

## **Classis of Dakota Journey Towards Renewed Biblical Authority**

**Our Vision:** Dakota Classis is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in the Dakotas – We seek to uplift Christ Jesus as Lord.

**Our Mission:** Our shared tasks are to... Revitalize Congregations, Develop Leaders, Multiply Congregations

**Key beliefs include:** Belief in the Triune God, Jesus is the only Savior and Lord (no other), the Bible is the inerrant Word of God and authoritative in our lives – our only rule for life.

**Purpose of Classis Discernment Team:** At stake in the present debate in regard to sexuality and marriage is the authority of Scripture in the lives of Christians. Hence, our team is to prepare an option(s) of our future as Christ's Church, if the recommendation of the RCA 2020 Vision Team is a recommendation that we as a classis cannot support.

### **Summary of Classis of Dakota action on restoring/leaving RCA**

**2016** Report from the Jerusalem Council (see below)

**Dec. 2017** Delaware Reformed Church (Lennox, SD, consistory petitions the Classis Admin Team for a special meeting on sending an overture to General Synod 2018 to uphold Biblical authority, addressing the inconsistency of practicing the RCA approved theology in regard to sexuality and marriage. Other congregations supported this petition and the Classis Admin Team set a date for such a meeting.

**Feb. 2018** Special Meeting of Classis of Dakota at Faith Ref. in Brookings in regard to a statement pertaining to marriage and sexuality and an overture.

-The classis unanimously agreed that it is God's design for sexuality to be between one man (biological) and one woman (biological) in the context of marriage.

-The classis unanimously approved to send the overture to General Synod

**June 2018** General Synod (see the overture below)

-Classis overture was approved by the General Synod committee so that it could be addressed on the floor of General Synod

-By a narrow margin, General Synod referred the overture to the 2020 Vision Team.

**July/August 2018** the consistory of Delaware Reformed Church sent a letter of concern about the process of the RCA 2020 Vision Team. The letter stated that as a consistory they would like to see the classis, regional synod, and the congregations of the classis to respond to General Synod's referral of the classis overture and the planned RCA 2020 Vision Team.

**August 29, 2018** Special Classis informational meeting with GS Vice Pres. EJ deWaard in regard to the proposed RCA 2020 Vision Team. Joining the meeting by zoom was Pres. of General Synod James Nakakihara.

**Oct. 2018** the consistory of Delaware Reformed Church, encouraged by others, submitted an updated overture to the Classis.

**Fall 2018** Classis organizes a Discernment Team

**Nov. 2018 Classis Meeting.** The updated overture presented by Delaware Reformed Church was defeated by a tie breaking vote, in favor of waiting for the 2020 Vision Team report.

**Throughout the years 2019 and 2020** the Classis Discernment Team met several times through zoom meetings. Several updates were sent out to the classis churches to keep them informed of the team's work.

**April 2019** Letter to the Classis from First Reformed Church, Sheldon, IA, inviting the classis to consider sending to RCA the resolution that they sent (see below)

**Nov. 2019** the Classis Discernment Team presented to the classis a resolution to be sent to the RCA 2020 Vision Team, responding to their request of input from congregations and classes. The resolution which was nearly unanimous stated that the classis of Dakota would only consider some option of "grace-filled" separation. The other two options that were offered did not address the question of Biblical authority that is being undermined by some RCA congregations/pastors/classes.

**Jan. 2020** A survey was sent out by the Classis Discernment team to gain insight in regard to concerns leaders/consistories might have in regard to where the RCA is headed.

**Jan. 2020** Letters (long and short versions) of information were sent to the classis congregations in regard to the discussion of the RCA's future. (see below)

**Jan. 2020** a small group of conservatives, including regional Synod of the Heartland executive Tom Smith met in California to discuss the desire of many congregations/classes to leave the RCA. Out of this meeting a group referred to as the Denver Collaborative was formed.

**Jan. 12 2020** A group of eight conservative congregations of SW Minnesota invited representatives of Dakota Classis to share what Dakota Classis was considering in regard to the future. Some SW Minnesota congregations expressed an interest in joining Dakota Classis.

**March 11-12, 2020** A meeting of Denver Collaborative in Denver. Classis Pastor Seth Sundstrom attended and represented our classis. The consensus of the group was to move ahead to a new future outside of the RCA, and not try to reform the RCA.

**March 14, 2020** Pastor Gary of Delaware Reformed Church sent a letter to the RCA 2020 Vision Team and Facilitators requesting for the 2018 Overture that was referred to the RCA

2020 Vision Team, be brought to the floor of General Synod 2020. No response. Not brought back to the GS 2020 agenda.

**Mar. 25, 2020** the Classis Admin Team met (by zoom) and was approached once again about an updated overture. They responded that the classis was beyond that, and looking ahead to some type of separation as being likely.

**May 21, 2020** Zoom meeting of Denver Collaborative.

**June 2020** The RCA 2020 Vision Team final report is made known to the denomination. (see below)

**July 14, 2020** the classis discernment team approved a plan: Seth and Jared and Cody would develop a survey that would be sent to the consistories of the classis in regard to what are described as the essentials of faith, and an inquiry if their consistory is committed to seek a future together with the other congregations of the classis; secondly, the admin team would set up cluster meetings so that consistories would have the opportunity to discuss our essential beliefs and ask questions in regard to our future; and thirdly, seek to have a statement of faith approved at the 2020 Annual Classis Meeting.

**July 23, 2020** Zoom meeting of Denver Collaborative

**August 12, 2020** the classis admin team through zoom, heard a two-synod proposal, presented by Tim Vink.

**August/September 2020** consistories received and were asked to complete the survey in regard to essentials of faith. (see below)

**August 25, 2020** representatives of Dakota Classis were included in a zoom meeting organized by the Zeeland Classis to introduce a possible new denomination, the Reformed Evangelical Church in America

**August 27, 2020** the zoom meeting of Denver Collaborative was cancelled, but several documents were shared with participants in regard to possible futures

Covenant Reformed Church (Bruce Bugb and Central California)

Reformed Evangelical Church in America (Zeeland Classis, MI)

Two Synod proposal (Tim Vink, and originally from Lee DeYoung)

A Survey of the Essentials of Faith (Classis of Dakota)

**Sept./Oct. 2020** The consistory of Harrison Community Church requested of the Classis Admin Team to reintroduce the overture to classis. This request also had the support of the consistories of Delaware Reformed Church, Lennox, SD, and Grandview Reformed Church, Armour, SD. The classis Admin Team approved their request to have that discussion at the 2020 Annual Classis Meeting.

**Sept. 2020** the Classis of Zeeland (Michigan) officially approved to move ahead to form a new legal entity to become a new denomination.

**Oct. 2020** Cluster meetings of consistory members to discuss the classis discernment team's survey and the future of the classis.

**Nov. 13-14** Annual Classis Meeting at Inspiration Hills Camp

Classis of Dakota has been contacted by several individuals throughout the past two years in regard to the work the discernment team was doing, and the direction of the classis in regard to the future.

**Sept./Oct 2020** Many congregations in the RCA are sending notice to their classes of their intent to leave the RCA. Including:

**Central California Classis**

Christ Community Church

Most Central Cal. Classis are expected

**Central Iowa Classis**

1<sup>st</sup> Ref. Sully

1<sup>st</sup> Ref. Pella

3<sup>rd</sup> Ref. Pella

Trinity Ref. Pella

Central Ref. Oskaloosa

The Way, Newton

Celebrate (Knoxville?)

**Classis of Muskegon (Michigan)**

Hope Reformed Church of Grand Haven, MI

Several congregations are reportedly considering this

**Classis of Wisconsin**

Alto Ref., Waupun, WI

**Classis of Zeeland (Michigan)**

The classis as a whole is formally organizing a new denomination

**East Sioux Classis (Iowa)**

1<sup>st</sup> Ref. Sheldon

## **2016 Jerusalem Council: Pastor David Landegent represented Classis of Dakota**

To the members of Dakota Classis:

Thank you for allowing me to represent you at the Special Council. It was a very interesting time. Although some might get flustered or even angry when meeting people who interpret the Bible wrongly on LGBT issues, I find it intriguing to figure out where they're coming from and why they landed where they have. I hope I represented you well in standing for the truth that homosexual activity is not pleasing to God.

I was intending to report these matters to the Admin Team the week I got back, but my youngest brother died in his sleep while I was at the Special Council and because of the funeral, I was unavailable for that meeting.

I'm not going to repeat the report that was sent to you all, but I do want to comment on what transpired, for I quickly realized that the goal was a bit different from what I was expecting.

