REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2024

Response to *MGS 2024*, EC 24-9, p. 43

> 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 a preliminary report to General Synod 2025, with a recommendation given to General Synod 2026 for church multiplication outside North America in the RCA.

REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCH PLANTING TASK FORCE

The Spirit of God is moving. International church planting is germinating through the work of the RCA Church Multiplication team through classes, and, after December 30, 2026, through middle assemblies. (Any references in this report to classes should be understood to refer to middle assemblies once the restructuring is effective.) Churches from around the globe are desiring to be adopted into the Reformed Church in America to partner with us in mission. The International Church Planting Task Force was commissioned by General Synod 2024 to embrace what the Holy Spirit is doing while also offering guidance that helps us to navigate this new chapter. The task force's assignment was not to decide whether or not this should happen, but to explore how this might happen to the best of the RCA's ability and to the glory of Jesus Christ.

This report cannot possibly answer every question or eventuality that may arise as the RCA tries to keep in step with the Spirit, but it can offer best practices, avenues of partnership, and ideas about how the RCA might create structures that help us to be flexible and generous as we look to join how God is working. Rather than thinking of that structure as a building or something static, the task force invites you to understand it more like the banks of a river. The task force's intent is not to stop or quench what is happening, but to help it flow to all the places that God is leading the RCA through RCA Global Mission, RCA Church Multiplication, and RCA assemblies.

One of the first things to understand is that both RCA Church Multiplication and RCA Global Mission are here to encourage and strengthen the church both locally and globally. As we think of the RCA's work internationally, it is important to know that the RCA has at least two connecting points: first, partnership with RCA Global Mission through diverse partners that want to help further the mission of Christ in the world, and second, through the work of the RCA Church Multiplication team through classes to help plant or adopt international churches that want to be covenantally connected to the RCA, sharing in our theology, polity, discipleship, and mission around the world. These two connecting points allow the RCA to partner with the broader church while also allowing us to both plant and adopt churches that want to

be a part of the RCA covenant family. The task force believes that God is using and wants to use both of these connecting points for his glory.

So how do each of these connecting points happen? RCA Global Mission has a rich history of partnering with different agencies and denominations in many countries through hospitals, education, discipleship, agriculture, gospel saturation, and more. The RCA will continue to look for positive partnerships through RCA Global Mission with organizations and sisters and brothers in Christ around the world to bring hope and life to others. The RCA is blessed to be a blessing and will continue the good work of the kingdom with all willing partners where we have a common heart and mission. This continues the good work of the past as the RCA stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

The second connecting point comes through the Spirit's fresh vision in the RCA of becoming a Revelation 7:9 church and the work of the RCA Church Multiplication team through classes. As the RCA has been captured by the Revelation 7:9 vision, it has led our churches to grow the RCA family to look more like God's ultimate family. As God is moving the RCA from being a historically Dutch church to a Revelation 7:9 church, it is only natural that this new work would lead to connections around the world. The RCA is now benefitting from sisters and brothers in our churches that are connected to other countries in a way that the RCA has never seen before.

The world has never been smaller; relationships and training that were not possible before now happen in real time. It is as easy to talk with someone on Zoom in India as it is in Iowa. Never has the world had more international friendships and connections. The RCA now has the ability to foster covenantal relationships with those who were once too geographically far away. This changes everything!

Another major shift impacting the RCA is that Christianity is no longer centered in the West but in the Global South. One of the greatest blessings and opportunities in international church planting and adoption is that the RCA gets to experience how God is working in other parts of the world! The RCA Church Multiplication team, through multiple classes, has begun to engage these opportunities and vitally connect us to the global church.

So how does the RCA navigate this new work of the Spirit, through which we are becoming even more of a Revelation 7:9 church? The task force offers that much of it comes from answering this question: "What is the difference between a church or organization that the RCA is partnering with through Global Mission versus one that is becoming a part of our covenant family by means of church multiplication through classes?" The next section of our report will be dedicated to considering this question and navigating it well.

