

**Synod of the Great Lakes
Meeting and Minutes
Convened at Remembrance Reformed Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Sixty-Second Annual Session
May 1, 2017**

FORMATION OF THE SYNOD

Roll Call/Seating of Delegates

The Assembly convened in the chapel of Remembrance Reformed Church at 4575 Remembrance Road N.W. in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Monday, May 1, 2017. Delegates were asked to be seated and to introduce themselves to others seated around the same round table. President Branson Parler called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. Attendance was taken by noting the nametags that were not picked up. The President declared that a quorum—a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder delegates—was present. The delegates to this assembly meeting are listed below. The names of absent delegates were given to the Leave of Absence Committee. * designates a second year delegate.

GREAT LAKES CITY CLASSIS

Rev. Mark Bergsma, 5342 Pinebrook Ave, Kentwood, MI, 49548
Rev. Darrell Dalman, 21 Murray Street, Kentwood, MI, 49548*
Rev. Nate DeWard, 7050 Union Avenue, Grand Rapids, MI, 49548 *
Mr. Andy LaBo, 25180 Mylor, Taylor, MI, 48180
Ms. Jeanette Meringa, 6750 Union Avenue, Grand Rapids, MI, 49548*
Mr. Tom Paarlberg, 7468 Kettle Lake Drive, Alto, MI, 49302
Mr. Wayne Schipper, 7012 Rolling Hills Drive, Hudsonville, MI, 49426
Rev. Tim Wilson, 2211 Glen Echo Drive, Grand Rapids, MI, 49546

HOLLAND CLASSIS

Mr. Dave Boelkins, 68 Michigan Avenue, Holland, MI, 49424
Rev. Celaine Bouma-Prediger, 105 W 12th Street, Holland, MI, 49423
Rev. Ken Eriks, 171 Bristol, Holland, MI, 49424
Mrs. Phyllis Garvelink, 6378 146th Avenue, Holland, MI, 49423*
Mr. Gary Morris, 630 State Street, Holland, MI, 49423 *
Rev. Jill Russell, 77 West 11th Street, Holland, MI, 49423*
Rev. Leigh VanKempen, A4643 Pine Drive, Holland, MI, 49423*
Mr. Daniel Woolsey, 351 Stone Harbor Road, Holland, MI, 49424*

MUSKEGON CLASSIS

Rev. Paul Burmeister, 1306 Mills, North Muskegon, MI, 49445*
Mr. Jim Heckethorn, 5429 Staple Road, Twin Lake, MI, 49457*
Rev. Lary Jackson, 350 De Witte Lane, Grand Haven, MI, 49403
Mr. Richard Kuiper, 632 Lake Avenue, Grand Haven, MI, 49417*
Mr. Mike Leak, 1330 S. Ferry Street, Grand Haven, MI, 49417*
Mr. Ron Morse, 16919 Landing Lane, Spring Lake, MI, 49456
Rev. Sandra Nikkel, 3769 Sehler Street, Conklin, MI, 49403
Rev. Steve Vander Woude, 2390 Ravenna Road, MI, 49451

NORTH GRAND RAPIDS CLASSIS

Rev. Kathy Bartels, 1465 Three Mile Road, Grand Rapids, MI, 49544*
Ms. Lin Cline, 250 Sunset Hills, Grand Rapids, MI, 49354 *
Rev. Adam Navis, 15469 Thornapple Drive, Rockford, MI, 49431
Ms. Wilma Nelson, 192 Rollingwood Drive, Rockford, MI, 49341*
Ms. Ellen Ormsby, 337778 Morse, Clinton Twp, MI, 48035
Rev. Jennifer Petersen, 1050 Pulawski, Grand Rapids, MI, 49504*
Rev. Todd Schmidt, 4575 Remembrance Road, Grand Rapids, MI, 49505
Mr. Ray Van Portfliet, 3391 English Hills Drive, Grand Rapids, MI, 49544

NORTHERN MICHIGAN CLASSIS

Rev. Seth Bush, 45 Amber Road, Scottville, MI, 49454
Rev. Dan DeVries, 4902 W. Macfarlane Road, Glen Arbor, MI, 49636
Rev. Adam Grill, 8372 S Lucas Road, McBain, MI, 49657
Mr. Bert Jackson, 4872 South Ferris, Newaygo, MI, 49337*
Mr. Doug Bunning
Rev. Chip Sauer, 100 Oak Street, Charlevoix, MI, 49720*
Mr. Mik Sutton, 535 South Brye Road, Ludington, MI, 49431*

SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN CLASSIS

Ms. Jan Drolen, 3706 Tartan Circle, Portage, MI, 49024*
Mr. Randy Eding, 09093 Riverben Drive, South Haven MI, 49090*
Rev. Suzanne Hart, 2509 Fredrick, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008
Rev. Mark Hofstra, 200 Pine Street, Deactur, MI, 49045*
Mr. Alan Jackson, 2410 Hunters Woods, Kalamazoo, MI, 49048*
Rev. Agshin Jafarov, 729 Whites Road, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008
Mr. Jerry Traxler, 194 Pretty Lake Drive, Mattawan, MI, 49071
Rev. Mark Vanderson, 5676 Quail Hollow Circle, Kalamazoo, MI, 49009*

ZEELAND CLASSIS

Ms. Kay Bolman, 1684 South Trillium Circle, Zeeland, MI, 49464*
Rev. Kurt Henry, 10376 Flech Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464
Rev. Todd Krygsheld, 5275 Hidden Woods Land, Hudsonville, MI, 49426
Mr. Jim Mulder, 7565 Ranson Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464
Ms. Diane Pater, 2267 Riley Court, Hudsonville, MI, 49426
Rev. Chris Peiters, 4515 104th Avenue, Zeeland, MI, 49464*
Mr. Scott VanHaitsma, 30 S Division Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464*
Rev. Barbara Yandell, 13100 Lubbock Lane, Austin, TX, 78729*

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

President:	Dr. Branson Parler
Vice-President:	Rev. Judy Nelson
Past-President:	Mr. Dean Van Farowe
Past Past-President:	Mr. Gordon Christian
Finance Committee Chairperson:	Mr. Irv Boersen
At-Large Members:	Mrs. Laurel Kempkers
	Rev. Curry Pikkaart
	Rev. Dan Sewell
	Rev. Greg Stamm
	Mr. Bob VanderZwaag
Regional Executive:	Rev. Rick Veenstra
Stated Clerk/Parliamentarian (non-voting):	Rev. Howard Moths

SYNOD STAFF (non-voting)

Mrs. Alison DeBoer	Operations Manager, Full-Time
Rev. Dr. Doug McClintic	Church Multiplication Consultant Catalyst, Full-Time
Rev. John Messer	New Regional Executive as of May 1, 2017
Rev. Howard Moths	Stated Clerk, Part-Time
Rev. Rick Veenstra	Regional Executive/ Leadership Development Catalyst, Full-Time
Mr. Bill VerHulst	Treasurer, Part-Time
Rev. Art Wiers	Church Health Catalyst, Full-Time

Privilege of the Floor

Since non-delegates do not have access to the floor, the following motion was made and seconded:

R-1

To grant the privilege of the floor to those employed as classis leaders, stated clerks, or RCA staff that are present, and those non-delegates and members of the GLR task forces, committees, and ministry teams who have been asked to present reports to the Synod.

(ADOPTED)

Limits to Debate

The Executive Committee recommend the following motion:

R-2

To limit debate to two minutes for each delegate on any motion that comes before the Assembly. Following Robert's Rules, delegates may not speak more than twice to a single motion. If a delegate choose to speak a second time, the time available will be limited to one minute." (ADOPTED)

Approval of the 2016 Assembly Minutes

The Minutes of the Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes that was held on May 2, 2016 are posted on the Great Lakes Region website on the Assembly Resources page and were mailed to anyone who requested a copy. The minutes were reviewed and approved for publication by the GLR Executive Committee. The president asked for any additions or corrections to the minutes. Since none were offered, he declared that the minutes of the 2016 Assembly will stand approved as printed.

Appointments of Standing Committees and Tellers

The following committees and tellers were appointed by the Executive Committee. The standing committees met before the assembly meeting to conduct their business.

Classical Minutes Committee

Celaine Bouma-Prediger, chair

Kurt Henry

Rick Kuiper

Mik Sutton

Howard Moths (staff)

Resolution/Leave of Absence Committee

Chip Sauer, chair

Phyllis Garvelink

Wilma Nelson

Tim Wilson

Doug McClintic (staff)

Study Committee

Not appointed

Tellers

Chris Pieters

Paul Burmeister

Dan DeVries

Jan Drolen

Andy LaBo (recused, VP nominee)

Howard Moths (staff)

Presentation of New Business

The *Rules of Order* of the Synod of the Great Lakes allow for presentation of new business at this point in the agenda. No new business was presented.

Approval of the Agenda

The agenda for this meeting was printed at the beginning of the Assembly workbook. The Executive Committee revised the agenda by adding a number of additional overtures to the General Synod to be considered along with the first overture in the afternoon. Without objection the Assembly adopted:

R-3

To approve the revised agenda. (ADOPTED)

OPENING PRAYER

Two times for worship were planned for this Assembly – one at 11:00 a.m. in recognition of Rick Veenstra's almost 13 years of service as our Regional Executive, and another time right after lunch as a service of welcome and blessing for John Messer who was appointed as our new Regional Executive. Branson Parler opened this session with prayer.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Branson Parler, reporting

As Branson presented his report, our vice-president, Judy Nelson, took the chair.

Over the course of the past year, I have had the privilege to become better acquainted with the work God is doing throughout the Synod of the Great Lakes and the work God is doing through the staff of the Synod of the Great Lakes.

My guess is that some of you were in the same position I was two years ago, not knowing much about the staff of the SGL and the work that they do. If you are, I want to commend them and the work that they do to you. Their commitment to developing leaders to start and strengthen churches comes through in a variety of ways, including:

- Congregational consulting
- Transition ministry services
- Ridder church renewal
- Church multiplication, including Luminex collaboratives and their ambitious goal of starting and organizing 25 new churches in the region and sending out 25 church planters in the region by the year 2025.
- Equipping leaders in an accessible way through the Luminex blog, Whiteboard Wednesdays, and other resources for pastors, elders, and other church leaders.

I can speak for the entire Executive Committee when I say that we are thankful for the focused and committed work of the staff of the Regional Synod. If you have not had the opportunity to take advantage of the resources the SGL offers, I would encourage you to do so.

