting opportunity for the seminary as we invite undergraduate students and others aspiring to attend seminary to come and present a theological paper. I am grateful for the leadership of Dr. Madison Pierce, along with Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas and Dr. Keith Starckenburg, for this event.
- **Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst** was installed as the Richard C. Oudersluys Chair of World Christianity on November 2 as a part of the Great Lakes Theology Conference. Her lecture was titled, “Cultivating Community: Space for Life in a Disintegrating World.”
- **Dr. Winn Collier** has recently spoken for the Hope Road Counseling Retreat (Longview, Texas), the Pace-Warren Lecture Series at Second Presbyterian Church (Lexington, Kentucky), The Henry Center at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois), a Pillar Church men’s gathering (Holland, Michigan), and Jamestown Reformed Church (Jamestown, Michigan).
- A piece **Dr. Wesley Hill** wrote last summer, “Jesus and the Transformation of Gender,” for *Comment* 41/3 (Fall 2023): 107-116 has appeared in print and online at www.comment.org/jesus-and-the-transformation-of-gender. He is currently working to complete his manuscript for *Easter: The Season of the Resurrection of Jesus* for InterVarsity Press’s Fullness of Time series and has also had several speaking and preaching engagements during the fall 2023 semester: the RadVo (Radical Vocation) conference at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Dallas, Texas, September 21-22; Gallery Church, Baltimore, Maryland, October 28-29; and The Episcopal Church of St. Michael and St. George, St. Louis, Missouri, December 2-3.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Felix Theonugraha
President and Professor of Educational Leadership
Western Theological Seminary

Report of Central College

Central College in Pella, Iowa, is a private, four-year college known for its academic rigor, engaged citizenship and character formation, experiential learning, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), athletics, and service. For more information about Central College, visit central.edu.

For more than 100 years, Central has valued its affiliation with the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Central's connection with the RCA is invaluable for students learning to live out their faith through service to God and humanity. RCA members serve on Central's board of trustees. Reformed churches support students through Central's Journey Scholarship Fund. RCA students also can receive the Heritage Award. Many Central graduates go on to serve as leaders in RCA congregations.

Central's mission integrates career preparation with developing values essential to responsible citizenship. Central empowers graduates to serve and do a world of good in local, national, and international communities. A Central education prepares students for civic responsibility, to "let their light shine before others, so that they may see your good works" (Matthew 5:16). Through activities, courses, service opportunities, and Central's relationship with the RCA, students learn to take their place in the world as justice seekers.

Campus Ministries

Campus Ministries students and staff plan and lead a variety of activities and events on campus as a body of Christ-followers with a desire for people to know the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. The mission is to "Make, Grow, and Send disciples of Jesus Christ who have a love for the Word of God, prayer, worship, fellowship, and service."

The Calm

On average, 40-70 students participate in The Calm, a weekly worship service to start the week focused and study a book of the Bible or walk through a topical series. This year, students studied the book of Philippians and completed a series called BLESSED.

Outreach

Campus Ministries is involved with Urban Bike Ministry, World Vision, Love Packages, Single Parent Provision, Jonathan's House for Orphans, Angel Tree, and other service organizations. Additionally, Central students travel to Des Moines, Iowa, and join others to distribute food, blankets, gloves, and hats to people in need. Students are looking for opportunities to serve at a children's hospital and also support a refugee family hosted in Central housing this year.

Campus Ministries holds several fundraisers annually for organizations in which they are involved as well as domestic and international mission trips.

Mission Trips

Mission trips allow students to serve others while growing their faith. Campus Ministries is dedicated to global missions and has traveled to Texas, Tanzania, Kentucky, New York, London, Haiti, Honduras, and other locations over the years.

Over spring break 2024, Campus Ministries plans to travel to Mission, Texas, to work alongside a local church and to Amory, Mississippi, to serve alongside Eight Days of Hope. While in these locations, students will worship daily, complete construction projects, and do outreach in the local community. In May 2024, they plan to take their second international trip to Tanzania to serve alongside Hope of the Nations. During fall break 2023, Campus Ministries led men's and women's retreats in Des Moines and Rathbun, Iowa, to serve, provide fellowship, dive into the Word, and be refreshed!

Over winter break, 40 students went to Mission, Texas, to build homes, serve near the border, help at a local church, and host a carnival. This tradition has become a favorite for students!