Distinguishing between Partnership and Covenantal Relationship

The International Church Planting Task Force celebrates and praises God for every partner God has given us, both locally and globally, to help carry out the mission of Christ. All who lift up Jesus as Savior and Lord are our sisters and brothers in the

broader family of God. But what makes a church or group of believers a part of the RCA's tighter nuclear family, the covenant community? How does the RCA know the difference? The task force offers these riverbanks to help us know whether churches, organizations, or groups of believers are flowing in the same direction as the RCA or only intersecting with the RCA for a time or season.

1. They value Reformed theology.
2. They embrace the RCA's polity.
3. They are united in our discipleship mission.
4. They value highly trained clergy.
5. They value shared leadership (consistory).
6. They value RCA liturgy.
7. They embrace the two sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism.

Reformed Theology

Churches planted or adopted internationally that want to be covenantally a part of the RCA embrace Reformed theology and value our creeds and confessions that help guide our understanding of Scripture.

Testimony: One of the largest attractions for international churches that want to join the RCA is our strong, biblically grounded theology!

RCA Polity

The Pentecostal movement has covered the globe and the Catholic church has dominated much of church history. In many countries, people have encountered the Christian faith only through either the Pentecostal church or the Catholic church. Churches planted or adopted internationally that want to be a part of the RCA need to understand and value our polity, which shows a different way of governing and being the church together than either the Catholic or Pentecostal traditions.

Story: Did you know that one of the RCA classes engaged in international church planting have turned down 70 percent of international churches that initially say that they want to join the RCA? Some of these are due to theological differences, and others are due to how the church is governed. This classis is doing a great job in understanding the difference between those churches who want to become a part of our RCA covenant family and those we can learn with as part of the greater body of Christ.

Tension: Many international churches see the value of RCA polity, but it will take patience and understanding to help them live into it, especially among leaders that come from a more authoritative background. It takes time to see the value of RCA polity. At the same time, it will be important that RCA polity is understood, accepted, and being lived out before churches become fully a part of the RCA.

Discipleship Mission

The RCA has been strained in the past by churches trying to go every direction. Now, as a smaller denomination coming through years of trial, it is more important than ever to embrace our mission of making disciples of all nations and our Revelation 7:9 vision. Churches planted or adopted internationally should be unified in this mission.

Testimony: International church planting and adoption is helping the RCA to fulfill this mission and see the vision of a Revelation 7:9 church become a greater reality.

Highly Trained Clergy

The RCA strongly values highly trained clergy. While international church planting and adoption bring some challenges, all churches looking to join the RCA should value and empower their clergy to be equipped to be able to properly handle the Word of God and to lead the church.

Tension: As the RCA evaluates this, we need to be careful not to assume that we have the only educational system that is valuable. It will be important to look at different ways that training happens in other countries that are equivalent to our own. The task force encourages parity in the credentialing of clergy but challenges the assumption that there is only one way to get that done. International church planting and adoption will benefit from our educational processes, but the RCA will also learn and benefit from educational processes around the world. It will be important to learn from each other.

Testimony: The international churches that want to join the RCA hunger for biblical, theological, and leadership training. This is a big draw for them. They desire rigorous training and equipping that prepares them to lead God's church well.

Shared Leadership

Many international churches come from pastor-dominated leadership structures. It is important to emphasize that in the RCA, ministers of Word and sacrament, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons all work together to lead and equip the church to carry out the ministry of Jesus. All churches joining the RCA should value this shared leadership model.

Story: Many of the pastors desiring to join the RCA feel the stress and isolation of trying to lead alone. They value shared leadership where the church is built up by multiple leaders.

RCA Liturgy

It is important not only that we worship but also how we worship. International churches seeking to join the RCA should value liturgy in understanding biblical ways to approach God and ways to worship as the people of God.

Story: Many of the international church leaders that classes have encountered have a hunger for biblically sound and meaningful worship. They appreciate RCA liturgy.

The Sacraments

The way that the two sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism are both understood and expressed in the RCA is important. All international church plants and adoptions should value and walk in unity with the RCA's understanding of these two sacraments.