Marriage and the RCA

One of the most pressing questions we have dealt with in the past year has been that of the RCA's stance on marriage and sexuality. With regard to questions of sexuality and marriage, the church cannot live on the fumes of the past nor can we nostalgically long for a bygone era.

So what should we do?

We must affirm the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. We, the church, are a creature of the Word. We do not stand over the word, but under its authority, for it tells us who we are by telling us *whose* we are. At the heart of the Reformation was the cry of *sola Scriptura*, the conviction that neither custom, nor the majority, nor mere passage of time, nor official statements stand on par with the Word of God. As the Belgic Confession puts it, Scripture is the infallible rule by which every teaching must be tested. So what should we do? We must take up anew the task of studying Scripture to be clear about what it says about marriage and sexuality and *why*. Every controversy is a gift insofar as it forces us back to the Word to ask, "What is God saying here? Why does God say this? How should we understand and live this out in our lives today?"

What should we do?

We have to explain ourselves! Why does God create us male and female? Why does God create bodies, sex, and marriage? What is sex for? What is marriage for?

Legalistic commands—"don't have sex outside of marriage!"—are not enough. Christians must be able to articulate clearly and winsomely why we view sex and marriage the way that we do.

Admittedly, this vision will not resonate with our culture, which is committed to a vision of sex and marriage that centers on self-realization and self-fulfillment. In contrast, we emphasize that the call to follow Jesus involves, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts, the painful dying-away of the old self and the coming-to-life of the new self. As we live out the pattern of death and resurrection in our lives daily, however, we trust that God will use our words and deeds to bear witness to the truth of Jesus in such a way that others will be drawn to him.

The Great Lakes Catechism you will find in your folders is one attempt to speak faithfully, clearly, and winsomely about what it means to follow Jesus when it comes to marriage and sexuality. This catechism is meant to be a teaching tool and a theological resource as we think through these questions together.

So what should we do? As pastors and elders, you *must* think and talk about these matters with your congregations, your consistories, the parents in your congregation, the youth in your congregation! We must remember that the Old and New Testaments were written in a context where Israel and the church were the minority, by far, in their beliefs and practices regarding sex and marriage. The Bible isn't a book that reveals what everybody just obviously knows about sex and marriage! No! It's a strange book, a book that reveals God's pattern and plan that runs deeply *against* the general practice of the culture, both when it was written and still today. We also need to remind ourselves that the sexual ethics of Scripture are for the people of God. In 1 Cor. 5-6, Paul reminds us that we ought to expect sexual immorality among those who have not embraced the gospel, and while also reminding us that the life of God's people, as God's temple, should be radically different. What should we do? If people aren't disciples of Jesus, your task is not to make them embrace a Christian sexual ethic! If people are disciples of Jesus, it's your job to teach them to obey all that God has commanded us as part of a life of gratitude!

What should we do?

In answering questions about the meaning of sex and marriage, we must also walk and talk with those Christians who are same-sex attracted, transgender, and intersex. I want to be clear: I hold to Scripture's teaching that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, and that sexual activity is meant for marriage alone. But I also hold to the clear biblical teaching that God is a God of grace, a God who, when he became flesh and dwelt among us, had much kinder words for sexual sinners than for upstanding religious folks. Too often, the church's posture toward people who are same-sex attracted, transgender, and intersex (and these terms are not identical!) has failed to match that of Jesus. The church has often singled out persons who are same-sex attracted for special condemnation and vilification. Sisters and brothers, this should not be! Too often, Christians have assumed that, if I cannot affirm someone's actions, then I cannot show them love and grace. Ironically, many today re-affirm this stance and repeat this mistake when they claim that the only way to love someone is to affirm their actions. We see in the Gospels that those who were labeled 'sinners' often had an overwhelming attraction to Jesus. Do they have this same attraction to us? What should we do? Are we willing to invest our time, our energy, our devotion to walking with our sisters and brothers who are same-sex attracted? Who are transgender? Who are intersex? Are we willing to recognize that our *primary* call is not first to our spouses, children, or biological families, but to the family of God?

What should we do?

The Executive Committee of the Synod of the Great Lakes spent a good deal of time this year listening and talking through how best to approach the current state of affairs in the RCA. The actual stance of the RCA on this issue is clear. The normative view of Scripture, which is the only rule of faith and practice in the RCA, is that marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. The only liturgies ever approved for use in the RCA, though not constitutional, affirm that marriage is between one man and one woman. The Heidelberg Catechism forbids and condemns all unchastity, a term inclusive of all sexual sin, including same-sex sexual activity, and states that those living in unrepentant sexual sin are refusing the kingdom of God. General Synod statements have always reiterated the historic position of the RCA, which is that marriage is between one man and one woman.

So what do we do in our current state, a state where some have willingly departed from this?

This afternoon we will have the opportunity to think together about some overtures to General Synod that propose possible ways forward, and I will speak briefly regarding those options at that time.

But let me be clear: if the RCA today had absolute unity on matters of marriage and sex, it would not affect one bit the need to affirm Scripture's authority and study Scripture carefully, to explain ourselves clearly to those inside and outside the church, and to listen carefully and walk faithfully and graciously with Christians who are intersex, transgender, and same-sex attracted. Regardless of what decisions are made here today, that call—to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey Jesus fully—remains the same. May God bless you as you remain faithful to that call.

The report of the President is automatically referred to the Executive Committee for their consideration. After the report above was finished, Branson resumed the chair.

ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT

The current vice-president, Judy Nelson, was presented as the sole candidate for the office of president. Delegates used the provided ballots to vote as required by the Rules of Order. Judy Nelson was elected as President of the Synod of the Great Lakes on the first ballot.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT

Branson Parler, reporting

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE PAST YEAR

The *Rules of Order* of the Synod of the Great Lakes (GLR) state that among other duties, the Executive Committee shall “administer the affairs of the Regional Synod between sessions of the assembly.” Since the 2016 Assembly meeting, the Executive Committee has met four times. A summary of each meeting is printed below. All meetings were held in the large conference room of the Synod of the Great Lakes.

At the June 27, 2016 meeting, the committee:

- Approved the GLR Assembly Minutes of May 2, 2016 for publication.
- Reviewed a summary of the evaluation forms completed by the delegates at the Assembly.
- Set the date for the 2017 Assembly on Monday, May 1, 2017.
- Reviewed our Guiding Principles: “Every congregation and classis within our regional synod will be thriving, missional, and reproducing.” Our Vision is: “Developing Leaders to Start and Strengthen Churches.” We reviewed a list of projects that Doug McClintic is working on and a Transition Ministry Update from Art Wiers. We discussed the role of coaching in leadership development in the RCA.
- Received an update from the Regional Executive Search Team and appointed a new member: Laurel Kempkers.
- Discussed a summary of the 2016 General Synod including the proposed amendments to the RCA Constitution.
- Met with Dan Gillett who was elected as the President of the General Synod.
- Engaged in a Bible study led by Branson on the topic of “The Family of God” including Mark 10:28-31, 1 Corinthians 7:29-35, Ephesians 5:21-33, and Matthew 19:9-10.
- Invited classis leaders to a dialogue on August 10 on the implications of the actions of the General Synod regarding same-sex marriage.
- Prayed for wisdom regarding the possibilities that are open to us in fulfilling the calling we have in Christ..

At the November 7, 2016 meeting, the committee:

- Reviewed progress in completing the list of Core Leadership Team Goals for 2016 present by Rick Veenstra.
- Approved housing allowance amounts for members of the regional synod staff.
- Received a report from the Regional Executive Search Team.
- Discussed a report from the August 10 Dialogue with classis leaders from our region and printed copies of the PowerPoint presentations that were made at the meeting. The group discussed suggestions in the report and how the regional synod can take a leadership role in addressing the questions around human sexuality (possibly by creating a confessional statement) and/or forming organizational structures that would provide time for more deliberative conversation around this issue without undergoing judicial procedures.
- Met with Lee DeYoung, the newly-elected vice-president of the General Synod, and received his request for a replacement on the GS Commission on Nominations.
- Reviewed the revised 2016/2017 Ministry Fund budget presented by Bill VerHulst.
- Approved the transition plan presented by Howard Moths regarding the nomination and election of members of the GLR Executive Committee, and discussed ways to nominate the two at-large members for approval by the Assembly to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives.
- Reviewed the Guiding Principles adopted by the SGL Executive Committee as part of our commitment to using the Accountable Leadership Model.
- Authorized a sub-committee to work on some next steps in the conversation regarding same-sex marriage.
- Discussed plans for the 2016 Regional Synod Assembly will be held on May 1, 2017 at Remembrance Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

At the January 3, 2017 meeting, the committee:

- Considered the report of the Regional Executive Search Team that has been meeting for approximately one year. The team looked at 25 candidates for the position of Regional Executive and interviewed six of them on the phone. Three of the six candidates were selected for a get-acquainted breakfast and in-person interviews. After checking references and engaging in prayer and discernment, the search team unanimously recommended the Rev. John Messer for the position of Regional Executive for the Synod of the Great Lakes.
- Held a conversation with Rev. John Messer around the topic of leadership. John and Lynette (his wife) both commented on their sense of God's call and openness to move into a new ministry position. John asked if he could continue working on his doctorate in leadership, and about the timing of the transition to this new position.
- Voted to offer the position of Regional Executive for the Synod of the Great Lakes to the Rev. John Messer with a starting salary of \$85,500 plus the benefits that are outlined in the Ministerial Compensation Guidelines with the following addition: 2/52 of salary and two weeks for professional development with the understanding that Rev. Messer will be encouraged to work on his doctorate. In addition, the synod will cover the cost of moving Rev. Messer from northwest Iowa to west Michigan.
- Expressed appreciation for the work of the Regional Executive Search Team.