(A) The meeting involved almost no Biblical interpretation issues, but focused on ways to change the RCA Constitution in a way that might resolve the issues about same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing LGBT members (which is their preferred self-description). I was disappointed by that because I believe our best way forward is through God's Word. I could tell people on the other "side" (I hope you don't mind me using the language of "sides" here) simply assume their interpretations are correct and have no interest in revisiting biblical texts. One said to me, "I'm so sick of hearing about Romans 1." Now, I'm not one to hold people to the literal truth of short comments they make in the heat of a discussion. I'm sure that if they saw this quote, they would like the opportunity to nuance that comment. Yet it did seem telling to me that some people want to move past biblical interpretation.

(B) I was thinking that those gathered were to be a representative body of the RCA (one delegate from each classis). I was expecting this because I assumed we would be voting on matters to send along. But there was no voting (except perhaps some consensus-seeking straw polls within groups of 8). And so the importance of being a representative group did not seem to be that much of a priority. What they wanted to see happen was that the representative group (1 from each of the 44 classes) would get to interact from a very unrepresentative group — 30 others, who mostly seemed to support LGBT concerns, with some of them actually gay or lesbians themselves. The idea was that instead of talking about an issue in the abstract, we would talk about an issue with a human face. I can understand that, but the presence of these additional people, plus the classis reps who were already favorable toward them, did make people like me feel like a definite minority. For example, at my table of seven, 4 were favorable toward same-sex marriages and homosexual ordination, 1 was undecided and only 2 of us were opposed. When I talked to others like myself, many reported similar ratios. I only heard of one of the 10 tables that had four on the "traditional" side (I would prefer the term biblical side). So you can see why it would have been very misleading to vote or imply that the council's recommendations represented the mind of the denomination.

(C) Speaking of recommendations, I should clarify the meaning of that term. I was thinking before I went that our goal was to recommend a constitutional path that our denomination *should* do to deal with this issue. But I quickly realized that our task instead was to offer various constitutional paths that our denomination *could* do to offer a way forward. In other words we were to offer a range of possibilities that could make a constitutional difference. The word “constitutional” is important here. We realized that other paths chosen in the past (like making a synod statement, approving a paper, etc.) did not constitutionally fix the problem, because if it’s not in the constitution (BCO, Liturgy, Confessions), it has no teeth, and thus cannot be enforced. We needed to offer the General Synod some options that could have teeth — in either direction. As individuals at the council we might not agree on which option(s) should be chosen, but they were the constitutional options. And so when you read through the document being sent to Synod, you might quickly see that some options go in totally opposite directions, but that’s the idea — we were only to come up with constitutional options.

We mostly arrived at these options at our tables of 7-8. First we brainstormed at our tables (which means that any and all ideas get offered, even outrageous ones, without stopping to think if they’d work and find agreement). Then on the next day, after reading what all tables had offered, we started talking about which ones appealed to us. Then the next day after reading which ones were most often cited, we were to whittle it down to the top 3. The top 3 at each table are listed in the document. From there, the Council of Five highlighted the most common ones and allowed input before their final report.

#### **THE 4 “RECOMMENDED” ACTIONS**

Let me comment on the 4 “recommended” actions (again emphasizing that the word “recommended” does not mean that the council necessarily wanted you to do them):

(1) The first recommendation is to somehow reaffirm the wording of the BCO so that it becomes clearer to everyone that the authority to figure out who qualifies for ordination to Word and Sacrament belongs to the classis and the authority to determine who can be married belongs to the local church and classis. If this one alone gets approved, then we would be allowing for some classes to ordain homosexuals and some churches to perform same-sex marriages. It’s a “live and let live” policy.

This is actually how our policy is designed to operate. And apart from the same-sex issues this method has much going for it. Without this policy, we become a denomination of meddlers, with the different classes trying to tell other classes how to operate. An attempt in this direction was made at a recent Synod, suggesting that a classis could file a complaint against another classis. But it would open up a can of worms if that became the rule, because not only could our classis then complain against another classis for ordaining a homosexual, but they in turn could complain against us for *not* doing so. It would be a mess.

The trouble is, this system works well when there is a basic agreement about biblical interpretation. But when the agreement is not there, it creates a whole different mess. For example, let’s say an entire classis decides there is no Trinity. Unless someone from the classis files a complaint (and even then it’s not sure how that would get adjudicated), there’s really nothing anyone else in the denomination can do about it. To me, that’s a problem. We have all

been taught in seminary that congregationalism is not a good form of church government, for it's important to be accountable to others instead of having a "no one's going to tell me what to do" attitude. But now, it's like the spirit of congregationalism has simply moved up the organizational flow chart to the classis level, so that whole classes can avoid accountability with a "nobody's going to tell me what to do" attitude.

This first recommendation does not fix that problem, but only reinforces the polity behind the problem.

(2) The conservative guy in my circle (from California) really promoted the idea that the best way to get some teeth into the opposition to same-sex marriage is through the wedding liturgy. He claims that the wedding liturgies in our *Liturgy* have never been ratified in the same way as the sacrament liturgies, which we are required to abide by (although there remains much flexibility in how they are used). So we need to specify (and ratify, he would claim) a wedding liturgy that either referred solely to man and woman as husband and wife, or a wedding liturgy that left it open with vague pronouns. The idea is that this forces the denomination to choose one or the other — and whichever choice was made, then those who disagreed would know it's time to leave (rather than living in limbo as we do now). Of course, if neither one receives 2/3's of the classes in support, we'd be left in our current deadlock again. I would of course, endorse only the first option so that marriage is only between a man and woman.

This is probably the main way for those opposed to same-sex marriage to move forward on this issue in our denomination. It provides some teeth to the issue, so that anyone wanting to file a complaint against a pastor for officiating at a same-sex marriage would have a *constitutional* basis for the charge (unfortunately today, to have *biblical* basis for a charge doesn't have much clout right now). Still, the only way the first liturgical change (making marriage between a man and a woman) would really have much effect is:

- (a) if someone from a classis is willing to file a complaint against a pastor in their classis who performed a same-sex marriage — and that usually means a person has to be sort of a bulldog feisty person, which unfortunately feeds into general perceptions that conservatives are unloving — and then that the classis would actually enforce the intent of this liturgical clarification. OR
- (b) all the churches who support same-sex marriage would interpret this liturgical change as a signal that they should move to other denominations, and do so.

I don't think either scenario is likely. Much more likely (even if 2/3's of the classes approve, which is not a sure thing), is that various classes (and perhaps regional synods) would refuse to enforce it, perhaps daring us to make them (knowing that it would be a media circus), and then we're still stuck. Even if someone were to successfully file a charge from within a classis, we would create "martyrs" for the LGBT cause, and the media circus would have a field day.

(3) Some thought it would be good to have an affinity classis of churches that support same-sex marriage and homosexual ordinations. Then they could just "do their thing" and the rest of us could do ours. Again, another live and let live proposal. I don't support this one at all, and neither did the LGBT people at my table. But other tables must have had more support for this. Affinity classes *might* be helpful when banding churches in similar ministry settings (like the

current City Classis that focuses on urban ministry), but even then I'm not so sure. But to make affinity classes based on theology or moral issues is a sure way to wrongly divide the body of Christ.

(4) The last recommendation about finding an orderly way to go our separate ways was actually much talked about and found lots of support on both sides, so I'm glad the Council of Five added it — it wasn't in their initial report, but came up after later discussion before being sent to you. Some, however, are very against any idea of going our separate ways, but I think they are failing to note that we are already divided — deeply. At the Special Council, we all knew how to show grace and give a listening ear, but there was no getting around the fact that we were nowhere near each other on LGBT issues.

Some of those who support LGBT concerns were willing to consider moving on, but more often it was the conservatives who were more amenable toward this (even though I suspect they are the majority in the RCA). I'm also open to moving on. I see no need to pronounce mutual anathemas before we depart. Perhaps we could model our situation on Paul and Barnabas arguing about whether Mark was a suitable mission partner (which happened right after the Acts 15 Special Council). For them, the time came to stop squabbling on the shore, and find other ministry partners for our missionary journeys. We may need to do the same. I realize with this analogy that in the early church, after Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways, both likely had mission successes, Mark matured, and Paul came around to valuing him after all. Perhaps that story line will be replayed with us in the future, but my hunch is that the missionary journey will fail for those who refuse to regard homosexual behavior as sinful. But I'll leave that to God. So I think it wise to figure out how our denomination will separate. It wouldn't be good to divide by attrition with individual churches breaking off one at a time. Much better would be fore whole classes and even regional synods to move out together.