Understanding Possible Different Outcomes from this Work

As the RCA steps further into what the Holy Spirit is doing internationally, the International Church Planting Task Force understands that there will be different potential outcomes from each relationship that is formed. Here are three of those possible outcomes; these should not be viewed as the only possibilities.

1. International church plants or adoptions become fully a part of the Reformed Church in America. This is already happening through classes, through the responsibilities given to them in the *Book of Church Order* (see *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, and Article 10 Section 7 (2025 edition pp. 34-35, 42).
2. Partnerships form through RCA Global Mission that further the cause of Christ around the world. This continues to be a vital way that the RCA works internationally.
3. Some partnerships might lead to autonomous expressions of the RCA in other countries while maintaining covenantal connection through theology, polity, liturgy, mission, etc. Simply put, this means autonomy in their country while being covenantally connected in every other way. This would be a new and emerging work as the Holy Spirit leads.

The RCA's goal should not be to direct any international connections to a specific outcome but to let it unfold through the work and leading of the Holy Spirit in connection with local leaders.

Is the RCA going to become an international denomination or are we a denomination that has classes that are planting and adopting churches internationally?

The simple answer is that God knows. The RCA has not yet lived into what the Holy Spirit is doing through international church planting and adoption long enough to fully answer this question. While one aspect is already a reality, the other will be discovered as the RCA continues to lean into the work that the Holy Spirit is putting before us. The task force's hope is that the RCA continues to facilitate what God is doing without prematurely determining the final outcome. The task force trusts that many questions will be answered in their God-appointed time.

However, the task force is seeing the first fruits through classes engaged in the work and recognizes that the Spirit of God has been and is moving in the development of

potential autonomous middle assemblies in Honduras, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico. Leaders in each of these countries are currently in discussions with their U.S. counterparts regarding this transition.

Two forming middle assemblies in North America (they will officially become middle assemblies under RCA polity on December 30, 2026) have adopted an international multiplication model. The task force recognizes how the Holy Spirit is leading these middle assemblies in creating possible autonomous middle assemblies throughout the Americas and beyond.

What about Benefits and the Care of Clergy Internationally?

As soon as the RCA crosses international borders, there are many things that change both culturally and economically. The RCA can't apply United States or Canadian realities to other countries and cultures, and vice versa. So how does the RCA proceed? Here are some starting points for working with international complexities:

1. All churches in the RCA, both domestic and abroad, should have a strong understanding of their responsibility for the care of clergy. Adequate understanding and training in clergy care should occur for any churches desiring to be adopted or planted domestically or internationally.
2. Through small changes to Formulary No. 5, which were adopted by General Synod 2025 and may be declared effective by General Synod 2026 if approved by the requisite number of classes, the RCA can keep North American standards in place while gaining the flexibility needed for other countries (*MGS 2025*, CO 25-1, pp. 168-170).
3. The RCA needs to pay close attention to cultural and economic differences. The goal is not to disrupt cultural norms (such as cultures where families are expected to take care of their parents in retirement) or create elitism (where clergy are cared for far above economic norms in a country). The task force believes that a partnership between BOBS and the classes/middle assemblies working internationally is a great starting point for setting appropriate standards outside the United States.

Where are RCA classes/middle assemblies and churches presently working in international church planting and adoption around the world?

The assemblies that are joining together to form the Reformed Global Assembly are working in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Equatorial Guinea (in Central Africa). There have also been contacts in Costa Rica, England, and Italy.

Classis de las Naciones is working with over 30 churches and pastors in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and England.

The Classis of the Americas is working with 31 pastors and churches in Venezuela, eight in Mexico, five in Colombia, two in Brazil, two in Panama, three in Chile, and one in the Dominican Republic.

Emmanuel Community Church in Edmonton, Alberta; the Classis of Canadian Prairies; and the Regional Synod of Canada are working with partners to provide leadership training in two different areas. They are working with Coram Deo and RCA missionary Rev. Tom Johnson to train 13 ministry students from the People's Democratic Republic of Congo. They are also working in partnership with the Evangelical Reformed College and RCA Global Mission (which has provided the students with laptops) to train 19 ministry students from Rwanda who have completed four courses toward their ministry certificate. The goal is to train these ministers in Reformed theology with the intention that their churches could join the RCA.