At the March 13, 2017 meeting, the committee:

- Reviewed a report presented by Rick Veenstra on the work of the Core Leadership Team of the Great Lakes Region.
- Received a report from Doug McClintic called, *Vision 2025*, that casts a vision for starting 25 new churches. The document listed churches started, churches organized, and missionary planters sent within each classis of our region. The reverse side of the page listed a plan for Mobilizing for Multiplication – Three Levels of Mobilization for Existing Churches: Serving Churches, Supporting Churches, and Sending Churches. The goals listed in the three categories: Serving Churches (55), Supporting Churches (25), and Sending Churches (20) by 2025 will be added to the annual goals of the regional synod.
- Received the report that John Messer will be starting to work for the regional synod on April 17, and May 1 will be his official start date as the new Regional Executive. Rick will continue to work as needed for a number of weeks after that, perhaps one day a week, as needed for the transition.
- Reviewed the report submitted by Rick Veenstra on the GLR Goals of the Core Leadership Team for 2016 with results in response to the outcome goals and process goals listed in the report.
- Evaluated the success of the Accountable Leadership Model (Carver Governance) and the work of the GLR Executive Committee. The rhythm of three Executive Committee meetings a year seems to work well (with separate meetings of the officers preceding regular meetings).
- Reviewed the recommendations from the Finance Committee for presentation to the 2017 Assembly, including the region synod budget for 2017/2018 and the 2018 Assessment of \$19.50 per confessing member, and the 2018 Ministerial Salary and Benefit Guidelines and the 2018 Church Staff Salary and Benefit Guidelines.
- Voted to nominate two women to the SGL Executive Committee as at-large members for approval by the Assembly to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives. (See the Nominations Report.)
- Voted to appoint Tom Paarlberg to the GS Commission on Nominations. The *Book of Church Order (BCO)* mandates regional synod representation on the General Synod Council (BCO 3.1.3.1b), the Commission on Judicial Business (BCO 3.1.5.6a), and the Commission on Nominations (BCO 3.1.5.8a) by appointment.
- Received a report on nominations from the classes within our region for members of the GLR Executive Committee.
- Decided to nominate three persons to the GLR Executive Committee for the office of Vice President. These three are non-ministers as required by our *Rules of Order*. (See the Nominations Report.)
- Appointed delegates to the 2017 General Synod that will be held at Hope College in Holland, Michigan on June 8–13, 2017. Judy Nelson will serve as our regular delegate. Laurel Kempkers and Jennifer Jackson Nkansah will serve as our women delegates. Justin Keating was appointed as our youth corresponding delegate.
- Considered a paper with options for the RCA to find a constitutional way forward that listed four ways to delegate authority on issues of human sexuality.

- Voted to recommend an overture to the May 1, 2017 SGL Assembly which asks the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council “to implement a grace-filled and orderly re-alignment.” (See the overture on the next page.)
- Voted to send a Catechism on Marriage and Human Sexuality written by Branson Parler to the General Synod Commission on Theology in reply to their request for a response to the COT statement on Human Sexuality presented to the 2013 General Synod. (The Catechism is presented for information only in this workbook.)
- Reviewed the agenda for the Regional Synod Assembly will be held on May 1, 2017 at Remembrance Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.
- Decided to set the date for our next meeting on Monday, June 26, 2017.

At the April 24, 2017 meeting, the committee:

- Approved amendments to the Overture On A Grace-Filled And Orderly Re-Alignment that was approved at the March 13 meeting of the committee.
- Approved an Overture On Declarative Authority to the General Synod to be recommended to the to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting.
- Approved an Overture On An Act Of Declarative Authority Regarding Marriage to the General Synod to be recommended to the to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting.
- Approved an Overture On The Heidelberg Catechism And Marriage to the General Synod to be recommended to the to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting.
- Approved a recommendation on time limits for debate for the May 1 Assembly meeting.
- Voted to adopt the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Human Sexuality as a statement to which all regional staff must adhere, and to recommend it as a teaching tool and theological resource for all the churches in our region. The Catechism was included in the Assembly Workbook.

A motion was made from the floor and supported to suspend the Rules of Order to allow the Assembly to review the decision of the Executive Committee to establish the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Human Sexuality as a statement to which all regional staff must adhere. By unanimous consent, that motion was postponed for consideration this afternoon during the time that the overtures are considered.

NOMINATIONS AND ELECTION

The 2015 Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes voted: “To instruct the Overtures and Judicial Business Committee to propose changes in the Rules of Order of the Synod of the Great Lakes so that each of its classes nominates one representative to the Synod’s Executive Committee to be approved by the Assembly.” The OJBC recommended amendments to the SGL *Rules of Order* that were approved by the 2016 SGL Assembly.

Following the SGL Bylaws, the proposed amendments must be submitted to the 2016 Assembly and approved by a majority vote, reviewed again by the OJBC committee, and then approved by the 2017 Assembly by two-thirds vote. If we waited until final approval before implementation, these amendments would not affect the nomination process until 2018. In order for these amendments to take effect a year earlier, the 2016 Assembly voted: “That the Rules of Order regarding nomination be suspended in part to allow for these rules to be used for nominations coming to the 2017 Assembly. (ADOPTED by two-thirds of the delegates present)

The changes to the nomination of members to serve on the Great Lakes Region (GLR) Executive Committee include the following main points:

- Nine regular members of the Executive Committee will be elected in staggered three-year terms. A balance shall be maintained between ministers of Word and sacrament and non-ministers on the committee.
- One member will be nominated by each classis for approval at the assembly meeting as needed. The classis shall certify that they have considered a wide range of candidates, in response to the request of the regional synod for diversity.
- In addition, the SGL Executive Committee will nominate two at-large members for approval by the Assembly to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives, and such other skills as may be needed on the Executive Committee.

Following this plan the following nominations are being made to this Assembly:

The Great Lakes City Classis nominated Rev. Dan Sewell to serve a three-year term, beginning on June 1, 2017. Dan Sewell grew up at the Parkview Reformed Church in Fairview Park, Ohio and went to Cran-Hill ranch in 1969 where he met both Christ and his future spouse, Karen (Toppen). They were married in 1975 and went to work with Young Life in several Northeastern cities before their growing family caused them to return to Fairview in 1984 to pursue a career in insurance, maintaining a volunteer ministry with YL and the Parkview Church. When Parkview became vacant in 1989, Dan and the church entered into a one year contract as pastor there, which soon grew in scope. In 1992, the Parkview and Riverside Reformed Churches "married " to form the New Hope Church, where Dan serves to this day. In 2011, New Hope purchased a large furniture store in Fairview Park that they have transformed into an expansive ministry headquarters that is increasingly utilized for Christ-centered ministry serving the local community and beyond. Dan has a MAT from Fuller Seminary, enjoys too-rare outings of fishing and golf, and enjoys frequent opportunities to use his musical gifts as part of the worship team at New Hope. He and Karen have four daughters , Katie (& Justin), Jessica (& Jim), Lauren, and Michelle, as well as four granddaughters, Lorelei, Holly. Lucy, and Eliana.

R-4

To Elect Dan Sewell to serve a three-year term on the GLR Executive Committee beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

The Holland Classis nominated the Elder Glenda McKinley to serve a two-year term, beginning on June 1, 2017. Glenda is a member of the Central Park Reformed Church in Holland and has served as vice-president of the consistory. She has also served as President of the Classis of Holland. Glenda owns and operates "Glenda's Lakewood Floral," a local business in the Holland area. She has also served on staff at Western Seminary. Her family has a deep and wide history with the Reformed Church in America. Her father, brother and uncles have served as ministers in the Reformed Church. Her husband, Richard, has served as a consultant to the denomination. Richard and Glenda are the parents of two children and grandparents.

R-5

To elect Glenda McKinley to serve a two-year term on the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

The Muskegon Classis nominated Rev. Greg Stamm to serve a second three-year term, beginning on June 1, 2017. Greg has been the lead pastor at Coopersville Reformed Church since the fall of 2011. He graduated from Western Theological Seminary (M.Div.) in 1999. He has been married to his best friend, Jodie, since 1993 and has three daughters, Kailie (21), Madi (19), and Emma (18). Greg pastored two new church plants before accepting the call to lead Coopersville Reformed Church, a 160+ year old church. Before becoming a pastor, he had a job "in the real world" working in municipal government. For fun he loves hunting pheasants with his 2 German Short-haired retrievers, Socks and Scout, backpacking anywhere in God's creation, and hanging out at the Lake Michigan beach with the family. He loves good coffee and is always available to have a rich conversation over a steaming cup of joe.

R-6

To elect Greg Stamm to serve a three-year term on the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

The Northern Michigan Classis was asked to nominate a person to serve the remaining one-year term of Laurel Kempfers. Laurel resigned from her role as the representative of the N Michigan Classis since she is no longer a member of the Classis having joined Overisel Reformed Church. The classis nominated Mik Sutton. Mik grew up near Ludington, Michigan, attended Mason County Central Schools, West Shore Community College, Western Michigan University (BS, MA in special education), Grand Valley State University (MA educational leadership). He worked in the field of special education for 32 years, and retired to enter the RCA Commissioned Pastor program. He has served as Pastor of Intercession and Care at Mason County Reformed, Senior Pastor at Grant Reformed, and Senior Pastor at Sugar Ridge Church of the Brethren. Mik served on the Northern Michigan Classis Board, the Regional Synod Executive Committee, the Words of Hope Board of Direction, and has been a delegate to two General Synods. Mik's current ministry is that of a Prayer Outreach Ministry, interceding on behalf of up to 3,500 people each week. Mik is married to Polly, they have five children, four grandchildren, three great grandchildren, and are members of Mason County Reformed Church.

R-7

To elect Mik Sutton to serve the remaining one-year term on the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

The North Grand Rapids Classis nominated Rev. Billy Norden to serve a two-year term, beginning on June 1, 2017. Billy Norden was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and moved to Dublin, Ohio when he was two after the Reformed Church in America asked his father to plant a church in the Columbus area. New Hope Reformed Church flourished, and was his home church until he left for college in 2000. Billy attended Hope College from 2000-2004. He earned a BA degree with a major in Communications, and minors in Philosophy and Political Science. He did a semester in New York City, working at a Comedy Improv Theater, and lived in an apartment next to Madison Square Garden. While working at Cran Hill Ranch in 2003, he gave in to an increasingly pestering and persistent call to go to seminary. Billy attended Western Seminary from 2004-2007. He also met his wife Mara and was married during that period. Upon graduating, Mara's contract as a pastor of Church of the Servant was up, and they took calls to positions in New Jersey. Billy served as Associate Minister at the Wyckoff Reformed Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey from 2007-2012, and Mara became a board certified chaplain and eventually served a retirement community as their chaplain. In 2012 they were urged to apply as Co-Pastors to The Community: An RCA Ministry in Ada, Michigan. They agreed that if they didn't kill each other, they'd make a great team. They accepted the call and have been there since. Billy also has two sons, Bear (6) and Arie (4) and new puppy, Molly. His hobbies and distractions are too many to list.