You may be wondering about another recommendation that could have been made by the Special Council, namely, why don't we just put it in the BCO that same-sex marriage is sinful and that homosexual persons should not be ordained? I actually like that method the best, but it got nowhere. The fear is that this would create a different mess. Supposedly the BCO doesn't make explicit pronouncements about certain moral issues, but rather sticks to more general moral terms like being "holy" and being "fit for ministry" (both of which some interpret in a completely non-moral way). Most people seemed to think there was wisdom in the non-specified morality of the BCO, because otherwise we'll have people trying to make every moral issue that comes along a matter of the BCO. Would we really want the BCO specifying, for example, whether pastors should own guns, not be divorced, oppose nuclear weapons, or determine their positions on taxes and capital punishment? No. But that's because there is a bit of interpretive wiggle-room on some of these matters in the Bible — but I don't see that to be the case with same-sex activities. I wouldn't have a problem myself with putting this particular moral issue in the BCO — or even more radically I wouldn't object to making an amendment to the Heidelberg Catechism in specifying that homosexual actions break the seventh commandment. But that's me — I'm far more concerned about following the Bible, even if that means amending a very valuable tradition (which is why I chafe against those who label the two sides in this debate as traditionalists vs. progressives).

Again, thank you for allowing me to attend the council. I had many valuable conversations and met many wonderful people (even those on the other side). For those who want to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus in finding common ground (Phil 2:1-11), it's always better to form face-to-face friendships with the opposition rather than firing smart bomb missiles from a distance.

Anyway, this report is too long as it is. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

David Landegent

**Original form of 2018 Overture sent to RCA for 2018 Gen. Synod**

**AMEND RULES FOR SEATING GENERAL SYNOD  
DELEGATES**

1. **The Classis of Dakota overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to amend the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod in regard to the Seating of Delegates (*Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103]):**

**An amendment to Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1, Seating of Delegates, to add subsection d:**

- d. **To be seated, the clerk of the classis must confirm that during the preceding year:**
  1. **No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members are actively living in a same-sex relationship.**
  2. **No congregations have allowed same-sex weddings in their sanctuary, facilities, or upon their property.**
  3. **No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members have officiated a same-sex marriage or union.**

Reasons:

1. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament or classis members engaged in such practices are living in contradiction of the RCA's constitution that marriage is between one man and one woman, for we have indeed affirmed that this is what the Standards of Unity teach: "To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns 'all unchastity,' which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA's Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman" (*MGS 2017*, R 17-29, p. 161 [adopted]).
2. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament or classis members engaged in such practices are living in contradiction to the RCA's theological statements (General Synods of 1978, 1979, 1994, 1998, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017) in regard to sexuality that an active same-sex sexual relationship is consistently described as a practice outside the will of God. At the same time, marriage is affirmed on more than one occasion to be "between one man and one woman," found in some of the actions of synod-approved studies. Yet there has not been any approved theological

statement of the General Synod that approved same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriages as God honoring.

3. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament engaged in such practices are living in contradiction of the vows ministers of Word and sacrament take upon their ordination and installation into their respective office of upholding the theology and constitution of the Reformed Church in America. “I accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life. I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God. I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. I will submit myself to the counsel and admonition of the classis, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of my understanding of the Christian faith. I will conduct the work of the church in an orderly way and in accordance with the Liturgy and the *Book of Church Order*” (*BCO*, Formulary #3, “Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament” [2017 edition, p. 130]).
  
4. Presently, the General Synod does not seat a classis if the classis has not fully paid its assessments for that year. Theological and constitutional reasons should result in the same practice (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103]).

Letter to the Classis from First Reformed Church, Sheldon, IA

May 2019

Dakota Classis Executive Team

604 E. Maple St.

Harrisburg, SD 57032

Dear Dakota Classis Executive Team :

Greetings in the name of the Lord from Northwest Iowa and First Reformed Church in Sheldon. Our primary purpose for writing you today is to share with you a resolution we recently adopted in preparation for, and response to, the work and future conclusions of the RCA Vision 2020 team. Secondly, we are inviting you to read through the resolution and invite you and Dakota Classis to join us.

It is clear, the RCA is at a crossroads. At General Synod in 2018 interim General Secretary, Don Poest, stated such and we are in agreement. He went on to say, "Our denomination as we know it will never be the same—and we believe that gives us the opportunity to write the next hopeful chapter." In response to the General Secretary's report, the Vision 2020 team was formed "to identify and explore possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America: (1) staying together; (2) radical reconstituting and reorganization; (3) grace-filled separation."

In response, our Elders began to seek further information about the future relationship of First, Sheldon and the RCA. They, along with the Deacons, concluded that it is necessary to prepare in advance for the day when the RCA "will never be the same." We conclude that option 3 given to the Vision 2020 team is the only foreseeable future; given that option 1 was not agreeable because a segment of classes, churches, and pastors continue to approve same-sex practice and marriage and that option 2 was effectively the same thing. Therefore, our Consistory drafted a resolution that states our position on the matter of same-sex practice and marriage. We the members of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa, approved it and are sending it along to you.

We hope that you will read through the enclosed resolution and find the presented position on same-sex practice and marriage one that you can adopt for yourself and Dakota Classis. We hope that similar believing pastors, churches, and classes can join with us and organize ourselves together for the future of the RCA. We also hope that those, who approve same-sex practice and marriage and find that the RCA is no longer a place for them, would be able to freely leave with their buildings and resources without consequence or payment.

Thank you for reading our letter. May the Lord's favor be upon you and Dakota Classis.

Grace be with you,



The Members of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa

## First Reformed Church

Building God's Kingdom One Life at a Time

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### A Resolution to the Members of First Reformed Church, Churches of the East and West Sioux Classes, Synod of the Heartland and its Classes and the Reformed Church in America

Whereas, we the members of the Consistory of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa have been inducted into office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established by the Reformed Church in America, by the call of God to represent Christ and serve His church, we therefore are bound in our duties to affirm the following:

Whereas, Jesus commands us as members of His Church to first love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and second, to love our neighbor as ourselves? And as Jesus taught, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:10-13 NIV).

Whereas, Jesus brings both grace and truth to humanity, as he reveals of himself, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth," and "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:14, 17 NIV).

Whereas, the Holy Spirit spoke through the Apostle Paul that Christians "are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27 NIV). Therefore, what influences one part or member of the body, ultimately influences the entire body, either directly or indirectly. This is true not only for individuals, but also for congregations, classes, synods, denominations and His whole Church on Earth.

Whereas, the RCA recognizes the authority of Holy Scripture as the perfect doctrine of salvation and the only rule of faith and life, including God's final definition and intent of marriage as between a man and a woman.

Whereas, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14, NIV), is identified as Jesus Christ, the "Son of God," God incarnate, it stands to reason that Jesus knows God's definition and intent for marriage. When asked about marriage, Jesus stated, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female'. \*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Mark 10:6-9 NIV). From the very beginning of God's creation, marriage has been between a man and a woman.

Whereas, study<sup>ii</sup> of the ancient Greco-Roman world before the incarnation of Jesus and Premodern

Europe after the ascension of Jesus, has revealed that same-sex attraction and same-sex behavior (even that found in monogamous loving relationships) is not unique to our generation. Therefore, with such knowledge of his day, Jesus could have allowed or made provision for a wider interpretation of marriage, including that between two men or two women, but He did not. The fact that some nations, including our own, have been influenced by changing culture and have broadened their definition of marriage to include marriages between persons of the same sex, does not mean that God, "the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" has changed His mind, His definition of marriage, or His intent for marriage as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. Nor should the Church change its definition of marriage. The Church must not act as a chaplain to society but instead as representatives of our Lord and Savior.

Whereas, condoning same-sex marriage is in fact doing a great disservice and injustice to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ. Such action leads individuals to believe that God gives His blessing to the sharing of sexual intimacy within a same-sex relationship, when in fact God has reserved the gift of sexual intimacy for men and women within the confines of marriage between one man and one woman as Jesus teaches in Mark's Gospel.

Whereas, same-sex marriage encourages our brothers and sisters in Christ who experience same-sex attraction, to act on those attractions by engaging in sexual behavior that God through Holy Scripture has not blessed, but has identified as sinful and forbidden for His people. In Leviticus, in the midst of a long list of forbidden sexual acts, we read, The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. . . Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable'" (Leviticus 18:2, 22). In Romans, Paul states, "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Romans 1:24-27). These are just two of five references in both the Old and New Testaments that address homosexual behavior as well as a variety of prohibited heterosexual acts.

Whereas, in some churches and classes of the Reformed Church in America, false teaching about marriage and human sexuality permits same-sex marriage, condones inappropriate same-sex behavior, and causes individuals with same-sex attraction to fall into sin. Such teaching redefines God's definition and intent for marriage and conflicts with God's original design in creation, by exchanging the complementary nature of the male and female body to "become one in flesh," with a distorted expression of sexual intimacy between people of the same sex. In so doing, not only does the same-sex couple or individual come under God's judgment and condemnation, but it also brings God's judgment and condemnation against The Reformed Church in America. "Jesus said to his disciples: Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin" (Luke 17:1-2 NIV). Recent statistics show that The Reformed Church in America is spiraling downward. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that God has removed His blessing from the Reformed Church due, in part, because of our allowance of same-sex behavior and unless something changes, the Reformed Church in America is going to die.