Recommendations

The International Church Planting Task Force has three recommendations for this General Synod to consider.

RF 26-4
To celebrate and encourage the RCA Church Multiplication team and classes/middle assemblies that are actively engaged in international church planting and adoption for helping the RCA to make disciples of all nations and furthering the RCA's Revelation 7:9 vision; and further,

To pray for the new congregations joining the RCA from around the globe.

RF 26-5
To commend this International Church Planting Report to the forming middle assemblies for use in their responsibilities of planting new churches and adopting other churches.

RF 26-6
To direct the General Synod Council to reconvene an International Church Planting Task Force in three to five years to consider how the riverbanks are working and to further explore and share best practices. This task force should conduct its work virtually.

If you would like to get involved or learn more about how to engage international church planting and adoption in the RCA, contact the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry by emailing equip@rca.org.

Response to *MGS 2024*, ONB 24-4, p. 159

> To direct the General Synod Council to develop a policy for the denomination's collection and use of personal data, including gender data and honorifics, that could include an option not to disclose this information; and further,
>
> To study the linguistic implications of this policy in a multilingual denomination.

The GSC appointed a small group of GSC members to develop this policy: Patrick Beckford, Susan Davis, Clair Hoeksema, and Carlos Rivera.

The group brought a report and recommended policy to the GSC at its fall 2025 meeting, noting:

> It is impossible to include all demographic possibilities in a survey. This policy does not get "into the weeds" on specific definitions or theories related to demographics. It is unnecessary to require demographic answers in most, if not all, situations. It is appropriate for the RCA to value and respect individuals who prefer not to share demographic information with the denomination. Not all forms and/or surveys are within the RCA's capacity to revise; in some situations, the RCA will not be able to provide an "other/prefer not to answer" option or make the question optional.

GSC voted (GSC 25-74):

> To adopt the following policy to fulfill General Synod's directive in ONB 24-4:
>
> > When collecting demographic information (including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, and language), the Reformed Church in America, whenever possible, shall either (1) provide an "other/prefer not to answer" option, or (2) not require an answer to the question.
>
> And further, to bring this policy to General Synod 2026 for broader implementation.

As a non-constitutional policy adopted by the GSC (or even the General Synod) is not binding on other RCA assemblies, the GSC makes the following recommendation:

> **RF 26-7**
> **To encourage RCA assemblies, institutions, and boards to adopt the following or a similar policy regarding collection of demographic information:**
>
> > **When collecting demographic information (including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, and language), the [name of assembly, institution, or board], whenever**

possible, shall either (1) provide an "other/prefer not to answer" option, or (2) not require an answer to the question.

Response to *MGS 2024*, RF 24-6, p. 134

> To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Church Order, to study the size and membership requirements of the General Synod's commissions to adjust the number of members on commissions and possibly simplify the requirements for commission representation in order to right-size the volunteer requirements for a smaller denomination, keeping in mind the workload required to advise the Synod on its essential duties after the restructure and the need for commissions to be able to have at least one in-person meeting per year, recommending suggested revisions to the General Synod bylaws (*Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5 [2023 edition, pp. 112-121]) with a preliminary report to the General Synod of 2025.

The Committee on Commission Size was formed by the GSC in the fall of 2024. Members are Randy Karcher, Neale Roller, and Greg Town (representing the GSC); Amanda Bruehl (representing the Commission on Church Order [CCO]), and Al Plat and the late Patricia Sealy (representing the Commission on Nominations [CoN]). Liz Brand has provided staff support as needed.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON COMMISSION SIZE

The committee reviewed the size and membership requirement of each commission, recognizing the varying requirements of each. It was noted that two commissions (the Commission on Judicial Business and the Commission on Nominations) will be impacted by the restructuring and thus were out of this committee's hands.

Together we wondered about several possibilities for amending the number of members and requirements for the commissions. After conversation and consideration, the committee compiled a survey of questions for the commission moderators to offer their input; the moderators provided the committee with feedback in spring 2025.