R-8

To elect Rev. Billy Norden to serve a two-year term on the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

Following the new Rules of Order, the GLR Executive Committee nominated Laurel Kempkers to serve a two-year term as an at-large member of the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017, to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives, and such other skills as may be needed on the Executive Committee. Laurel (Van Haitsma) Kempkers is a member of Overisel Reformed Church in Holland, where she had been a part of the prayer team for the pastoral search process and also is a member of the Celebration Choir of the church. Laurel married Gordon Kempkers 1-1/2 years ago and moved to Hamilton, MI from Ludington. She had been a member of Mason County Reformed Church (MCRC) of Scottville, MI for 27-1/2 years, serving by the side of her late husband, the Rev. Rick Van Haitsma for 26 of those years. They also served at Beechwood Reformed Church in Holland, MI for 12-1/2 years. Laurel is a 1972 graduate of Hope College. She has two married sons, Bryan (& Erika) and Jared (& Lori), and 9 grandchildren with #10 expected in August. She retired from teaching in 2009 from Covenant Christian School, Ludington, MI. Laurel's favorite pastimes are reading and walking, and going "on safari" with Gord as they two-track through the woods looking for deer, turkeys, and other wild life.

R-9

To elect Laurel Kempkers to serve a two-year term as an at-large member of the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

Following the new Rules of Order, the **GLR Executive Committee** nominates **Jennifer Jackson Nkansah** at-large member to serve a three-year term, beginning on June 1, 2017, to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives, and such other skills as may be needed on the Executive Committee. Jennifer lives a fast-paced life full of blessings for which she is thankful. Along with teaching as a tenured Communication Professor, she is pursuing a degree in Couples, Family and Relationship Counseling. She also is a Co-Founder of Jackson/Lohr Consulting, the wife of a seminary student and the mother of a daughter and a son. Jennifer has a passion for global missions and has served as a missionary to many countries. She enjoys writing and has 26 journal books full of memories. Jennifer most enjoys singing, laughing, playing with her family, kissing on her babies and connecting with friends.

R-10

To elect Jennifer Jackson Nkansah to serve a three-year term as an at-large member of the GLR Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2017. (ADOPTED)

Nominees for the Office of Vice-President of the Regional Synod

Andy LaBo was born in Jackson, Michigan and was raised in Taylor, Michigan where to this day he resides with his wife. He has been a member of Grace Church in Allen Park since 1996. He served the community of faith there at Grace in many different roles: as a Deacon, Sunday School Superintendent, Elder, Youth Group leader, search committee chairperson, and as one of the teachers for a Discipleship class. He is now taking classes to become a Commissioned Pastor within the Great Lakes City Classis. He works currently at Cadon Plating in Wyandotte, Michigan where he has worked for 29 years. In that time he has served in many different roles – Shipping Manger, Scheduling Manager, and currently the Quotations/Purchasing Manager (sometimes on the road as Salesman). He will be married to his wife, Laura, for 30 years this May. They have three adult children. Their oldest daughter is married and has blessed them with their first grandchild. His son will be married this May and his youngest daughter will follow sometime later this year. He is looking forward to what God has in store in the future and is grateful for the opportunity to serve.

Gary Morris was born and raised in Eastern Michigan, attended Michigan State University (Economics '67) and began a 32 year career with the Internal Revenue Service. In his travels around the country Gary has been active in churches of several denominations. He has been a teacher, Sunday School Department Director, dramatist, choir member and director. He and his wife, Vikki, retired to Holland in 2012. They are members of First Reformed of Holland, where they serve in the choir and as teachers. Gary is currently an Elder and chairs the Outreach Team at First Church. Gary's IRS career had several chapters; the last 10 years were spent in Washington DC as Chief of the IRS Artificial Intelligence Lab. After retirement, Gary returned to the University of Pennsylvania to complete a PhD in Artificial Intelligence. His dissertation topic was a Machine Learning program built for Wycliffe Bible Translators. His software is now being used by Wycliffe field workers, primarily in Africa.

Bob VanderZwaag was born and raised in the Holland/Zeeland, MI area, and has been a part of Community Reformed Church of Zeeland since 1978, serving as a youth leader, Sunday School/Catechism teacher, deacon, elder, search committee chairperson, Kids Hope USA Program Director, and a number of other committees. Currently he serves as a Board member of Zeeland Classis, and as President of the Michigan County Social Services Association, a state-wide organization representing Department of Health and Human Services county board members from across the state. Bob recently retired after 41 years in the field of education, serving in the Zeeland Public Schools, at Cornerstone University, and most recently as the Administrator of Borculo Christian School in Zeeland, MI. Bob graduated from Grand Valley State Colleges (University) in 1973, and received a MA degree from Michigan State University in 1981. Bob has been married to his wife Sandy for 39 years, has three adult children, and is further blessed by 6 grandchildren - all of whom live within 25 miles of the VanderZwaag homestead.

Delegates to the 2017 General Synod

The 2017 General Synod will be held at Hope College in Holland, Michigan on June 8–13, 2017. Each regional synod is entitled to one regular voting delegate (BCO 1.IV.1), two women corresponding delegates (BCO 3.I.9.11a), and one young adult corresponding delegate (BCO 3.I.9.11b).

We usually ask our president or vice-president to serve as our regular delegate. Branson Parler was not able to attend so Judy Nelson agreed to serve as our regular delegate. We usually ask the women serving on the SGL Executive Committee if they are willing to serve as corresponding delegates. Laurel Kempkers agreed to serve as one of the delegates, and Jennifer Jackson Nkansah (nominated above to serve a three-year term as an at-large member) agreed to serve as the other one of the women delegates. We appointed Justin Keating, a member of Calvary, Cleveland and a freshman at Univ. of Toledo, as our youth corresponding delegate to the 2017 General Synod.

REGIONAL EXECUTIVE REPORT

Rick Veenstra, reporting

Rick Veenstra presented an oral report on the work of the regional synod along with the written reports below.

I am a life-long CUBS fan, having been born and raised in Chicago. My grandmother, who lived with us, cheered for the CUBS with me after school because they always played day games when I was a child. I was able to have the thrill of a life-time by going to Wrigley Field for Game 3 of the 2016 World Series, which

the CUBS lost 1 to 0. When the CUBS were down three games to one, I felt that they would not be able to win the series in Cleveland. I was wrong, the longest drought in the history of American sports is now over and the CUBS are World Series champions for the first time since 1908. I can't stop smiling!

During the Super Bowl on February 2nd, when the Patriots were down to the Falcons with four minutes left in the third quarter by a score of 28 to 3, I felt that a historic comeback of this magnitude in the Super Bowl by a 39 year old quarterback and his team was not possible. In NFL post-season history, teams leading by 19+ points after three quarters were 93 and 0. I was wrong. I can't stop smiling about the wonder of athletic competition!

When the search process began for my replacement as Regional Executive, I was certain that the person would be from the GLR and someone with whom I had worked and grown to respect over the years. When John Messer, a lead pastor from Iowa, was selected by the Search Team, I did not know John at all, never having met or spoken to him. I was wrong. Now that I have spoken to John on the phone many times and finally met him face to face, I can't stop smiling! John is a capable strategic leader who is deeply supportive of the mission/vision/values of the GLR. He surely is more than capable of leading the GLR into the next chapter, even though the times are uncertain, complicated and challenging for the RCA and beyond.

In all that I have shared with you today, I have concluded that God is sovereign and I am NOT! Big surprise!

After nearly thirteen years serving in a regional role, my biggest learning is this: I was right when I said from the beginning that our congregations have only two options before them – slow death or deep transformative systemic change. However, I was also wrong in that the change is DEEPER, HARDER and LONGER than I thought!

Another big learning is this: MULTIPLICATION at all levels is a primary component of this deep change for any Christian organism!

A twin learning to the above item, is the fact that our best weapon (in the context of spiritual warfare) at the regional level to strengthen a congregation is competent and caring leadership during congregational transitions.

Thanks to the work of Patrick Lencioni and my current coach, Rodger Price, I have also learned another important lesson about organizational leadership: After developing a cohesive leadership team, nothing is more important than establishing, over-communicating and reinforcing the CLARITY of the mission/vision/values of the organization. Once God made it clear to our team that God wanted us to develop leaders to start and strengthen churches, we have kept those Seven Words before us as our “marching orders”. This CLARITY has helped us to be more effective in our on-going spiritual warfare, since you may have noticed that the evil one does not favor actually “developing leaders to start and strengthen churches”.

One more thing: I have concluded that Christian leadership is a TEAM sport. As we work together for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must grow in our ability to TRUST each other, DISAGREE openly with one another, COMMIT to the goals that God reveals to our team, hold each other ACCOUNTABLE and pay “ruthless” attention to RESULTS. Again, I am indebted to Lencioni for this insight. For example, we felt led by God to work toward doubling the number of newly organized churches from one to two per year in the GLR. We have doggedly pursued that goal and have experienced some success for the sake of the gospel.

After 45 years of serving in the RCA as a leader in various capacities, I am grateful that God allowed the concluding years to include:

The Best Teams!

The Best Colleagues!

The Best Governing Boards!

Friends in Christ for life!

According to the most recent RCA statistics, 48% of our congregations are growing by worship attendance or confessing members or both. The ship, that is the RCA, including the GLR, is turning toward growth for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of a frontal spiritual attack! I look forward to participating in different ways in the future, as that percentage grows and the missional impact of the RCA deepens at every level.

For a person who likes to be right, I have been wrong a lot lately. However, God is sovereignly moving among us to transform the world by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am grateful to have been part of that great endeavor! I am grateful that other followers of Jesus will continue to move toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the decades to come!

Now I would like to speak “off the record” and share a few memories while we are meeting here at Remembrance Church. Please turn off the recording devices. I call for an NSA blackout for the next few minutes. Please shut down the drones overhead. Fair enough?

I remember a personal conversation with another Regional Executive in the RCA in which I explained that regarding the LGBTQ community, I hold to a welcoming and non-affirming position, similar to the position of the RCA to this very moment. The other executive said to me, “Rick, if you are not affirming, you CANNOT be welcoming.” Our RCA Council of Synod Executives (COSE) is a divided house. The RCA is divided. Am I wrong, yet again? I don’t think so!

I am not a gifted evangelist, but I remember leading Jimmy Berens (10) to Christ after evening devotions outside a cabin at Camp Manitoqua in Frankfort, IL and then Otho Lunsford (82) confessed Christ in his mobile home near Gary, IN. Was I wrong to take the necessity of salvation seriously during the 45 years that I have served as a pastor/minister/leader in the RCA? Was I wrong to believe that Acts 4:12 is true, that there is salvation in no other name, except the name of Jesus? I don’t think so. Yet some folks in the RCA do not believe this to be true. We are a divided house!