Services and Discipleship

Many students are involved with local churches, including assisting with worship services and youth and children's ministries. In addition to connections with local churches, 32 students and community members are participating in a discipleship program designed to help grow their faith and relationship with God.

Small Groups and Bible Studies

Campus Ministries encourages small group studies to build trust and faith. This year's Bible study groups expanded to include women, men, co-ed, and first-year student groups. Plus, Campus Ministries has been writing and emailing a daily Lenten devotional to the campus community as a way of sharing faith within the community and encouraging one another in our Christian walks. Students particularly enjoy the homemade Lent breakfasts made by local churches during this season!

Civic Engagement

Service plays a major role on Central's campus. It is expressed through student organizations, classes with service-learning components, and projects by students, faculty, and staff.

Community service teaches civic engagement. By engaging with the community, students practice treating others with care and respect. Living a servant-hearted life means understanding one's responsibility to others and the pursuit of justice for all. Central is committed to teaching civic responsibility through multiple activities.

Service Learning

Service learning strengthens cognitive, vocational, social, emotional, behavioral and moral competencies. The Career Development and Civic Engagement Office places students where they can provide direct service to community members, such as teaching English-language learners, leading fitness activities with seniors, assisting with after-school programs, and serving food to families who are food insecure. More than 600 art kits were assembled for the Pella Community Art Center.

Service Day makes it possible for all members of the Central family to collaborate on projects that address a community need. In 2023, 701 students, faculty, and staff served at 36 locations in Central Iowa—many at faith-based organizations. In total, there were 2,227 hours donated on a single day with an economic impact to our community partners of \$61,622.

Coursework

Central has nine service-learning courses across four academic departments. On average, 120 to 140 students per semester register for these courses. Students were surveyed after their experience and asked how the course helped them.

- 79 percent of students better understand how communities work or function.
- 74 percent of students became more sensitive to the hardships and needs of others.
- 68 percent of students increased their curiosity about cultural groups with whom they had not had direct experience.

Students often initiate their service or social justice-oriented groups with a faculty member. In summer 2023, three students completed a service-learning module with two nonprofit organizations and received academic credit. One notable example involved two students working with United Way of Central Iowa, an organization providing community resources in areas of essential need, educational success, economic opportunity, health, and wellbeing. The Central students supported their IT department, analyzed data, and provided the organization with information to reach a wider audience.

Season of Gratitude and Food Security Projects

In fall 2023, college departments and community partners collaborated for Season of Gratitude events. The campus community wrote 40 positive, seasonal greeting cards sent to adults living at Hearthstone WesleyLife in Pella. Other activities included coffee cup compliments with words of encouragement, observing World Kindness Day with friendship and a gratitude board, a food drive for the Pella Food Pantry, crocheting mats made of used plastic grocery bags for homeless individuals, a coat drive for refugees, and celebrating Giving Tuesday to encourage giving to nonprofits.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Central honors Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy of equity, justice, and peace with a day of alternative learning for students. In 2023, students attended an opening plenary session and then selected from 15 concurrent academic sessions and five service projects throughout the day. In 2024, the extreme weather postponed activities. Fortunately, all the planned sessions have been scheduled throughout the semester, which allows students to attend more sessions. Programs address the core values of King's vision for social justice and acceptance.

School Visits

Central's community-based learning program collaborates with the admission office to offer college visits to students served by Central's community partners. These visits are different from typical college visits primarily because these students represent underserved, first-generation families who have never been on a college campus. This increases college access to students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural perspectives. It also strengthens the college's partnership with the community.

Civic engagement and admission staff welcomed:

- 48 students from Findley Elementary School's third-grade class from Des Moines, Iowa. This partnership with the By Degrees Foundation was established in the fall of 2015.
- Des Moines North High School seniors, who were part of North High Celebration as the first third-grade class that Central adopted.
- 100 Harding Middle School eighth graders from Des Moines, Iowa.
- 200 Pella Middle School eighth graders.

College Affordability

Individuals with a servitude heart come from all corners of the earth. Central addresses college affordability with competitive tuition to state schools (\$20,988). In 2023, we began giving all incoming students a \$1,000 Journey Scholarship. The goal is to award students the scholarship each year they attend Central. The Journey Scholarships are 100 percent donor-funded.