Whereas, allowing unchecked false teaching about marriage and human sexuality, our pastor and every other pastor of the Reformed Church in America is forced by association to violate their ordination vows. These vows include upholding the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God and the only rule of faith and life; teaching and preaching the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ; being a faithful pastor to build up and equip the church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to seek the things that make for unity, purity and peace. If the Reformed Church in America gives approval for false teaching about marriage and human sexuality, the RCA would require that pastors ignore what God has revealed in Holy Scripture regarding God's definition and intent for marriage and share false teaching on marriage, thus preaching a false gospel. Preaching a false gospel could lead the very people entrusted into the care of pastors to fall into sin — all of which will contribute to the destruction (rather than the guarding) of the faith, unity and discipline of His church. There are many pastors in the RCA who have made it clear that they will not stand for such false teaching or actions and will leave the RCA.

Whereas, there are some within the Reformed Church who believe that the RCA is being "prophetic" by promoting same-sex marriage and hence same-sex behavior; they believe God is doing "a new thing" in our generation, and ultimately the rest of the Church will come to see that. In the meantime, because this is seen as a justice issue for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ, they are willing, if necessary, to divide His Church if others can't embrace this "new thing" they believe God is doing. Such beliefs are exactly what the Prophet Jeremiah was speaking of when he proclaimed: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The LORD says: You will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you'" (Jeremiah 23:16-17 NIV).

Furthermore, our generation fits the description of those the Apostle Paul warned Timothy about when he stated: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound

doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3 NIV).

It is without question, the sincerity and the well intention of many in the Reformed Church who believe the best way to love and minister to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ is to embrace them in their sexuality and make provision for their same-sex attraction through same-sex marriage. It is as Paul writes to the Ephesians: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12 NIV). We believe Satan has been deceiving the leadership of the Church to create ways for our gay and lesbians brothers and sisters in Christ to embrace their sexual desires rather than to repent and seek Jesus and with him, God's grace and the Spirit's power. It has created division in Christ's Church over same-sex attraction and behavior and used the Church to hurt and destroy the very people we care for and love.

Whereas, we the members of the Consistory of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa exhort the Reformed Church in America and the delegates to the General Synod to change course from the path the RCA is on and uphold the past decisions of the General Synod regarding same-sex marriage and behavior. It is not out of mean-spiritedness, hatred, bigotry, a judgmental attitude, or homophobia that we say this — but rather out of love - love for God and His Word; love for The Reformed Church in America; and love for those who experience same-sex attraction. For, if we get Holy Scripture right but we get love wrong, we are wrong as the Apostle Paul writes, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV).

Whereas, we call on the Reformed Church in America to affirm God's definition and intent for marriage as Jesus taught in the New Testament, and declare what Holy Scripture teaches about the forbidden and sinful quality of same-sex behavior and thus marriage. In so doing, we are not suggesting a return to the days of old where our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ were despised and treated shamefully. Often these individuals were branded as being worse sinners than everyone else and were told, or led to believe, that God didn't love them and that they were not welcome in the Church. Such behavior in Christ's Church is not of God; and from it, people must repent.

Together, we must fight the temptation to place ourselves in the judgment seat, judging and condemning brothers and sisters in Christ who experience same-sex attraction. We must recognize that we all yearn for God's love and are fallen sinners in need of God's mercy and redeeming grace, because our truth will not be heard until our grace is felt. It is the same grace Jesus showed to the woman caught in adultery. He didn't condemn her as all those with stones in their hands had done, "Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?" "No-one, sir," she said. "Then neither do condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8: 70-71 NIV). Additionally, we must also fight the temptation of all sin and wrongdoing in our lives to honor the Lord and

live a new and holy life and call all believers who continue in any sin and wrongdoing to repentance. While Jesus showed grace to this woman, at the same time he called her to leave her sin behind. So, to bless and give permission to sexual behaviors that are in opposition to God's will and design as revealed through Holy Scripture, does an injustice to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ. It gives permission for sin and does not help them fight against temptation and rather live to honor the Lord.

Jesus is calling the Church to follow His example. He is calling the Church to have the courage to speak His truth in love and in the fullness of His grace about same-sex behavior and marriage. Sexual relations between two men or two women were never part of God's plan and is a distortion of His design in creation and as such should be avoided.

The Lord is calling the Church to help our brothers and sisters in Christ who experience same-sex attraction to come to understand that their identity and value is not found in their sexual orientation, as they have been led to believe. It is in their relationship with God, in and through Jesus Christ - the One in whose image they were created (Genesis 1:27 NIV). He is the One who died for them, offering Himself as a sacrifice for their sins and for the sins of all.

With that said, the Bible does not forbid two people of the same sex from loving one another in the sense of caring deeply or having a strong sense of affection for one another. Strong friendships are a blessing and gift. As already mentioned, God commands us to love one another both male and female. The Bible doesn't forbid two people of the same sex from sharing a home or life together. It doesn't forbid two people of the same sex from being legal guardians for one another or health care proxies for one another. All God has said through Holy Scriptures regarding relations between two men or two women is that they should not enter into sexual relations with one another, and that marriage is reserved for the joining together of a man and woman.

Whereas, federal and state officials have chosen to expand the definition of marriage, it is not necessary for the Church to change its definition or understanding of Christian marriage to match the new secular definition. It is time for the Church to stop functioning as an agent of society and instead act as an ambassador of our Lord and Savior.

Authorizing same-sex marriage is in direct conflict and contradiction to God's intent for Christian marriage as revealed through Holy Scripture. In so doing, God's word is ignored and its authority circumvented.

Therefore, it is the intent of the First Reformed Church to continue to be loyal servants of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to that end we respectfully exhort The Reformed Church in America and the delegates to the General Synod to change course from the path the RCA is on and uphold the past decisions of the General Synod regarding same-sex marriage and behavior. We call on the Reformed Church in America to:

1. Lead its churches to follow the holy and inspired Scripture on which our faith is founded.
2. Encourage brothers and sisters in Christ who experience same-sex attraction to cling to God's grace, the Spirit's power and find one's identity in Jesus.
3. Forbid same-sex marriage.
4. Rebuke those classes, churches, consistories, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament who approve or perform same-sex marriages within the Church.
5. Call to repentance those engaging in same-sex behavior to repent from their sinful ways, seek forgiveness from Jesus, and pray for strength as we all must do. All of us are sinners, saved by grace, and call upon Jesus to redeem us from our earthly sins.

We recognize that the General Synod's June 2020 meeting on these issues will be a watershed moment in time for the Reformed Church in America. We, the Consistory and members of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa stand prepared to uphold the Word of God and will defend its teachings even to the point of making the regretful decision to leave the denomination of the Reformed Church. We invite other congregations, Classes, and Regional Synods, if necessary to come with us.

May God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit guide and lead us as we go forth in His Name, attempting to discern and carry out His will. In all we say and do, may God be honored and glorified. And may His Church and people be blessed.

Signed this é day of April, 2019

Consistory of First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa

## **Long Letter to the congregations Dec. 2019**

**December 3, 2019/January 2020**

**To the congregations of the Classis of Dakota  
From the Discernment Team of Classis of Dakota**

### **Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus!**

During the fall of 2018 the Classis of Dakota Administrative Team brought together a group of people to function as a discernment team for the classis. This was in response to the 2018 General Synod which approved of establishing the RCA 2020 Vision Team. This RCA 2020 Vision team was approved by the General Synod for the sake of helping our denomination understand a pathway forward for our denomination. Our denomination has been experiencing a growing division pertaining to our denomination's understanding of the authority of Scripture, God's Holy Word. For over 40 years one of the dividing subjects within the denomination has been the Biblical teachings in regard to sexuality and marriage.

The practice of this theology on sexuality and marriage has been defied by some pastors, congregations, and classes. The approval of same sex relationships and marriages is taking place within our denomination and some pastors who are actively gay/lesbian have been ordained and installed in some classes of our denomination. Same sex marriages have also been occurring in some of the RCA's congregations. Such practices are contrary to the RCA's stated and approved theology of the Biblical teachings pertaining to these subjects.

The division in our denomination has come to the point that many congregations have left the RCA in the past five years, with this issue highlighting the ongoing challenge to the authority of Scripture. As the RCA 2020 Vision Team is in their second year of developing a proposal for the RCA to find a pathway forward for the RCA's future, the task assigned to the Vision Team was to consider three possible pathways.