I remember my dad, a gifted tenor soloist, singing from the great oratorios, such as The Messiah, Elijah and The Seven Last Words. He also sang gospel songs, one with more emotion than others: “He (Jesus) could have called ten thousand angels, but he bled and died for you and me....” My dad, the soloist, and I, the son, believe that John 14:6 is true, that no one comes to the Father, but by Jesus Christ, the Son. Am I wrong? I don’t think so. Some folks in the RCA do not believe this to be true! We are a divided house!

I remember, that before Lincoln said it, Jesus said, “...a house divided against itself cannot stand....” (Matthew 12:25). The RCA is a divided house and cannot stand. Am I wrong? I don’t think so.

We need today to face the facts, no matter how brutal they are, and move toward grace-filled and orderly realignment, trusting God to guide us along the way, as we strive to be a community of grace and truth, as followers of Jesus, who was full of grace and truth. (John 1:14) In addition to our overture to the General Synod, I encourage you to consider the development of the Gospel Alliance (thegospelalliance.com) as part of that process of realignment, as you are led by the Holy Spirit.

It may be that realignment will not be sufficient and separation will eventually be required for the divided house of the RCA. Since I served faithfully on the Way Forward Task Force (a group of eight, one from each regional synod) in 2012, I have felt that grace-filled and orderly separation was the appropriate course for the RCA, given the foundational nature of our division. This remains my position, as I conclude my service to the Great Lakes Region as Regional Executive. If God leads us in a different direction than separation, I plan to yield gladly to the leading of the sovereign God in Christ, whom I serve.

Great Lakes Region Statistics

	<u>2003 - 2013</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>
Adult Baptisms.....	3,680	403	512	381
Confessions of Faith.....	18,582	1,322	1,154	1,155
Infant Baptisms.....	10,044	767	765	715
Newly Organized Churches.....	18	3	1	1

*2016 is 99.3% of organized churches and plants responding.

ELECTION OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT

Andy LaBo, Gary Morris, and Bob VanderZwaag were nominated by the Executive Committee as candidates for the office of vice-president. Nominations for the regional synod vice-president were opened from the floor. No additional nominations were made by the delegates. Following the first ballot vote, the names of Gary

Morris and Bob VanderZwaag were presented for the second ballot. Bob VanderZwaag was elected to the office of Vice-President on the second ballot.

STARTING AND STRENGTHENING CHURCHES BY DEVELOPING LEADERS

Art Wiers, Doug McClintic, Mike Gafa, reporting

Art Wiers reported that Transition Ministry continues to be a growing area for our region and is an important part of our strategy for strengthening churches. The team approach is increasingly effective and allows for flexibility in our approach to helping churches maximize their opportunity for increased health and growth during a time of leadership transition. Art continues to work at recruiting new members for the transition team that bring the experience and skill set to be truly effective in this area of ministry. Along with other important services offered by our synod team for strengthening churches Art shared that in this next year he will be giving increased attention and effort to helping churches develop a Kingdom focused prayer. Art Wiers invited Dan Ackerman to speak on his experience within Zeeland Classis regarding transitions in pastoral leadership and the use of specialized transition ministers provided by the regional synod.

Doug McClintic began his report by commenting on our significant progress toward our church starting goal: "By 2025 Parent Churches and Classes in partnership with Luminex (the missional arm of the Great Lakes Region of the Reformed Church in America) will have started and organized at least 25 new churches and will also have sent out at least 25 missionary church planters to under resourced and unreached people groups within the Region and around the world." Since the inception of our goal on July 1, 2015 we have organized 4 new churches, started 6 new congregations and sent 4 missionary church planters. One great joy has been taking a number of our church planters through the Multiply Training in three cohorts that have included 9 RCA planters as well as planters from other denominations and networks. This training focuses on 12 key competencies and has been delivered alongside Randy Weener and the North American team. Doug requested prayer for those launching new churches.

Mike Gafa began his address by referencing the Control Continuum, a tool he originally encountered through Stephen Covey. The Control Continuum illustrates what we can control, and what we can't. Mike then talked about a key lesson he has learned in his 1-1/2 years working in the GLR, which is that while our polity gives regional synods very little direct control, our mission to "Develop leaders to start and strengthen churches" is absolutely vital. Hence, our approach to leadership in the GLR is not rooted in hierarchy, or in power or control, but in influence. Mike then referenced some of what the GLR does to lead by influence, including his work in the region. Mike closed by pointing to the one-page summary of his profile and service offered, which is included in the workbook.

TABLE DISCUSSION: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN OUR CHURCHES

We reserved 25 minutes on our agenda for a discussion of Leadership Development in our Churches. Mike Gafa introduced this discussion. The following questions were provided for the Table Discussion:

1. What are you learning about leadership at this time, and how is what you are learning strengthening your church (or ministry)?
2. What is the single most significant leadership challenge facing the North American church at this time, and how is that challenge being met (or not being met)?
3. What recommendations do you have for Luminex training topics? (I.E. recommendations for Blog posts, Whiteboard Wednesday Videos, Podcasts, or Training events)? If you have not read any of the articles or seen any of the Luminex training videos, please visit <http://luminexusa.org>.

BREAK

WORSHIP CELEBRATION

The Assembly entered a time of worship in Recognition For Rick Veenstra's Service as our Regional Executive. Branson Parler opened with prayer. The worship team from Remembrance Church led in the singing of *Morning Has Broken*, *In Christ Alone*, and *Cornerstone*. Scott Lokers read from Philippians 1:1-11 and expressed thanks to Rick and Kathy Veenstra for close to 13 years of service to the regional synod. He spoke about the significance of the partnership that we share in the gospel and the importance of holding the people we serve in our hearts. The worship team led the singing of *Lay Me Down*. Judy Nelson expressed thanks to Rick and Kathy Veenstra and presented them with a gift from the regional synod. A video presentation of photos from Rick's life was shown, including the mention of all the churches he has served.

Art Wiers led a closing prayer after inviting all those who have served with Rick on ministry teams and those who received mentoring from Rick to gather around him and lay on hands.

LUNCH AND FELLOWSHIP TIME

We scheduled a one-hour and fifteen minute break for lunch at this time. The president called the afternoon meeting to order ten minutes earlier to conserve time.

OVERTURES AND JUDICIAL BUSINESS COMMITTEE REPORT

Irv Boersen, Reporting

The Overtures and Judicial Business Committee (OJBC) is one of the Administrative Committees of the Synod of the Great Lakes (SGL) whose members are directly appointed by the classes within the region. This committee has seven members, one from each classis. The OJBC reviews all matters of a judicial nature and reports to the SGL Assembly with recommendations, forwards overtures received from the classes to the SGL Assembly with recommendations, and prepares amendments to the SGL *Rules of Order* and recommends them to the SGL Assembly for adoption. Members may serve a maximum of two consecutive four-year terms. The stated clerk serves ex-officio, without vote. Currently Russell Camp serves as chair and Irv Boersen serves as vice-chair. The OJBC met on October 14, 2016 and February 3, 2017 and has been in communication by e-mail regarding matters under consideration by this committee.

AMENDMENTS TO THE SGL RULES OF ORDER

On May 2, 2016, the OJBC recommended the amendments below to the 2016 SGL Assembly. (*Additions are underlined; deletions are stricken.*) The Assembly voted to approve the amendments to the SGL Rules of Order in principle, and voted to suspend the Rules of Order regarding nomination in part to allow for these changes to be used for nominations to the 2017 Assembly. This motion required the approval of two-thirds of the delegates present in 2016, and requires the approval of the final draft of the proposed amendments by two-thirds of the delegates present at the 2017 Assembly meeting. Note: Sections 1-3 under Article V describe the process of electing a president and vice-president. Those sections remain unchanged. Section 4 (below) describes what happens when an officer vacates office. Section 5 (below) describes the election of the regular members of the committee.

ARTICLE V. ELECTIONS

Sec. 4. Should the president vacate the office, the vice-president shall be named president, and a new vice-president shall be appointed. ~~following the rule in the next sentence. Should the vice-president vacate the office, When needed,~~ the Executive Committee shall appoint a vice-president from the current delegates to the assembly, giving full consideration to those who had the highest number of nominating votes at the prior session. Should ~~the a~~ a past president ~~or any of the at-large members~~ resign or otherwise vacate ~~their his/her~~ his/her position, ~~the position shall remain vacant. Executive Committee shall appoint a new person to fill the office from the confessing members of the churches in the Regional Synod. All appointments of at-large members shall be subject to approval of the Regional Synod at its next regular session.~~

Sec. 5. ~~Six~~ Nine ~~at-large regular~~ at-large regular members of the Executive Committee will be elected in staggered three-year terms as needed at the regular session of the Assembly, ~~for three-year terms~~ and will be eligible for nomination and re-election one time. A balance shall be maintained between ministers of Word and sacrament and non-ministers on the committee. Terms for ~~the at-large all~~ all members begin on June 1 and end on May 31. ~~At-large Regular~~ Regular members will be chosen for their gifts, from the confessing members of the churches in the Regional Synod ~~at-large~~ and need not come from the body of delegates at the assembly. One at-large member will be nominated by each classis for approval at the assembly meeting. The classis shall certify that they have considered a wide range of candidates, in response to the request of the regional synod for diversity. In addition, the SGL Executive Committee will nominate two at-large members for approval by the Assembly to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives, and such other skills as may be needed on the Executive Committee. the Executive Committee with the goal of including at least one member from each of the eight classes on the Executive Committee. ~~If the election of the assembly results in any classis not having a member on the Executive Committee, the Executive Committee shall appoint another at-large member from that classis. All such appointments shall be subject to approval of the Regional Synod at its next regular session. The person so appointed shall serve only as long as it is necessary to ensure that each classis has a member included on the Executive~~

Committee. Should any of the members resign or otherwise vacate their position, the classis (or the SGL Executive Committee in the case of an at-large member) shall nominate a new person to serve the remainder of the unexpired term for election at the next Assembly meeting. Members who have served a partial term of one year shall be eligible for an additional full three-year term.

ARTICLE VI. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Sec. 1. The Executive Committee shall consist of the president, the vice-president, the Regional Executive, the two most recent past presidents, the chairperson of the Finance Committee, and six nine members. A majority of the members of the Executive Committee shall constitute a quorum at any meeting.