Conclusion

Central believes in and fully commits to its mission of preparing students to be leaders for good. Part of this preparation is learning what it means to serve and how to change the world for the better. Central values its relationship with the RCA and the support—through gifts, guidance and prayer—that the RCA offers this vital undertaking.

Report of Hope College

Hope College, a proud affiliate of the Reformed Church in America since its inception in 1866, is renowned for its inclusive Christian environment, thriving campus community, and exceptional academic and extracurricular offerings. Our commitment to shaping leaders rooted in the historic Christian tradition remains steadfast.

Mission

The mission of Hope College is to educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular programs of recognized excellence in the liberal arts and in the context of the historic Christian faith.

A Beacon of Academic Excellence

At Hope College, we lead the way in undergraduate research, scholarly pursuits, and readiness for both further education and the professional sphere. With a dedicated faculty delivering a rigorous, coeducational experience, we serve approximately 3,200 undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. Through intimate class settings and extensive collaborative research opportunities, we maintain an impressive 11:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Offering over 1,800 internships and 300 study abroad programs across 60 countries, we instill a global perspective, ensuring our graduates excel in an interconnected world. Notably, 94 percent of our graduates seamlessly transition into the workforce or pursue advanced studies within six months of graduation.

Hope Forward: A Visionary Initiative

Under the visionary leadership of President Matthew A. Scogin, Hope College embarks on the transformative Hope Forward initiative. This groundbreaking endeavor seeks to fully fund the tuition of all students by shifting to a donation-based model post-graduation. Inspired by principles of generosity and gratitude, this initiative aligns seamlessly with our Christian ethos. With over \$75 million raised and national recognition, including a feature on Malcolm Gladwell's "Revisionist History" podcast, Hope Forward embodies our commitment to accessible Christian education, echoing the founding principles of our institution.

A Legacy of Academic Excellence and Research

Rooted in a comprehensive liberal arts education, Hope College offers specialized programs across 90 majors, minors, and pre-professional tracks. Our faculty's dedication to teaching and scholarship fosters transformative experiences for students, igniting intellectual passions and professional aspirations. Renowned for undergraduate research (#27 per U.S. News & World Report), our institution ranks among the top liberal arts colleges in the nation (#100 per U.S. News & World Report), with students and faculty contributing significantly to diverse fields of knowledge.

Celebrating Artistic Expression

As pioneers in arts education, we hold national accreditation in art, dance, music, and theatre. Our commitment to artistic excellence extends beyond state-of-the-art facilities to comprehensive exhibition programs and transformative performance experiences. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, our students engage with nationally recognized artists, enriching their educational journey and fostering creativity.

Excellence in Athletics

In addition to excelling in scholarship, research, and artistic performance, our students also excel in athletics. We believe that intercollegiate sport is a powerful vehicle for education as well as for personal development. Our athletics program is part of our Kinesiology Department and is guided by a community of coaches, scholars, and leaders who prioritize excellence and the student-athlete experience. The members of our athletics program are committed to the utmost integrity in competition, engaged in Christian faith formation, and dedicated to excelling in sports, academics, and life. In December 2023, our women's volleyball team competed for the national title in Claremont, California, ultimately finishing as the national runner-up.

Empowering Vocational Discovery

Hope's Boerigter Center for Calling and Career (BCCC) is a college-wide initiative engaging our students and alumni in lifelong practices for career development beginning in a student's freshman year. The BCCC is more than a resource for reaching career goals: it is a process, a plan, and a guided journey over four-plus years. Interests, strengths, and values are assessed, and students become part of the Hope network.

Campus Ministries: A Holistic Approach to Faith

Hope College is a Christian community that invites all its members into a holistic and robust engagement with the historic Christian faith and a personal encounter with the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our Christian identity is described by these three aspirations: Hope aspires to be faithful, welcoming, and transformational. Hope is committed to the historical Christian faith as expressed in the ecumenical creeds of the ancient church, and the variety of expressions of the Christian faith we hold contributes to the vitality of the life of the college. Hope seeks to affirm the dignity of all persons as bearers of God's image, and we welcome those of different faiths or of no faith at all. We are committed to freedom of inquiry, yet also to the centrality of Scripture and renewal of our minds according to the will of God. The whole Hope community is encouraged in a life-long commitment to grow in God's grace and to pursue vocations through which the world so loved by God is renewed. This March, over 250 students traveled on immersion trips with our campus ministries team. Believing that we are not sent to save the world but to serve the world in the name

of Jesus, these students participated in service projects around the country and world.