The first pathway would be for the RCA to continue on as it is, accepting the tension of different perspectives in regard to the authority of Scripture, and specifically, approve of the denomination having different viewpoints in regard to sexuality and marriage. The congregations or classes that feel they cannot continue ministering in that tension would be encouraged to leave the denomination.

The second pathway would be one in which the RCA would be realigned into three synods, not based on geography but according to the practice of theology. The three synods would be described as the conservatives, moderates, and the liberals. All three synods would remain under the same umbrella as a denomination. The practice of theology would be the distinguishing feature between the three synods. The authority of Scripture would remain compromised as the practice of ministry is given preference over the authority of Scripture.

The third pathway would be one in which the RCA would either affirm its historical stance of Biblical theology that sexuality and marriage are defined by God to be in the context of marriage of a man and a woman – and those who cannot accept this would be encouraged to separate from the denomination. Or the RCA would become a denomination which would embrace multiple expressions and relationships of sexuality and marriage. Those who could not agree to that theology would be encouraged to separate from the denomination.

When Classis of Dakota formed our discernment team in 2018, the difficulty of the task that was asked of the RCA's 2020 Vision Team was recognized. Also, the realization of the difficulty to have any proposal made by the RCA Vision Team be passed by the General Synod and then by two thirds of the classes was also recognized. The classis discernment team has been given the responsibility to prepare possible ways forward for the Classis of Dakota as the RCA's 2020 Vision Team prepares its recommendation from the possible scenarios.

Throughout the past two years the Classis of Dakota has approved a couple of key statements that have been used by our discernment team to understand where our classis is in regard to the Biblical understanding of the subject of sexuality and marriage.

At a special meeting in February 2018 the Classis of Dakota unanimously approved the Biblical theology that sexuality is intended by God to be between one man and one woman in the context of marriage.

During the fall 2019 classis meeting the Classis of Dakota approved, with a large majority, the following resolution to be sent to the RCA's 2020 Vision Team:

“Whereas the Classis of Dakota finds neither Option 1 nor Option 2 of the three options suggested to the 2020 Vision Team to be acceptable, we resolve to inform the 2020 Vision Team that only some form of Option 3 will be considered by our classis. It is our intent to consider grace-filled separation, whether this proves to be the Vision 2020 Team's recommendation to the 2020 General Synod and thus led by the 2020 General Synod, or led through our classis, or led by some other intermediate group.”

**With those two statements of faith that are based in the Biblical teaching of sexuality and marriage, our discernment team is looking ahead to its work. The following two pathways are giving direction to our discernment team.**

### **Two Parallel Tracks Under Consideration**

The first possible path is that the RCA 2020 Vision Team proposes a structure that results in the majority of the RCA, which are conservatives, remain the core body of the RCA, and those congregations or classes that do not agree separate out.

- Our discernment team will work at keeping the congregations of classis informed as the RCA 2020 Vision Team progresses in their work.
- Our classis has been encouraged to follow up with our 2018 overture. That overture was

referred to RCA 2020 Team. Our discernment team will be following up and seek to pursue the possibility of it being brought back to the floor of 2020 General Synod.

The second possible path the discernment team will be preparing for is the scenario that the RCA's 2020 Vision Team proposes a structure that we as a classis cannot agree with. The moderate or liberal segments of the denomination remain the core of the RCA and the conservative group(s) separate out.

- Our discernment team's work will include considering what this might look like: a group of classes and/or regional synods leave the RCA together and form a new body.
- Our discernment team's work will include considering leaving the RCA as a classis. Each congregation would have the right to choose to stay with the RCA that remains, separate out with the classis, or individually join another denomination.
- Our discernment team recognizes that many practical items will need to be addressed such as property, minister's insurances and annuities, missionary support, the future of the present RCA/Regional Synod/Classis staff personnel, to name a few. Our team will not have all the answers to how to approach each of these issues, but we will seek to understand what are some of the other matters that will need to be addressed.

### **Common work of the discernment team that fits for both path one and path two**

- The November RCA 2020 Team noted that the RCA is theologically diverse about a range of topics, including human sexuality, infant baptism, women in church leadership and others. Do the congregations of Dakota Classis see "these other topics" as a matter of concern?
- Research governmental structures of other denominations, especially in regard to accountability of Classes/Presbyteries/Regional Bodies. Even with the first path of remaining in the RCA a new structure of accountability needs to be considered.
- Research other denominations' ways of holding the credentials of ministers. Presently the RCA minister's credentials are held by the classis. Another method is found in the CRC churches with individual congregations hold their minister's credentials.

## **Beginning Steps**

### **1. A Survey Addressing Several Items**

- to discern where our congregations stand in regard to the "other topics" (such as infant baptism/infant – child dedication, women in church leadership)
- in regard to mission/benevolent ministries each congregation support. This will help to identify how many RCA missionaries are supported by our classis congregations, informing us to be attentive to providing for them financially through a new structure. It may also inform us if certain missionaries may not hold to our Biblical theology, then congregations may decide to switch to other missions/benevolent ministries that are consistent with our Biblical theology.
- seek to form and **send this survey out to the congregations during the month of December.**

## **2. Interview Pastors/Retired Pastors/Specialized Ministers**

- the discernment team members will contact each one by phone or in person
- the discernment team will seek to understand any concerns or anxieties that they may be feeling (personally for themselves, their families, or for their congregations) in regard to the future of the classis and the RCA in general.

## **3. Research to Conduct**

- Research other denominations structures of accountability and credentials
- Research Robert's Rules of Order in regard to the 2018 overture referral. Be in contact with General Synod officers/GSC in regard to having our 2018 brought back to the floor. -
- In regard to the subject of women in leadership, many of our churches have women in leadership, other churches do not. Research the definition of "complementarianism" as it seems that there are different definitions of this term.
- In regard to infant baptism and infant/child dedication, is there room in our Covenant Theology for the allowance of dedication, or does that add too much confusion to our theology. This will be studied.

## **4. Communication with Classis Congregations**

- Send out timely emails/communications of updates of the RCA's 2020 Team, progress of our work as a discernment team, other communication that our team sees as important and appropriate
- As we develop our two parallel plans, we may consider having a team of two discernment team members meet with clusters of churches to explain the options, our concerns as a classis, and opportunity for them to ask questions.

## **Classis of Dakota Discernment Team**

**Chet Carlson**, Pastor of First Ref. Church, Mitchell, SD

**Marc DeWaard**, Pastor of Chancellor Ref. Church, Chancellor, SD

**Charles Gray**, Elder of Faith Community Church, Wishek, ND

**Gary Hegstad**, Pastor of Delaware Ref. Church, Lennox, SD Chair of Discernment Team

**David Landegent**, Pastor of First Ref. Church, Volga, SD

**Jared Lee**, Pastor of Community Church, Bismarck, ND

**Cody Raak**, Pastor of Emmanuel Ref. Church, Springfield, SD, Pres. of Classis of Dakota

**Seth Sundstrom**, Classis Pastor of the Classis of Dakota

**Brenda Van Beek**, Clerk of Classis of Dakota

**Duane Wolbrink**, Elder of Harrison Community Church, Harrison, SD,  
Past Pres. of Classis of Dakota

## Short Letter to Classis Congregations Jan. 2020

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus!

This letter comes to you from the Classis of Dakota Discernment Team. We were established by the classis last year to help figure out possible paths into the future for our classis.

As you may know, our denomination is in great turmoil. Your local church may be doing well and our classis is doing well, but our denomination is deeply divided over same-sex issues. In the past decade especially some classis and churches in the denomination have turned from biblical truth and begun ordaining same-sex clergy and consistory members, as well as officiating for same-sex marriages. And unfortunately, our current RCA polity (which normally serves us so well) does not allow for any other classes or the General Synod to prevent these classes or churches from continuing in this.

The RCA set up a church-wide 2020 Vision Team to come up with a possible solution. So far there has been no information yet on what that proposal might be. It could range from: (1) keeping the status quo of turbulence, or (2) creating a structure in which conservative, moderate and liberal churches could each form their own synod with their own rules and yet remain one denomination, or (3) graciously separating from one another with it not yet known which group would keep the RCA name, and whether the other group would form a new denomination or just join with other currently existing denominations.

At recent meetings Dakota Classis has stated their near-unanimous belief that they would not go along with any solution which allowed for official denominational affirmation of same-sex behavior. We are thankful for the united spirit of our classis on these issues.

We do not yet know what the RCA's 2020 Vision Team will propose. But we wanted to do a little preparation work in case they end up proposing a bad plan that passes or a good plan that is rejected. So our group (the Classis of Dakota Discernment Team) has been asked to explore what options our classis might have if the denomination fails us at this point.