Reasons for Amendments

In recommending the proposed amendments above, the OJBC considered a number of factors:

- Size. The Executive Committee currently consists of the president, the vice-president, the Regional Executive, the two most recent past presidents, the chairperson of the Finance Committee, and six at-large members, for a total of 12 members if no additional members are appointed to ensure that each classis has a member included on the Executive Committee. With direct nomination of one person by each of the seven classes and two additional members nominated by the Executive Committee, the minimum size would increase to 15 members. We currently have 14 members on the committee because of overlapping terms, so that the increase to 15 members does not seem to be excessive.
- Diversity. We recognize the value of diversity in the leadership of the regional synod: ministers/elders, men/women, racial/ethnic, and age participation. We decided that it was important to maintain the balance between ministers and elders by making that a requirement. We struggled with the question of whether or not to include a standard for men/women, racial/ethnic, and age participation. We recognize the downside of setting quotas for the participation of members. Quotas may feel degrading to women, ethnic minorities, and youth who would rather be chosen for their skills and ability to contribute as a member. We agreed that there should be an education component in implementing the new rules on nomination, describing the value of diversity (gender, ethnic, age, skills) and modeling a process for seeking Spirit-led nominations that are more inclusive than what we are currently experiencing. Rather than trying to guarantee a certain level of gender or ethnic diversity, we plan to ask the nominating body to certify that they have considered an appropriate mix of candidates before making their nomination. Utilizing a form provides a better chance for diversity, because the classis will be asked to certify that they did consider a wide range of candidates in considering the request for diversity. In an effort to ensure more diversity, we are recommending that the Executive Committee nominate two at-large members (from any classis in the region). The suggested amendment does not single out "racial/ethnic" participation, but opens that opportunity now and provides some flexibility for the future when the Executive Committee may discover that another group is underrepresented.
- Terms of Office. Currently the terms of office are not evenly staggered. We are proposing nine members – that means three terms should be ending each year. Our rules of order do not currently require staggered terms. We decided to include a requirement by adding the words "in *staggered* three-year terms as needed."

Recommendation

The changes above have been implemented this year in the nomination process for members of the GLR Executive Committee and the process has gone well in this first year of operation with the cooperation of the classes. Following Article X in the SGL Rules of Order, the proposed amendments above that were approved by a majority vote in 2016 must be approved by the 2017 Assembly by two-thirds vote in order to be included in the Rules of Order of the regional synod.

R-11

To approve the proposed amendments above for inclusion in the Rules of Order of the Synod of the Great Lakes. (APPROVED)

JUDICIAL BUSINESS

Phil and Diane Forner (Forners), filed an appeal dated September 19, 2016, from the decision of the Zeeland Classis Overture and Judicial Business Committee as affirmed by the Board of Zeeland Classis titled "2016_0616_ZCOJB Ruling_June_2016.pdf" (ZC Ruling); which stated in part:

- "It has not been proven to Zeeland Classis Overtures and Judicial Business Committee ("ZCOJB") that the SVC Board of Elders has violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or other laws and regulations of the church."
- "Finally, because there is no proof that either implicit or actual membership of SVC was ever given during the process of the unification of the two churches, the Forners do not meet the criteria necessary, as dictated in the BCO Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 4a, to lodge a complaint against the SVC Board of Elders."

The ZCOJB Ruling is in response to 2015 General Synod decision in the Appeal By Zeeland Classis And Spring Valley Church, that adopted the recommendation of the Commission on Judicial Business (CJB): "To remand the case to the Zeeland Classis for hearing on the merits of the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner regarding their membership in Spring Valley Reformed Church." (2015 MGS, p. 216)

In our meeting on October 14, 2016, the GLR OJBC considered the requirements listed in the Process for Appeals in the RCA *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, and in particular, the following sentences in Section 4: "The committee shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The committee shall promptly advise the several parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to correct such irregularities." As the committee examined the record of the case, it found an irregularity that should be corrected by the classis before the case is considered by the regional synod. The 2015 General Synod voted to adopt the recommendation of the Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) in R-46: "To remand the case to the Zeeland Classis for hearing on the merits of the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner regarding their membership in Spring Valley Reformed Church. (ADOPTED, 2015 MGS, p. 216) Just before that action the CJB stated in its report: "Here, we believe that the complaint properly lies before the Zeeland Classis, where it was originally made, and that it is incumbent on the Zeeland Classis to deal with that complaint on the merits." The Zeeland Classis OJB (ZCOJB) states in its "Ruling Concerning the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner Regarding Their Membership in Spring Valley Church" dated June 16, 2016: "The January 26, 2013 complaint filed by Phil & Diane Forner is without merit and is dismissed without a hearing."

Following the requirement listed in the Process for Appeals in the RCA *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 4 (2016 edition, p. 92), the OJBC decided to advise the parties in this case that it deems the lack of a hearing as an irregularity, and to give Zeeland Classis a period of not more than twenty days to correct that irregularity. The Pre-Hearing Orders asking for a correction to that irregularity were sent to the parties on October 24, 2016.

On November 14, 2016, Zeeland Classis responded to the Pre-Hearing Orders stating in part: "We disagree with the claim of this PreHearing Order that not holding a hearing on this case in front of the full Zeeland Classis membership is an 'irregularity to be corrected.' ZCOJB followed the directive of GS2015's R-46 by processing the complaint afresh as if it were before the committee for the first time (following the process outlined in the BCO for complaints). It seems to be that the GLROJB believes 'for hearing' meant that a formal hearing before the full Zeeland Classis membership was required. We disagree with that understanding of R-46 on the grounds that ZCOJB has done the work before them with diligence and care by hearing the case anew, even utilizing a new ZCOJB. We do not agree with the claim of the PreHearing Order that a formal hearing before full Zeeland Classis membership is necessary to comply with GS2015's R-46."

After consultation by email and phone, a message was sent to the parties in this case on December 16, 2016, to correct the misunderstanding of the Zeeland Classis regarding the intent of the Pre-Hearing Orders. The OJBC offered the following clarification:

The OJBC did not mean to imply that the lack of a hearing on this case in front of the full Zeeland Classis membership is the "irregularity to be corrected." The Process for Complaints in the RCA *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 2, Part II, 2016 edition, pp. 88-89) does not require that a hearing be conducted in front of the full classis, but it does require that a hearing be conducted by the committee of the classis:

Sec. 5. If the case is in proper order, the committee shall then consider its merits. If the complaint is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the committee may dismiss the complaint

without a hearing. If the complaint goes forward, the committee shall consider the record of the case and such additional arguments as may have been submitted and shall also hear the parties together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties. Counsel shall meet the qualifications set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 10. This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner with all parties present. If the complainant in person or by counsel fails to appear, the committee may declare the case to be defaulted. (BCO, 2.II.2.5, p. 89)

The purpose of the hearing is to consider all the arguments that may be submitted in the case. To consider all the merits in the case the committee “shall also hear the parties together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties...This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner with all parties present.”

It would be unwise for the GLR OJBC to hold a hearing on this case on appeal before the ZCOJB complies with the decision of the General Synod and conducts a committee hearing on the merits of the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner regarding their membership in Spring Valley Reformed Church. A hearing by the classis committee would give the Forners the chance to explain the arguments presented to the regional synod as part of this appeal, and give the classis the opportunity to consider the merits of those arguments. It would also give the Forners the opportunity to identify the specific part of the record that they believe is missing, and to explain to the classis how that information might be relevant to the case. Since the record of the case indicates a number of points have not been considered by the classis because of the time constraints set by the classis, a hearing by the classis committee is in order. A hearing by the committee provides one last opportunity for the classis committee to consider the merits of all the arguments that have been presented by the appellants.

Therefore the OJBC reissued the following order with clarifying language underlined:

Following the requirement listed in the Process for Appeals in the RCA Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 4 (2016 edition, p. 92), we are advising the parties in this appeal that it deems the lack of a hearing by the committee of the classis as an irregularity, and is giving the committee of the Zeeland Classis a period of not more than twenty days to correct that irregularity and to inform the GLR OJBC of progress toward that end. We recognize that it may take more than 20 days for the committee to hold a hearing, but the ZCOJB can begin preparing for a hearing and inform the Forners and the GLR OJBC of that decision within 20 days after notification. If that is not possible, the ZCOJB may request an extension of the time requirement from the regional synod OJBC, with the understanding that the ZC clerk will provide a status update (including a schedule of future steps and resolution) every 20 days as this irregularity is addressed. A hearing should consider all the merits of the case, not only whether or not the Forners have standing to file the original complaint. The ruling of the Zeeland Classis on the merits of this complaint should also clearly state where the Forners have membership and how the Classis is planning to provide for their pastoral needs. As required by the Book of Church Order: “This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner with all parties present.”

According to the BCO, a hearing in front of the whole classis is not required. The committee reports in writing its findings and recommendations to its parent judicatory, and after receiving the report, the judicatory may or may not request to hear the original parties in the case. (BCO, 2.II.2.6, 2016 Edition, p. 89) In most cases, the judicatory does not vote to hear the parties in the case, and only votes on the recommendations of its committee.

We commend the Zeeland Classis for its efforts to resolve this complaint outside of the judicial process. We do not see how a hearing by the ZCOJB would prevent the classis and the Forners from reaching a mutually agreeable solution; indeed, it may provide an opportunity for a conversation directed toward that end. [*This ends the text of the Amended Pre-Hearing Orders.*]

The Zeeland Classis responded to the revised Pre-Hearing Orders by saying:

“In our communication of November 14, 2016 the ZCOJB and Classis Clerk demonstrated that we have complied with the directive of GS2015 by following the process outlined in the BCO for complaints. The complaint of Phil and Diane Forner received a hearing by ZCOJB (per BCO 2.II.2). It was determined by a meeting of ZCOJB that the case record was in proper order and upon review of the record ZCOJB determined that the case did not have merit. ZCOJB stands by our ruling and will not hold another hearing. We urge OJBC to rule on the appeal that has been made by Phil and Diane Forner.”

The Forners filed a new appeal on January 26, 2017 after filing an intent to appeal on January 7, 2017, appealing the decision of Zeeland Classis (ZC) and its Overture and Judicial Committee (ZCOJB) not to hold a hearing as ordered by the OJBC on December 16, 2016 in response to the remand of the General Synod.

In a conference call on February 3, 2017, the OJBC considered whether or not to hold a hearing on the Appeal filed by Phil and Diane Forner (Forners), dated September 19, 2016, from the decision of the Zeeland Classis Overture and Judicial Business Committee (ZCOJBC), and the Appeal filed by the Forners on January 26, 2017 regarding the refusal of the ZCOJBC to hold a hearing.