Hope-Western Prison Education Program (HWPEP): Extending Our Mission

In partnership with Western Theological Seminary, HWPEP extends our educational mission beyond traditional boundaries, providing transformative opportunities for incarcerated individuals. There are a collective 42 students enrolled in credit-bearing courses. The program is designed to accommodate 80 students when fully subscribed.

In Conclusion

Hope College stands as a beacon of academic excellence, creativity, and service, empowering students to realize their full potential within a nurturing Christian community. Our commitment to accessible education, innovative initiatives, and holistic development ensures that every student thrives, embodying the values of our institution.

Report of Northwestern College

We are pleased to report a fifth consecutive year of record enrollment at Northwestern College. Fall 2023 total enrollment was 1,715. Our Graduate and Professional Studies division continues to grow, achieving another record-breaking semester with 543 students across master's degree programs in counseling, education, and physician assistant studies.

Strategic Planning and Campus Master Planning

This academic year, trustees, faculty, and staff have been engaged in discussions on strategic planning and campus master planning. We completed the most recent five-year strategic plan with much success, including exceeding every enrollment goal; increasing diversity among our faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees; and exceeding every fundraising goal. As we envision the next five years, we are consulting with proven strategy experts at TGThree. Our strategic vision:

Northwestern will become the StandOut Christian College in Iowa, attracting a diverse community of students to an educational experience that counters today's isolation, division, and anxiety from being over-scheduled and over-stimulated through belonging, community, and rich, reflective, unhurried opportunities to learn and discern how to follow Christ and pursue God's redeeming work in the world.

In addition to developing our next strategic plan, we are also partnering with CMBA Architects to create a new campus master plan. The recently completed ten-year campus master plan included the RSC four-court renovation, soccer field construction and renovation, North Suites, DeWitt Learning Commons, Ramaker Center renovations, Juffer Fieldhouse, DeWitt Family Science Center, Van Peurse Hall renovations, Vogel Welcome Center, and Christy Suites. Since 2012, we have invested more than \$62 million in new and remodeled campus facilities. Praise the Lord for the generosity of our friends and donors! The new campus master plan will address additional space needed for academic program growth, replacement housing, and deferred maintenance in some of our older facilities.

Both the strategic plan and campus master plan will be brought to the Board of Trustees for approval at the annual board meeting in April 2024.

Academic Program Updates

Bachelor of Science in Engineering

Development of our newest undergraduate major is being led by Dr. Young-Ji Byon, engineering program director. Dr. Byon came from Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, a top-100 engineering university, where he served as associate chair of the department of civil infrastructure and environmental engineering.

During his 11 years at Khalifa, he was involved with the initial launch of civil engineering programs and helped secure ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) accreditation for those programs in 2019. Dr. Byon received his master's and doctoral degrees in civil engineering from the University of Toronto, where he also earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. He completed post-doctoral research at the University of Calgary and the University of Chile.

Dr. Byon has shared his excitement about the opportunity to use his passion for Christian engineering education—along with his research expertise and administrative skills—to build a program that meets the growing demands of students and industry. Our vision for Northwestern's engineering program is for it to be Christ-centered and to equip students with an excellent engineering foundation, creative and innovative minds, and hands-on experience with a missionary mindset.

Pending final approval from the Higher Learning Commission in April, Northwestern's first cohort of undergraduate engineering students will begin classes in the fall.

Master's in Business Administration

Northwestern's new master of business administration (MBA) program will enroll its first cohort this fall. The faith-informed program will be customizable with electives in project management, entrepreneurship and innovation, and digital marketing. It will be geared toward young professionals who have two to ten years of work experience. The curriculum will cover accounting, finance, economics, and marketing while also developing students' critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership. The program is 100 percent online so students can enroll from around the world. It may be particularly attractive for international applicants, as we have designed the program so that it can fulfill the international residency requirements for an F1 visa.