To that effect, we will be sending surveys to churches and leaders about their thoughts on such things as forming our own denomination (probably in conjunction with other classes looking for a new home), or joining another currently-existing denomination, etc. We are also attempting to do a little fact-finding about what changes would need to be made and how that might affect local church ministries and pastors. We are hoping that the denomination stays true to God's

word and that we never have to follow through on any of these contingency plans. But we want to be prepared in case.

A letter with a lot more details about what we are working on is also being sent to your church, so if you have further questions on this, you can get more information from your church leadership. We plan to keep the churches informed as we learn more. Thank you for reading this letter, and please remember the denomination and our classis in your prayers as we approach a pivotal moment in the RCA.

In Christ, The Classis of Dakota Discernment Team

Chet Carlson (Mitchell), Marc DeWaard (Chancellor), Charles Grey (Wishek, ND), Gary Hegsted (Lennox), David Landegent (Volga), Jared Lee (Bismarck), Cody Raak (Springfield), Seth Sundstrom (classis pastor), Brenda Van Beek (classis clerk), Duane Wolbrink (Harrison).

## **In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity”**

Dakota Classis,

“May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” (2 Peter. 1:2)

We hope that by now you have had a chance to read and consider the implications of the [RCA Vision 2020 Team Final Report](#). Many of you have reached out with questions concerning our next move as a Classis. Please, rest assured in the Lord, our Classis Discernment Team is working toward an appropriate response, but we need your help.

We are asking you to devote time for **intentional conversation** as a consistory to discuss where we’ve been and where we’re headed. It has become apparent that not all of our churches have engaged our denominational dilemma with the same passion or concern. This is understandable, but we can no longer afford to ignore the issues dividing us. While we don’t expect our Classis will agree on every issue, we believe together is better. Thus, we must lead in mission or we will lose by attrition. With this in mind, we suggest your consistory appoint a key leader to facilitate the following conversation.

### **Remember Where We’ve Been**

The RCA has not changed, nor are we at odds with its essential doctrines. Rather, our problem has been with a minority of leaders acting outside the denomination’s official stance concerning human sexuality. Again, our complaint isn’t against official theology or doctrine; it is against a dysfunctional polity that prevents discipline.

In response, our Classis has attempted to call the denomination into corrective action by submitting an overture calling for the discipline of Pastors and Classes that were allowing the ordination and marriages of same-sex couples. General Synod tabled this overture in lieu of the appointment of the Vision 2020 Team.

The Vision 2020 Team was tasked with considering the following three options:

1. Staying together
2. Radical reconstitution/reorganizing
3. Grace-filled separation

After consideration, our Classis made the following official resolution:

“Whereas the Classis of Dakota finds neither Option 1 nor Option 2 of the three options suggested to the 2020 Vision Team to be acceptable, we resolve to inform the 2020 Vision Team that only some form of Option 3 will be considered by our classis. It is our intent to consider grace-filled separation, whether this proves to be the Vision 2020 Team’s recommendation to the 2020 General Synod and thus led by the 2020 General Synod, or led through our classis, or led by some other intermediate group.”

The [Vision 2020 Team Final Report](#) provides 3 recommendations:

1. Restructuring
2. New Mission Agency
3. Mutually Generous Separation

For those churches unable to live in the tension of a restructured big tent denomination, an offramp will be provided under recommendation 3 (Generous Separation). Our Classis has already stated that only Option 3 is acceptable to us. While we remain open to a Spirit-led alternative, it appears that it is time for us to find the offramp.

The Discernment Team has identified the following 3 options.

1. Joining the Denver Collaborative (a developing group of mission-minded RCA churches pursuing a post-denominational “Coalition Of Reformed Evangelicals”)
2. Creating our own new denomination
3. Joining a different denomination (PCA, EPC, CRC, etc)

Whatever our future denominationally, it is our goal to remain together as a Classis. We are currently investigating several other options in the development stage. Offramps are not destinations and navigation doesn’t end until the journey is complete.

### Review What We Believe

Moving forward with any of the above 3 options will require us to understand who we are theologically. Remember, we are not at odds with RCA **essential** doctrines. The RCA has not changed its position on any essential doctrine, including human sexuality. We have assumed the Dakota Classis is unified in these essentials. We are asking you to help us [and yourselves] by affirming this assumption.

Please review the list below with your consistory and give a simple “yes” or “no” answer to each. If you must, either because it is a new idea/document, or because you have not truly considered it before, you may answer “unsure;” but we ask you to strive together in this moment to be sure about what you believe. Now is not the time for staying in the middle, undecided. Please, let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

**Yes** = We **agree** and **value** this statement.

**Unsure** = We have not considered this or we are unfamiliar with this.

**No** = We **disagree** and find **no value** in this statement.

**We believe in the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**                      Yes      Unsure      No

**Scripture is the highest authority on our faith and its practice.**                      Yes      Unsure      No

**We affirm the foundational Protestant understanding of salvation:** Yes    Unsure    No

**Scripture Alone:** Scripture is the only source of revelation of salvation.

**By Grace Alone:** God’s Grace alone is sufficient for our salvation.

**Through Faith Alone:** Faith is the only way to obtain salvation, not works.

**Christ Alone:** Christ alone is our Savior and Lord.

**To the Glory of God Alone:** Our salvation life is all grateful response in worship to God.

**We affirm the RCA’s historical creeds and confessions\* as faithful witnesses to Scripture and helpful guides for our life and mission.**

**Apostles Creed:** God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit (Simple)                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Nicene Creed:** God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit (Expanded)                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Athanasian Creed:** The Trinity, and the Humanity and Deity of Christ                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Heidelberg Catechism:** Apostle’s Creed, Ten Commandments, Lord’s Prayer                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Belgic Confession:** Systematic Articles on Orthodox Doctrines                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Canons of Dort:** Human Sin, and God’s Election and Preservation of the Saints                    Yes    Unsure    No

**The Belhar Confession\*\*:** The Church’s Unity and Racial Justice                    Yes    Unsure    No

**Great Lakes Catechism\*\*\*:** God’s Design for Sexuality, Family, and Marriage                    Yes    Unsure    No

*\* For online versions of these, visit [www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions](http://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions).*

*\*\* Please answer only according to the content of the Belhar.*

*\*\*\* While not an official RCA confession, the Classis of Dakota affirms this catechism as biblically faithful and useful for churches. Read this here: [images.rca.org/docs/synod/GLCatechism.pdf](http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/GLCatechism.pdf).*

**Commit to Where We’re Headed**

Our Classis leadership is working to navigate our future. We don’t yet know what that will look like, but we trust the Lord has a plan for us. We believe that our Classis has worked well together in the past, and we hope we can keep our fleet together as we journey forward. In addition, we believe there is value in maintaining the covenant partnerships we have with many of our RCA sister churches throughout the Synod of the Heartland and the whole of our denomination. If you have affirmed the statements of belief (above) and you desire a continued relationship with our Classis, would you please affirm this below.

**We desire to keep our covenant with Dakota Classis.** Yes    No

**Pastor(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Elders:**

**Deacons:**


## Final Report of the RCA 2020 Vision Team that is to be presented to General Synod 2021

### Recommendations and rationale

We were originally asked to imagine what it would mean for the denomination to embark on one of three possible paths: staying together, radically reorganizing the denomination, or grace-filled separation. Throughout our time together, we've come to believe that the most fruitful future for the RCA would involve all three of these things. Already we're aware that some churches plan to leave the denomination regardless of what decisions are made, and these congregations deserve a thoughtful and generous separation. Others are committed to staying and helping to shape what remains into an organization equipped to live in theological tension and thrive in a changing context. We want to give them our best thinking on what that may look like. Some are waiting to see what comes of this report before choosing their paths. We have held all three of these groups in mind in crafting what follows.

Based on our time together, our study of relevant data, and the many generous ways RCA members have responded to our work to date, we plan to present the following recommendations to the next meeting of General Synod, which we anticipate will be in June 2021. While we hope and recommend that all three are adopted, we have structured them in such a way that each can exist independent of the others.

#### **Together, Yet Changed (Recommendation 1—Restructuring)**

Prior to the 2018 General Synod, the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) submitted a report to the General Synod Council (GSC) summarizing their understanding of the “current reality” of the Reformed Church in America. In that report, COSE outlined their general sense of the denomination's present state and future and shared anecdotal reports from their specific regions regarding beliefs and practices around the topic of human sexuality. The report painted a picture of a diverse denomination in belief, practice, and even priorities. While it was difficult for the group to reach consensus around how the current reality should be defined, they were united in their assertion that deep change was needed to address both the present divisiveness around controversial topics and various areas of organizational dysfunction.