The OJBC reviewed the report of the Commission on Judicial Business to the 2015 General Synod and affirmed the interpretation of the remand of the 2015 General Synod and the requirements of the Process for Hearing a Complaint in the RCA *Book of Church Order* as explained in the Pre-Hearing Orders (as amended on December 16, 2016). The OJBC decided to communicate with the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) to ask them for clarification of the remand of the General Synod of 2015 and the *Book of Church Order* on the question of whether or not a hearing requires that the parties be present rather than only a review of the original complaint by the Forners. The letter to the CJB was copied to the Zeeland Classis and the Forners.

The General Synod Commission on Judicial Business responded to the request of the OJBC for clarification of the 2015 General Synod decision in the Appeal By Zeeland Classis And Spring Valley Church by writing: "The unanimous intent of the members of the CJB in their recommendation that was approved by General Synod to "remand of the case to the Zeeland Classis for hearing on the merits" was for the Zeeland Classis Overture and Judicial Business Committee (ZCOJB) to hold a hearing to consider the record of the case, to consider additional arguments as may have been submitted, and to hear the parties together with such qualified counsel as may be requested by the parties. The hearing must be conducted in a fair and impartial manner with all parties present. A meeting does not constitute a hearing simply because it is called a hearing."

On March 8, 2017, the Zeeland Classis sent the following message:

Zeeland Classis OJB offers its thanks to the Regional Synod OJB for clarifying with the Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) regarding the intent of the motion from GS 2015. Zeeland Classis OJB will hold a hearing according to the specifications of the CJB email...Zeeland Classis OJB will communicate with the parties involved regarding a date for the hearing.

The Zeeland Classis OJB scheduled a hearing for March 28, 2017 and will be presenting a report to the classis for its review.

The OJBC discussed how to respond to the new appeal filed by the Forners on January 26, 2017. The appeal asks the ZC to do what the OJBC has asked the classis to do (hold a hearing), and therefore it is redundant at this time. The motion was made, seconded, and carried to postpone consideration of the Forner Appeal, dated January 26, 2017, until further action has been taken that may render the appeal unnecessary.

Overtures and Judicial Business Committee

Russell Camp, Irv Boersen, Rob Teitsma, Jared Van Noord, Susan Vogel-Vanderson, Case VanKempen, and Tim Vink. (Tim Vink recused himself from consideration of the judicial business above, since he is the representative from the Zeeland Classis.)

WELCOMING SERVICE FOR JOHN MESSER

Mike Gafa welcomed the delegates and guests for this Service of Welcome and Blessing for the Rev. John Messer as he begins his role as the new Regional Executive of the Synod of the Great Lakes. Representing the General Synod, Annalise Radcliffe, Coordinator for the Office of the General Secretary, read from Philippians 3:1-13 and opened the service with prayer. The Worship Team from Remembrance Church led the singing of *Abide With Me*, *Blessed Assurance*, and *O What A Savior*. Branson Parler welcomed John Messer as our New Regional Executive and read the liturgy that included the questions from the RCA Order for Commissioning a Minister of Word and Sacrament into a Specialized Ministry, adapted for this occasion. Ken Eriks, Director of Special Projects for the General Synod, read from Colossians 1:9-20 and gave a

charge to John as he begins this ministry. Rick Veenstra offered a prayer of blessing for John's work. Jill VerSteeg, Director of Transformational Engagement for the General Synod, delivered a message based on Ephesians 1:15-23 and offered prayer. The Worship Team led the group in singing *Be Thou My Vision*, and Doug McClintic concluded the service with a Prayer of Thanksgiving.

FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

Irv Boersen and Bill VerHulst, reporting

Our Finance Committee is the other one of two permanent administrative committees whose members are appointed directly by the classes within our region. Bill VerHulst, our synod treasurer, and Irv Boersen, the chair of the Finance Committee presented the report below.

During the past year, the Finance Committee dealt with the following issues:

- Reviewed and approved some changes in the 2016/17 budget.
- Reviewed the investment manager's report on earnings for 2016, and the current portfolio with the Synod's investment manager.
- Reviewed the financial statements for the year ended September 30, 2016.
- Updated the Minimum Salary Guidelines and Schedule for Ministers of Word and sacrament for 2018.
- Updated voluntary compensation guidelines for church staff of SGL churches for 2018.
- Reviewed and recommended approval of the Ministry Fund Budget and assessment for 2017/18, to the Executive Committee and this Assembly.
- Reviewed the financial statements for the quarter ended December 31, 2016.

2017/18 MINISTRY FUND BUDGET

Our committee reviewed the needs and requests for the Ministry Fund budget for 2017/18.. The Finance Committee looked at each budgeted line item with the purpose of determining if there are ways to lower the costs. In light of the economic conditions – and the fact that many of our congregations and classes are struggling to do ministry, the 2017/18 Ministry Fund Budget reflects the fiscal responsibility to control operational and programmatic costs.

We also have experienced a small, steady decline in confessing membership in recent years. The committee decided to propose the 2017/18 budget assuming a loss of 796 confessing members, or 1.95%, from 40,796 in 2016, to 40,000 in 2017. The committee believes that this would be a realistic and conservative approach for estimating the 2018 assessment.

The proposed 2017/18 budget reflects this estimate and proposes an increase of \$1.00. This budget reflects minimal salary increases and changes in uses of consultants.

The 2018 proposed assessment of \$19.50 in our regional synod represents an increase of \$1.00 over 2017, and will continue to be one of the lowest of the RCA's regional synods.

R-12

To approve the 2017-18 Ministry Fund Budget and the \$19.50 per confessing member assessment. (APPROVED)

The motion was made from the floor:

To instruct the Finance Committee to build a budget for the 2018-19 fiscal year that will not include an increase in the assessment. (NOT APPROVED)

The committee wants to continue to do whatever can be done to control future assessment increases. Each member of the Finance Committee has been appointed by their respective classis and has been involved in the development of this budget and has carefully reviewed the related expenditures. Please feel free to contact Bill VerHulst anytime – bverhulst@rcagl.org

SALARY GUIDELINES

Irv Boersen presented the Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word and sacrament. The Finance Committee voted to recommend a 2.0% change from the 2016 guidelines and the following motion to this Assembly:

R-13

To approve the proposed 2018 Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word and sacrament and recommend them to the classes within our region. (APPROVED)

The Executive Committee requested that we annually review and update the voluntary guidelines published to assist churches in setting reasonable compensation guidelines for certain other church staff members. We have completed that review and have recommended a 2.0% change from the 2017 guidelines. The Finance Committee also voted to recommend the following motion to this Assembly:

R-14

To approve the proposed 2018 Church Staff Salary and Benefits Guidelines, and recommend them to the churches to be implemented on a voluntary basis. (APPROVED)

Finance Committee

Irv Boersen, chair (MUSK)
Bob Zielinski (GLCC)
Chuck Brower (ZEE)
Bill VerHulst, staff

Linda Jacobs (HOL)
Cindy Lowman (SWM)

Mike Gafa (NGR)
Vacant (NMI)

BREAK

The president called a fifteen minute break at this time.

ADDENDUM TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT

The GLR Executive Committee met in special session on April 24, 2017 to reconsider the language of the overture to the General Synod that was approved at the March 13 meeting of the committee, and to consider additional overtures to the General Synod that would affirm the historic view of marriage as limited to those between one man and one woman, since the proposed amendments approved by the 2016 General Synod on marriage did not receive the necessary two-thirds approval by the classes.

OVERTURE ON A GRACE-FILLED AND ORDERLY RE-ALIGNMENT

At the last meeting, the GLR Executive Committee voted to recommend the following overture to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly. After discussion of ways to clarify and strengthen the overture, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to amend the overture to read as follows (additions underlined; deletions stricken out):

The Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod ~~to instruct the General Synod Council to create~~ and authorize a task force with representation from each of the regional synods to implement a grace-filled and orderly re-alignment that will result in giving each congregation and classis within the RCA the choice of joining one of two groups (a regional synod or conference) within the RCA that will meet in separate assemblies and judicatories aligned on questions of human sexuality, but will share some organizational ties for the purpose of ministry, mission, and benefit services, ~~for report back to the 2018 General Synod.~~

Reasons:

1. The recommendations contained in the 2016 Report of the Special Council did not lead to a resolution of the conflict in the RCA over questions of ordination and marriage. Even if there was clarity on affirming marriage as one man and one woman, churches who affirm same-sex marriage are not, generally speaking, inclined to leave the denomination or to conform to the historic view of marriage. This will create either a situation of endless judicial actions or of an undisciplined (and potentially dishonest) church, neither of which is desirable.
2. If no effective action is taken, we expect that large numbers of churches will leave the RCA, and many of our church plants will choose not to organize as RCA churches.
3. To place the authority to make this decision with consistories and classes is a way of saying this is a non-essential issue. Treating this as a non-essential issue is not acceptable to many churches. It would be better to create unity around this issue for the sake of mission.

4. This overture is designed to implement a process that may bring peace to the church sooner rather than later. Our ability to be honest and clear about where we stand, even if in different places, is a gift and an aid for the mission of the church.
5. This overture maintains organizational ties for the purpose of mission and benefit services that will allow for some measure of cooperation in the future between people on both sides of this issue within the Reformed Church in America.

R-15

To adopt the overture above as proposed in its second draft and send it to the 2017 General Synod. (NOT ADOPTED – YES 27, NO 30)

OVERTURE ON DECLARATIVE AUTHORITY

After discussion, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to recommend the following overture to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting:

The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to establish a permanent and public record of the Declarative Acts of General Synod; that from this time forward, all declarative acts of General Synod shall be distinguish by beginning with the phrase, “In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares . . .”; and that, for the sake of the unity of the church as stipulated in The Representative Principle (*BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle*), all declarative acts of General Synod shall be binding upon all assemblies and officers of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (*BCO, Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority*). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (*BCO, Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority*).
2. From time to time, doctrinal matters arise in the life of the church which are not addressed directly in our Standards. At such times, the church needs the wisdom and counsel of its leadership in knowing how to interpret Scripture and apply it to the current challenges facing its people. Thus, it is incumbent upon the officers of the church, for the welfare of the church, to exercise periodically its responsibility of declarative authority.
3. The BCO gives authority to determine doctrinal matters exclusively to the General Synod. It is the General Synod alone that approves our Standards of Unity, BCO, Formularies, Liturgy, etc. There is no place in the BCO where any of the lower assemblies are granted such authority in doctrinal matters. An example: “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church” (*BCO, IV.2.7*).
4. Acts of declarative authority by the General Synod require acceptance and adherence by all RCA officers, leaders, and members. The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states “Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others” (*BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle*). When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them” (*BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle*).