At a few points the committee wondered about how other agencies might be downsizing their membership with the changes in the RCA, and whether this would be under the purview of GSC, the General Synod, or the particular agency. We also wondered about how the restructuring might affect the work of the commissions—will the commissions be taking on more or less work between General Synods? Will any further decrease in staffing affect the need for some commissions to take on more work?

Based on survey responses, the committee ultimately decided to slightly reduce the membership of most commissions (in most cases, a decrease of one member). The majority of the commission moderators indicated in their survey responses that they

could operate with fewer members. Though the decreases are not drastic, they seem fair to the committee. The committee did not recommend decreasing the size of the Commission on Church Order (CCO), as it already has the fewest members (five) and has had a significant annual workload in recent years.

The working dynamics of CCO exemplify that if a commission has a good group of individuals dedicated to fulfilling the responsibilities of their commission, a small group of members can suffice in fulfilling the commission's responsibilities. A few moderators of larger commissions noted that their larger size allows some members not to participate or feel the need to show up to commission meetings (virtual or in person).

Another question the committee considered was decreasing ecumenical involvement. Some commissions have one or two ecumenical observers, or an ecumenical member (in the case of Commission on Christian Unity). These ecumenical observers come from other Reformed bodies and/or from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We thought that simplifying this down to a single ecumenical observer, whether Reformed or ELCA, as chosen by the commission and appointed by General Synod, should suffice.

In response to the committee's report, GSC voted at its fall 2025 meeting to bring the following recommendation to the General Synod for its consideration (GSC 25-73).

RF 26-8
To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, for recommendation to the 2027 General Synod for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 2. Commission on Christian Action

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~nine~~ <u>eight</u> members. There shall also be two ecumenical observers named by the Commission on Christian Action, subject to the approval of the General Synod<u>,</u>~~: one~~ from other Reformed churches ~~and one~~ <u>or</u> from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The term of office for ecumenical appointees shall be three years. They shall be subject to re-election for one additional term. All members shall be persons who have a strong desire and demonstrated ability to make the gospel and the Christian way of life applicable to contemporary social issues in both the United States and Canada.

Sec. 3. Commission on Christian Unity

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~nine~~ eight members. One of the members shall be from another denomination and shall be named by the Commission on Christian Unity subject to the approval of General Synod. The general secretary shall be a member ex-officio without vote.

Sec. 5. Commission on History

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~six~~ five members. The archivist and the general editor of the historical series shall serve as continuing consultants. A knowledge of, and interest in, the history of the Reformed Church in America shall be required of all members. Professional competence in this field is desirable.

Sec. 7. Commission on Race and Ethnicity

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~eight~~ seven members. The membership shall include at least one person recommended from each of the racial/ethnic councils of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America. At least one-half of the membership shall be laypersons.

Sec. 9. Commission on Theology

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~ten~~ nine members. The membership shall include two persons from among the Reformed Church seminary faculties, one General Synod professor, ~~two persons~~ one person from among the faculties of the Reformed Church colleges, three Ministers of Word and Sacrament (at least one of whom serves a local church), and at least two people who do not hold the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. There shall also be ~~two~~ one ecumenical ~~observers~~ observer named by the Commission on Theology, subject to the approval of the General Synod~~; one~~ from other reformed bodies ~~and one~~

or from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The term of office for ecumenical appointees shall be three years. They shall be subject to re-election for one additional term. Competence in theology is required of all members.

Sec. 10. Commission for Women

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~eight~~ seven members. All members shall share a strong desire to work for the full and complete participation of women in realizing the vision of a church and society inclusive of all gifts of all persons. Two members shall be men.

Sec. 11. Commission on Christian Worship

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~seven~~ six members. An interest and competence in the fields of liturgics, arts, or church music shall be required of all members.

Sec. 12. Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

a. Membership

The commission shall have ~~seven~~ five members. At least ~~three~~ two shall be persons with responsibility for discipleship and education in RCA churches and one shall be a member from the faculty of an RCA-affiliated institution. A knowledge of, and interest in, Christian education and discipleship shall be required of all members.