Following the COSE report, Don Poest called for the formation of our Vision 2020 Team (as referenced earlier in this report). One of the ways the team spent time in our first year together was reflecting on our past, present, and potential future as a denomination. We looked to works like Lynn Japinga's *Loyalty and Loss*<sup>[1]</sup> to learn about our past, to the COSE report and to survey data collected from our membership to understand the present, and to the expertise of George Bullard<sup>[2]</sup> to help us think about where many denominations, and ours in particular, seem to be headed.

As we reflected on what we learned, some key themes emerged that will give context to the recommendation that follows:

1. The tension and conflict we're facing today are not new realities. There have been numerous points, especially in the last 70 years, where the RCA has been at an impasse. Points of disagreement and tension have included differences of views on things like ecumenical partnerships, social justice/political involvement, merging with another denomination, communism, internal restructuring, the *Church Herald*, church planting models, women in

ministry, and human sexuality.<sup>[3]</sup> **This means we currently face something we have previously weathered, but it also means that we are likely to be here again if we do not find a way to handle conflict differently.**

2. Since the mid 1990's, about two-thirds of denominations in North America have shifted away from a "product delivery" model in which the headquarters (General Synod) designs a specific "product" and dispatches it to the branch offices (regions and classes) for distribution to the people. Instead, they have shifted to a model where the corporate assembly empowers a staff to equip the regional and local groups with the tools they need, but encourages them to use the tools in the way that best fits with what the Spirit is doing locally. This is what denominations that thrive are doing (Bullard). **The RCA has not quite made this shift, but we are moving in this direction with some of our initiatives.**
3. George Bullard views the RCA as being made up of three to four groups with unique understandings and priorities—the West, the East, and Iowa/Canada/the Midwest (with Michigan being similar to both the East and the Midwest, depending on which classis or congregation one considers). The COSE report and the second of the surveys we commissioned reveal similar regional identities at work. **These reports seem to indicate that we have already organically shifted away from a larger corporate identity to more regional identities.**
4. According to Bullard, it takes 2,000 churches to be a full-service denomination. We have fewer than 1,000 today, and our numbers are declining. We may not be large enough to support binational, regional, and local assemblies unless they are very well-defined and discrete from one another in function. Local congregations do not want to fund a structure that isn't delivering value and helping them move their mission forward. **We need to strongly consider the roles of our binational, regional, and local assemblies and look to the experiences of other small denominations for the most efficient and effective way to structure ourselves. This will likely mean dissolving our regional synods and restructuring our classes on an affinity model.**
5. The results of the second survey suggest that we desire unity but that we aren't sure what unites us. We want to be mission-focused, but there is a diverse understanding of what that mission looks like. We share a strong desire to be faithful to the Word of God, but we don't know how to function when we differ on our interpretation of it. **Centering us at the highest levels of our organization around the things we *can* all agree on and giving authority to decide the things we can't agree on to the local levels may be the best way to grow our effectiveness and reclaim some of the unity we feel we've lost through this conflict.**

We know that we will face more loss in the coming years, and we can't yet know the full impact of that loss. Some churches will leave the denomination, and we will feel the impact of that in our relationships and our operations. We do, however, know that there will be those who stay. While we did research several possible options for the future structure of the denomination, we believe a restructure should ultimately be detailed and implemented by those who remain within the RCA. It would make little sense for members intending to leave to vote on what will happen to the denomination after their exit. For that reason, we are not recommending specific RCA *Book of Church Order* changes for restructuring to be voted on at this General Synod. To reiterate, we believe those detailed changes should be decided by those who remain in the denomination. However, recognizing that some will feel undecided about their future with the

denomination until they have more clarity on what that future will hold, we do want to urge serious consideration of some of the changes we think will give the RCA the best chance at a healthy way forward.

We believe a team should be tasked with the specific work of restructuring the denomination in a way that is deeply informed by our ecclesiology (our theology of what it means to be the church) and seeks to optimize our sustained spiritual and organizational health for the 21st century. This team should include several members of current executive RCA staff as well as representation from those regional or local assemblies who have expressed an intention to remain with the denomination. Based on the research referenced above, our belief is that the best chance for success will include a structure in which:

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. We are already seeing these kinds of affinity relationships being sought by congregations both within and outside the RCA. It makes sense that our churches should have the ability to align themselves around shared values, understanding, and practices.
2. **Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.** This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model for classes.
3. **Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level.**
4. **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. Our research shows that the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward. One scenario would be for affinity classes and General Synod to assume the responsibilities of the regions. Options like this need to be evaluated and decided upon by those who remain in the denomination.

### **Recommendation 1**

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 use 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 2023.

### **Preserving Our Shared History (Recommendation 2—A New Mission Agency)**

We have had multiple opportunities during our two years together as a team to celebrate God's faithfulness in the good efforts of our denomination to see the gospel spread to every part of the globe. At the same time, we have had to face some hard truths about the RCA's declining

membership. For many years the overall number of confessing members of RCA congregations has been declining.

Since 1992, we have lost an average of 1 percent per year, and we have informally learned of entire classes' intention to exit the denomination in the near future. These losses have made it and will continue to make it increasingly challenging to fund the work of a full-service denomination, which calls into question whether many of the good works the RCA has begun will ultimately be able to continue.

Much of what the Vision 2020 Team has heard from the RCA over the course of our work reflects a corporate commitment to and desire to preserve this part of the RCA's legacy—that of expanding and strengthening God's kingdom through global missions. When we think through the reality of declining numbers and what separation or a restructure may mean for the organization, this is one of the things no one wants to lose. Additionally, there are sometimes aspects of a denomination (often unrelated to missions) that make it difficult for external organizations to enter into a missions partnership with it. As a team, we wondered if there might be a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed our denomination in global mission and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy. We believe the following recommendation is the best way to accomplish this.

We recommend that a new non-profit mission agency be formed independent of the RCA (but in partnership with the RCA) to house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions. We can find inspiration for this idea from thriving para-denominational mission agencies like Wycliffe, New Tribes Mission (Ethnos360), Operation Mobilization, China Inland Mission (OMF International), Pioneers, SEND International, and Africa Inland Mission. This specific organization would carry on the legacy of Reformed missions, while the support of churches in disciple-making, leadership development, next-generation spiritual formation, and local missional engagement would remain in the RCA through initiatives like Transformed & Transforming.

The RCA has a rich history of forming agencies that serve the church well, including the Church Growth Fund and Board of Benefits Services. These agencies are structured to serve the broader church if local congregations choose to use them. Similarly, all RCA churches, as well as churches outside the denomination, would be invited to participate in and be equipped by the work of this new para-denominational mission agency. This could include general financial support of the agency, specific financial support of missionaries, prayer support, short-term trips, and project partnerships. We see this as a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed us and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy.

While the leadership of this new missions agency would need to be determined by those tasked with forming the agency, we recognize that the skills and experience needed may be readily available in current RCA staff, so decisions about agency staffing would need to be made in consultation with executive RCA staff. Funding, too, would ultimately be the responsibility of

the new agency's board, but the Vision 2020 Team imagines that the RCA might choose to seed this work with funds from the current RCA Global Mission budget. Future funding would likely be found through donations (primarily for missions and similar initiatives) as well as fees charged for services.

Faced with the hard truth that our denomination is shrinking and that global missions is not the only part of our work worth preserving long-term, we also see this agency as being a potential home for other RCA functions and initiatives, *should that be required in the future*. For that reason, we recommend that the agency's mission (as stated in the founding documents) be defined in broad enough terms so that absorption of other RCA efforts and services in the future would be possible. We imagine that if both this recommendation and the restructuring recommendation are approved, the restructuring team would factor these things into their work.

## **Recommendation 2**

To form a new nonprofit mission agency independent of the RCA that will house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions; and further,

To direct the GSC to form an implementation team that will be tasked with incorporating the new agency as a 501(c)(3), drafting bylaws, and recruiting a board of directors, who would then be responsible for appointing an executive director for the new agency in the manner specified in the bylaws. The implementation team should work closely with the RCA Global Mission team to ensure diligent care for current RCA missionaries during the transition to the new agency. And further,

To instruct the general secretary to transfer a portion of the current RCA missions budget to the new agency as seed money (to be determined by the general secretary in consultation with GSC); and further,

To urge RCA churches and individuals that currently support RCA missionaries and mission projects through Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares to continue that support through the new agency.

A minority report on Recommendation 2 follows at the end of this report.

## **Forward with Grace (Recommendation 3—Mutually Generous Separation)**

Our hope is that both of the preceding proposals, once formally presented to General Synod, will be adopted by the denomination and that they will meet many of the needs that we have heard expressed. Some who had considered leaving the denomination may choose to stay and see the restructuring as an opportunity to breathe new life into an organization they love. Others may still leave but find ongoing connection with their former denomination through the new mission agency. Still others may decide to forge an entirely new path, to seek God's call on their lives through other relationships and partnerships.