R-16

To adopt the overture as printed above and send it to the 2017 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

OVERTURE ON AN ACT OF DECLARATIVE AUTHORITY REGARDING MARRIAGE

After discussion, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to recommend the following overture to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting:

The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to adopt the following act of declarative authority: In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares that the Bible teaches: 1) marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman, and 2) all sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin including same-sex sexual activity.

Reasons:

1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (*BCO, Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority*). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (*BCO, Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority*).
2. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with Holy Scripture (*Genesis 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7; Matthew 19:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 2:7-8; James 3:1; Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109*).
3. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with previous acts and statements of General Synod.
4. This act of declarative authority will bring clarity to the denomination’s official and authoritative position on matters related to gender and marriage.
5. A precedent for such declarative acts has already been set. In his book *Constitutional Theology*, Dr. Allan Janssen, General Synod Professor of Theology, writes “When the 1979 General Synod approved the ordination of women to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, it did so because a previous synod (1958) had already declared that there were no clear biblical grounds against the ordination of women to ministry.” (*Janssen, Dr. Allan J., Constitutional Theology, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p.25*). If General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about women’s ordination, then General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about gender and marriage.

R-17

To adopt the overture as printed above and send it to the 2017 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

OVERTURE ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND MARRIAGE

After discussion, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to recommend the following overture to the May 1, 2017 GLR Assembly meeting:

The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to clarify that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108-109 categorically condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards by all assemblies and officers therefore entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons pertaining to the appeal to the Heidelberg Catechism:

1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and Constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108-109, as well as Q&A 87.
2. In the 2014 minutes of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA.” This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism (*MGS, 2014, p. 241*)
3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak *only* against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.
4. The Catechism has always been understood to prohibit categorically same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, on the basis of biblical texts such as Genesis 2:18-25, Leviticus 18:22, Matthew 19:1-9, Acts 15:19-20, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:21-33, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10.
5. Some might argue that the Heidelberg Catechism does not specifically name same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriage. But this line of logic would lead us to conclude that adultery is the only specific sexual sin prohibited by the Catechism, when the clearly stated intention of the Catechism is to include all sexual sins, though not to provide a specific list of sins. The New Testament itself frequently does this when it uses the Greek term *porneia*, often translated “sexual immorality,” as an umbrella term for sexual sin rather than listing each particular sin. Since the Catechism is meant to be a summary of Scripture’s teaching on sexual morality, it should be taken to prohibit same-sex sexual activity, because this is precisely what Scripture does.

Reasons pertaining to the authority of General Synod to clarify the Standards:

1. The CCO states that the General Synod, “like the other assemblies, does carry out its work in deepest relationship to the teaching of the church (which is found in its Confessions) and under the authority of Scripture.” Furthermore, the CCO notes that the judicial decisions of all assemblies require them to “explicitly and authoritatively interpret the Constitution and Scripture.” (MGS 2014, p. 240. See BCO 2.I.2.1). The Commission on Church Order thus notes that the General Synod clearly has authority, but raises the question: what kind of authority does it have and how does it exercise it? The BCO answers that question.
2. By its authority as the “highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America,”¹ the “General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy.”² If the General Synod fails to speak and clarify the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, it would amount to giving lower assemblies the right to ignore the Standards or have lower assemblies interpret the Standards in ways that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. In that sense, the Standards would cease to be Standards of *Unity* and the RCA would be, functionally, congregational or classical in polity. (BCO, 1.IV.2.1., 1.IV.2.4.)
3. The BCO also states that “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.”³ The intent of this statement, however, is to make clear that the General Synod has ultimate oversight of the doctrine and teaching of the Reformed Church, not merely the theological seminaries, insofar as the theological seminaries are accountable to the General Synod, and not to any other assembly. Thus, our polity makes it clear that the doctrinal buck stops, so to speak, with the General Synod on matters of doctrine. As the BCO states, “the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.”⁴ If lower assemblies were granted the authority (functionally, even if not officially) to set doctrine on matters of sexual ethics addressed in the Standards, set denominational polity, or exercise independent oversight of theological students, true denominational unity would be sacrificed and the RCA would essentially be a loose federation or association of classes and/or churches.⁵
4. “The General Synod shall recommend to the churches such methods as shall effectively sustain the denominational program, ... to secure the largest dissemination of the gospel.”⁶ The current state of the RCA is such that the deep divisions over the question of same-sex marriage threaten the very existence of the denomination, let alone the ‘denominational program.’ Furthermore, the time, energy, and effort put into this effort, though necessary in defense of God’s Word, take away from time, energy, and effort that could be put into further dissemination of the gospel. The General Synod *must* clarify the way in which the Heidelberg Catechism speaks to the matter of same-sex marriage, for the sake of the denomination but, more importantly, for the sake of the Gospel.
5. The BCO states that the church, through its office holders, exercises “declarative authority,” which is “the right to speak in his [Christ’s] name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it...”⁷ The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states, “Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others.”⁸ When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly to clarify and declare the meaning of the RCA’s Standards, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”⁹ Failing to submit to the clarification and declaration made by the General Synod would foster disunity in the church and, thus, violate

¹ BCO, 1.IV.2.1.

² BCO, 1.IV.2.4.

³ BCO, 1.IV.2.7.

⁴ BCO, Preamble, p. 3.

⁵ BCO, 1.IV.2.8.

⁶ BCO, 1.IV.2.10.

⁷ BCO, Preamble, p.2.

⁸ BCO, Preamble, p.3-4.

⁹ BCO, Preamble, p.4.

one's vow as an officer or member of the church to seek "the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."¹⁰

6. The General Synod has taken upon itself the role of interpreter of the RCA's Constitution in the past. Debates about whether women could serve in office turned on the interpretation of the word "person" in the BCO, as it stated at that time that "those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination..."¹¹ When several classes moved to ordain women to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament prior to 1979, other classes filed complaints which were considered by the General Synod of 1979. As John Coakley notes, that General Synod decided that the matter could be treated as judicial business—"that is, as a matter of interpreting rather than changing the *Book of Church Order*. This meant that it was no longer necessary to secure agreement from two-thirds of all the classes."¹² Instead, all that was needed was the majority vote of General Synod. If the General Synod has the right and authority to interpret (*not* change) one aspect of the Constitution—the BCO—then it must have the right and authority to interpret another aspect of the Constitution—the Heidelberg Catechism.

Furthermore, the Judicial Business Committee of 1979 declared that General Synod had the right to clarify the meaning of the BCO on the basis that:

- a) The General Synod had repeatedly voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that church offices were open to women (even though these amendments were not approved by two-thirds of the classes) and
- b) The General Synod had taken no action on overtures that would have limited offices to men. (*MGS*, 1979, p. 68).

In a similar way, on the issue of same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage,

- a) The General Synod has repeatedly approved statements and voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that marriage is between one man and one woman and
- b) The General Synod has taken no action on overtures which would have affirmed same-sex marriages.

The method of approving women in office thus sets an important precedence for affirming that marriage is between one man and one woman. If the General Synod has the authority to interpret what the BCO and, by implication, the Bible say about women's ordination, then it certainly has the authority to interpret what the Heidelberg Catechism and, by implication, the Bible say about same-sex marriage.

R-18

To adopt the overture as printed above and send it to the 2017 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Earlier in the meeting, the motion was made and supported to suspend the Rules of Order to allow the Assembly to review the decision of the Executive Committee to establish the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Human Sexuality as a statement to which all regional staff must adhere. That motion was postponed for consideration this afternoon. Our Rules of Order of the Synod of the Great Lakes state that: "Decisions made by the Executive Committee remain subordinate to the actions of the Assembly." (Rules of Order, Article VI, Sec. 2A) In consultation with the presiding officer and the person who made the motion, the following motion was presented as a substitute with unanimous consent:

To reverse the decision of the Executive Committee that established the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Human Sexuality as a statement to which all regional staff must adhere. (NOT ADOPTED)

STANDING COMMITTEE REPORTS

Classical Minutes Committee

¹⁰ BCO: Appendix: The Formularies, Declaration for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, p.130; Declaration for a General Synod Professor, p. 134, and *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, 2005, Order for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons, p. 49.

¹¹ BCO, 1.1.3, which now reads "those men and women..."

¹² John Coakley, "Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America," in *Patterns and Portraits: Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America*, p. 9 (emphasis added).

Celaine Bouma-Prediger, reporting

Minutes of the classes within our region were examined by the committee before the meeting. Minutes from all seven classes, including their regular and special sessions, were submitted and found to be complete and in order. The committee members completed feedback forms that will be sent to each classis Stated Clerk.

Resolutions/Leave of Absence Committee

Chip Sauer, reporting

The following three resolutions recommended by the committee were approved with unanimous consent:

R-19:

To thank Irv Boersen for his four years of service on the Synod of the Great Lakes Executive Committee as the Finance Committee Chair. (ADOPTED)

R-20:

To thank Gordon Christian for his four years of service on the Synod of the Great Lakes Executive Committee as vice president, president, past president, and past past president. (ADOPTED)

R-21:

To thank Remembrance Reformed Church for making its facility available for this year's assembly. (ADOPTED)

Excused and Unexcused Absences

The following delegates were absent from the 2017 Assembly meeting:

Excused Absence: Curry Pikkaart from the Executive Committee

Unexcused Absence: Jerry Traxler, SWM Classis

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Delegates were asked to turn in their evaluation forms and reimbursement forms for the Assembly meeting. Delegates were given the opportunity to recycle their nametags, three-ring binders, and workbook papers.

READING OF THE JOURNAL

Howard Moths read the minutes of this session by title: *The 62nd Annual Session of the Synod of the Great Lakes Minutes, Convened at Remembrance Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 1, 2017*. The Executive Committee will review and approve the minutes before publication, and after that they will be available of the regional synod website.

SEATING OF THE NEW OFFICERS

Branson Parler invited the past-president, Dean Van Farowe, to come forward to seat the newly elected officers. Gordon invited Judy Nelson, the newly elected president, and Bob VanderZwaag, the newly elected vice-president to come forward. Dean congratulated them on their election and formerly seated them as officers.

CLOSING PRAYER

Judy Nelson closed the Assembly meeting with prayer.

ADJOURNMENT

Judy Nelson took over as the presiding officer. The motion was made, seconded, and carried to adjourn this Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes. The meeting was adjourned at 4:10 p.m.

Rev. Howard H. Moths
Stated Clerk, Synod of the Great Lakes