StandOut Students and Faculty

Nursing and Physician Assistant Graduates Achieve 100 Percent Exam Pass Rate

Northwestern's 2023 bachelor's of nursing (BSN) graduates recorded a 100 percent pass rate on the NCLEX-RN board exam. The pass rate is a benchmark for analyzing a nursing program's quality and is evidence of our standout nursing program. Northwestern's nurses are working at the University of Iowa Hospital in Iowa City, Sanford Children's Hospital in Sioux Falls, and Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis, to name only a few.

Like our nursing graduates, our physician assistant (PA) master's graduates have recorded a 100 percent first-time pass rate on the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination. All 29 of the PA students who graduated in August passed the exam on their first attempt. Our standout PA graduates are working in family practice, trauma surgery, psychiatry, dermatology, otolaryngology, neurosurgery, gastroenterology, and emergency medicine.

Dr. Laird Edman

Dr. Laird Edman, research professor and professor emeritus of psychology, has received a \$234,000 grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The grant covers two years of studying the impact of religious faith communities. Edman's work will study how people of faith—in particular, church leaders—leverage the way human minds work in order to better support faith development. His goal for his project team is to study which rituals achieve those results, test the team's hypotheses, and then share their findings through articles, podcasts, blogs, presentations, and a book. Their research will draw on the cognitive science of religion (CSR), an academic discipline that studies the mental capacities and processes that underlie recurrent patterns of religious thought and behavior. Overall, Edman hopes this work will lead to better understanding of the ways in which the human psyche is designed for worship, what psychological needs are fulfilled in worship, and what approaches to worship and discipleship will make the most profound, lasting impact.

Dr. Robert Hubbard

Dr. Robert Hubbard, professor of theatre, is the author of a recently published book titled *Scenes With My Son: Love and Grief in the Wake of Suicide*. Hubbard's purpose in sharing his family's story is twofold: He felt called to celebrate the life of his son and to let other people know about him. He also hopes the book is helpful both to people who have experienced great loss and difficulty as well as to those who haven't, but who would like to understand more about what it's like to endure suicide. Hubbard structured his book into three sections. "Beautiful Boy" introduces the reader to Auggie, "The Family Monster" chronicles his battle with clinical depression, and "The Life After" recounts the aftermath of Auggie's suicide. The book is not a work of apologetics tackling the problem of pain, but rather a story of great loss and hope.

Dr. Rachael Wittern

Dr. Rachael Wittern, assistant professor of psychology, was granted a \$3,000 Early Career Global Psychology Grant from the American Psychological Association. The grant supports her data collection on the mental health of Ukrainian refugees living in the United States. Wittern first became aware of the need for psychological data on refugees while running a free, bi-weekly therapy group open to the more than 100 Ukrainian refugees living in Sioux County. Four senior psychology majors are assisting Wittern with her research. From the data, Wittern will assess potential factors related to mental health outcomes, such as demographics, feelings of loss and guilt, and spirituality/religiosity. Knowledge of these factors and their impact on refugees' mental health will give psychologists a greater understanding of refugees' needs, allowing for more specialized treatment.

Raiders Stand Out

The Northwestern experience impacts students' lives and the lives of their families. The following is an excerpt from a letter written by two siblings thanking a donor for his family's investment in Northwestern (NWC).

The summer of 2021 our parents took us to numerous small Christian colleges for visits. To be honest, we only looked at Northwestern College to appease our mother, who is an alumna. We grew up in Charleston, SC, so the thought of northwest Iowa did not breed enthusiasm. Northwestern was our last college visit, and we did not expect much. However, we decided on NWC the day we visited. We are extremely thankful to be part of the Northwestern community.

We are both in the Honors Program, pursuing majors of biochemistry/pre-med. We benefit daily from your generosity through the [DeWitt Family] science facilities. The resources that you put into making NWC a top-tier institution impacts our lives on a daily basis. Thank you. This past summer we spent time with friends who are attending various colleges and universities. We are confident that our education is more rigorous and personable than what our friends are experiencing. Moreover, we are learning and growing in an environment where we are encouraged to ask difficult questions in light of the reality of who God is and who God is making us to be. We know our professors and they know us.

In addition to our studies, we are active playing baseball for the Raiders and participating in discipleship groups. Our freshman year was beyond expectation, and we look forward to the next several years at NWC. We are thankful for [supporters] like you who make NWC a place that truly Stands Out.