Recognizing that some separation is inevitable, we believe the RCA has an opportunity to act in an exemplary way by providing a generous exit path for those churches which decide to leave and by inviting those churches to also act generously. While the process currently outlined in the

RCA *Book of Church Order (BCO)* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]) allows a classis to be generous with a church petitioning for withdrawal from the denomination, it also allows a classis to deny a church’s petition for withdrawal or to be less than generous in granting the withdrawal. Given that we are entering a period when there will likely be more petitions being put forth than has been typical, we believe it is the right time to revise this process such that generosity is prescribed rather than simply permitted.

We also want to recognize that the timing of this proposal is difficult; with the General Synod 2020 meeting postponed, it will be 2021 at the earliest before the proposal can be voted on, and at least 2022 before these provisions can become part of the *BCO*. This means that in those cases where a church may wish to leave prior to full implementation<sup>[4]</sup> of this proposal and its classis does not treat it generously, that church may feel forced to wait until the new provisions are in full effect. Even then, if the guidelines are adopted as proposed below (including a period of ongoing financial responsibility to the denomination) that church would then face another waiting period before its ties could be fully severed.

For these rare cases, we think it is important that the proposal also include a provision for retroactive generosity. For example, let’s imagine that a church declares its *intent* to leave the denomination in July 2020 but is not granted a generous exit by its classis and so decides to hold off on separating. Assuming that the proposed changes are adopted by General Synod 2021, are approved by the necessary percentage of classes, and they receive a final declarative vote at General Synod 2022, which makes it possible to officially update the *BCO*, the changes would be retroactive for that church to the date the church communicated its intention. Any time-based requirements would therefore be considered against that church’s date of intent. In the hypothetical case considered here, the payment of assessments for two additional years would be fulfilled by the payments made from 2020 to 2022 (for example). We feel this is the best way to both encourage communication about a church’s intent (to the classis’s benefit) and to ensure protection for those churches facing a challenging separation from their classes.

In the time between now and General Synod 2021, we will seek the assistance of the Commission on Church Order both to determine what portions of the following provisions will require *BCO* changes and to write these proposed changes in order to develop specific language of the recommendation that will be submitted to the 2021 General Synod. Our recommendation will include the following provisions:

1. That any exit from the denomination would be done by churches or individual ministers of Word and sacrament from their classes. If entire classes and regional synods wish to leave, they must do so one church at a time, as already provided for in the *BCO*.
2. Regarding a church’s financial relationship with and commitments to the RCA,
  - that churches which decide to leave would be allowed to retain their property and other assets and would be solely responsible for any liabilities. This provision will include proposed changes to the *BCO* to make this possible.
  - that classes would be required to allow exiting churches to leave the classis and/or the denomination with their property and other assets if they are in compliance with requirements. That regional synods would not impede churches from moving into a different regional synod. No classis or regional synod can keep a church or its assets in

that classis or regional synod if the church would like to leave the denomination or move to another classis. This provision will include proposed changes to the *BCO* to make this possible.

- that churches which decide to leave would be invited to continue support of RCA missionary personnel and Global Mission partnerships (mission persons and initiatives to which they have already committed financially) and asked to give **two years'** notice before severing these supportive relationships.
- that churches which decide to leave would be required to continue paying all assessments for a **two-year** period of time to General Synod, regional synod, and classis, starting from the time that they express their written intent to leave the denomination (as provided in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 [2019 edition, p. 41]). In cases where this written intent is expressed prior to final ratification of the recommendation, and where the church submitting its intent wishes to wait for the final ratification before completing its exit, this provision would be applied retroactively to that date of notification. In such cases, churches must submit their written intent at the classis, regional synod, and General Synod levels.
- that where applicable, churches, classes, and regional synods would maintain their savings certificate investments with the Church Growth Fund (CGF) according to the existing terms, and when investments are maturing or if they become able to redeem the funds, would consider renewing and continuing their investments for a period of at least **two years**.
- that where applicable, churches would be required to continue paying off loans to classes, regional synods, and the Church Growth Fund (CGF), as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those organizations. Further, that CGF bylaws be changed to allow churches leaving the RCA to continue their borrowing relationship with the CGF.
- that consistories fulfill any and all outstanding obligations they have as adopting employers to properly fund all accounts maintained for their employees in retirement plans (i.e., the Board of Benefits Services or the Regional Synod of Canada plan), as promised in the provisions of the call form (*BCO*, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134–135]) and outlined in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 (2019 edition, p. 15) of the *BCO*.

3. Regarding the treatment of and provision for denominational, regional, classis, and local church employees, we encourage the General Synod Council, in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, in cooperation with the general secretary, GSC human resources team, and legal counsel, to continue to conduct a compassionate and orderly evaluation of staff structuring, including the continued provision of fair salaries and benefits packages when possible, and appropriately generous severance packages should budget constraints require downsizing. Further, we will encourage the same consideration at the regional synod, classis, and church level for staff at those levels.

### Final Thoughts

In closing this report, we wish to offer a few final reflections to you, our beloved colleagues and friends. Foremost, that it has truly been a privilege to serve together in this work. None of us emerges from this two-year journey unchallenged or unchanged. While we confess to being weary from the road, we also find ourselves better for having walked it together. We have

sharpened one another, iron against iron, and will carry the marks of our learning with us in gratitude, to God's glory.

As a denomination, the RCA is standing at a crossroads. Having sent our team as scouts to explore different paths, the task before you now is to decide which paths to take. Perhaps surprisingly, our advice in the end has been "take all of them." None is without challenge or loss, but all of them also hold opportunities. For those who decide to stay in the RCA, there is a path that holds the potential for the renewal and strengthening of a denomination they love. For those who choose to go a separate way there is an opportunity to provision them well for their journey, knowing that the work they go to do is for the kingdom we all call home. And before moving on from this crossroads, we have the chance to build something new together in the form of a mission agency, as a place for us to work together, and to preserve some of our best work as a celebration of our shared journey.

May the grace of God go with us all on the roads ahead.

*Throughout the process of this work, the Vision 2020 team came to understand that they could have unity without necessarily achieving unanimity. In the case of the team's second recommendation, that of forming a new mission agency, two of our team voiced strong concerns for the impact of this recommendation on the denomination. Valuing transparency and believing that we are only at our best when everyone can be fully seen and heard, the team agreed that it would be fitting to include a minority report written by these members.*

### **A Minority Report**

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the 2020 Team has labored two years together as a diverse group of RCA leaders. As we close our work, two of us strongly oppose Recommendation 2, the formation of a new mission agency. At the request of our team, we now share these objections that prevent us from endorsing this recommendation.

### **We believe we are part of God's covenant community**

When we are baptized into the church, we enter into covenant with God and one another to Christ's mission: "By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work."<sup>[5]</sup> We believe Recommendation 2 does not assume a covenantal foundation. Its structure is voluntary and pragmatic. By design, the agency would be extra-ecclesial, existing outside of the connection and accountability of a covenant community. We believe assigning RCA global missions *to function* within a separate para-church organization weakens our Reformed practice of keeping covenant promises to each other.

### **We believe that God's mission has a church**

As was stated and celebrated at the recent Mission 2020 event: "God's church does not have a mission, but God's mission has the Reformed Church in America." The mission of God and the identity of the church are as inseparable as the person of Christ and the work of Christ—indeed, the church and its mission flow from Christ's person and work. Further, our covenant identity

and accompanying mission requires us not to separate global and local mission. Recommendation 2 enacts a formal separation of global and local mission, which implies that Christ's presence can be divided. In fact, Christ moves among Christ's body, within every geography.

### **We believe that the church is called to courageous dialogue**

Because Christ is Lord, we need not fear difference. Being connected to one another is hard work, and it is exactly what belongs within God's covenantal community. This community, nourished by the Word and the sacraments, is the location that makes us able to engage in very difficult conversations. It is precisely in deep relationship with those whom we might not agree that the church must wrestle with our understandings of the gospel's call, our differing hermeneutics, and their implications for human sexuality. Recommendation 2 avoids confronting the very real divisions among us and pushes these hard conversations into other communities that do not have the support of covenant bonds.

### **Conclusion**

The creation of a new mission agency is not the answer to what divides us. What is urgently needed is a robust theological rationale for how the church exists in difference. What holds us together? How do we remain connected to and in covenant with one another?

As the Preamble of the *BCO* states, "The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head" (2019 edition, p. 2). And one of our Standards of Unity, the Belhar Confession, confesses: "that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16); that this 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)" Especially in light of our deep divisions, we must hold fast to our union with Christ by the power of the Spirit.

In Christ, all things hold together and Christ is the reconciler of all things who makes peace through the blood of his cross.<sup>[6]</sup> It is in this hope—that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and that Christ will come again—that we submit this report.