

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES  
REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA  
MEETING AND MINUTES  
Convened at DeWitt Ministry Center, RCA Michigan Regional Center  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
Sixty-seventh Annual Session  
May 2, 2022**

**FORMATION OF THE SYNOD**

**Roll Call/Seating of Delegates**

This Assembly of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (RSGL) was convened at the DeWitt Ministry Center in the RCA Michigan Regional Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan on Monday, May 2, 2022. Delegates were asked to be seated and to introduce themselves to others seated around their table. President Dan Gillett called the meeting to order at 9:05 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. The asterisk (\*) designates a second year delegate.

**GREAT LAKES CITY CLASSIS**

Mr. Roger Burgess, 7188 Crestwood, Jenison, MI, 49428\*  
Rev. Matt Cook, 5739 Park Avenue, Hudsonville, MI, 49426\*  
Rev. Andrea DeWard, 7050 Union Avenue, Grand Rapids, MI, 49548\*  
Rev. Tim Dieffenbach, 3260 Thornapple River Drive, Grand Rapids, MI, 49546  
Mr. Robert Lacy, 351 Summer Circle, Grand Rapids, MI, 49548\*  
Mr. Ron Schultz, 8780 East Paris Avenue, Caledonia, MI, 49316  
Mr. Ken Williams, 8880 Peninsula Court, Zeeland, MI, 49464

**HOLLAND CLASSIS**

Rev. Dan Jelsma, 133 East 34th Street, Holland, MI, 49423  
Rev. Kate Meyer, 9151 Hiawatha Drive, West Olive, MI, 49460  
Mr. Gary Morris, 10900 Thornberry Way, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Rev. Aaron Van Der Veen, 407 North Calvin Street, Holland, MI, 49424  
Ms. Anne VanderZiel, 608 Melrose, Holland, MI, 49423  
Mr. Hugo Vasquez, 635 Riley Street, Holland, MI, 49424  
Ms. Angela Wagenveld, 1075 Mid Bluff Drive, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Rev. Deb Yurk, 712 Apple Avenue, Holland, MI, 49423

**MUSKEGON CLASSIS**

Mr. Bennett Bassette  
Rev. Jim Beezley, 4095 Grand Haven Road, Norton Shores, MI, 49441  
Rev. Sherwin Brantsen, 1731 Dykstra Road, Muskegon, MI, 49445\*  
Rev. David Celeskey, 1521 Porter Road, Norton Shores, MI, 49441  
Mr. Ross Falkowski  
Rev. Sandra Nikkel, 3769 Sehler Street, Conklin, MI, 49403\*  
Mr. Bob Smith  
Mr. Joe Stevens

**NORTH GRAND RAPIDS CLASSIS**

Mr. Tom Boehm, 6313 Springmont Drive, Hudsonville, MI, 49426\*  
Rev. Ben Bruins, 1025 Courtney Street, Grand Rapids, MI, 49504\*  
Ms. Linda Cline, 250 Sunset Hills Avenue, Grand Rapids, MI, 49534  
Mr. Keith Hinkle, 3722 Grand River Drive, Grand Rapids, MI, 49525  
Mr. Scott Jacobs, 3849 Windwood Drive, Rockford, MI, 49341  
Rev. Kristen Meyer, 2060 Division Avenue S, Grand Rapids, MI, 49507  
Rev. Branson Parler, 1728 Country Club Drive, Grand Rapids, MI, 49505\*  
Rev. Rebecca Stegman Riekse, 475 Preswick, Grand Rapids, MI, 49546

#### NORTHERN MICHIGAN CLASSIS

Mr. Frank Ayre, 1411 West Lake Drive, Fremont, MI, 49412  
Rev. Todd Bush, 45 South Amber Road, Scottville, MI, 49454  
Rev. Alissa Davis \*  
Rev. Drew Peterson, 1139 East Front Street, Traverse City, MI, 49686  
Rev. Andrea Poppleton, 1139 East Front Street, Traverse City, MI, 49686  
Mr. Tom Van Dusen,  
Mr. Jim Van Sickle, 4719 Third Street, New Era, MI, 49446  
Mr. Gord VanderSlice, 33575 West Garfield Road, New Era, MI, 49446

#### SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN CLASSIS

Rev. Paul Fazio, 1316 Barney Road, Kalamazoo, MI, 49001  
Rev. Kevin Hart, 2323 Stadium Drive, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008  
Mr. Bruce Stohrer, 1503 Cambridge, Kalamazoo, MI, 49001  
Mr. Don Visker, 1844 Alamo Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI, 49006  
Rev. Dave Zomer, 1833 South Burdick, Kalamazoo, MI, 49001\*

#### ZEELAND CLASSIS

Rev. Adam Grill, 9530 Woodbridge Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Mr. Dan Kiel, 148 East Central Avenue, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Rev. Chris Pieters, 10376 Felch Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Mr. Llyod Redder, 12050 New Holland Street, Holland, MI, 49424  
Mr. Mark Timmer, 7224 Taylor Street, Hudsonville, MI, 49426  
Mr. Scott VanHaitsma, 30 South Division Street, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Rev. Josh Wall, 148 East Central Avenue, Zeeland, MI, 49464  
Rev. Kevin Yurk, 6839 Byron Road, Zeeland, MI, 49464

#### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

|  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| President:                                 | Rev. Dan Gillett       |
| Vice-President:                            | Mrs. Michelle Chahine  |
| Past-President:                            | Vacant                 |
| Past Past-President:                       | Rev. Greg Brower       |
| At-Large Member:                           | Rev. Jen Holmes Curran |
| Great Lakes City Classis Rep:              | Lee DeYoung            |
| Holland Classis Rep:                       | Rev. Deb Yurk          |
| Muskegon Classis Rep:                      | Mr. Wally De La Fuente |
| Northern Michigan Classis Rep:             | Mr. Paul DeBoer        |
| North Grand Rapids Classis Rep:            | Rev. Nancy Boote       |
| Southwest Michigan Classis Rep             | Rev. Suzanne Hart      |
| Zeeland Classis Rep                        | Mrs. Jami Alferink     |
| Regional Executive:                        | Rev. John Messer       |
| Stated Clerk/Parliamentarian (non-voting): | Rev. Howard Moths      |

Absent with excuse from this meeting: Jen Holmes Curran.

Absent without excuse from this meeting: Todd Bush, Wally De La Fuente, and Sandra Nikkel.

#### **Privilege of the Floor**

The presiding officer made a number of introductions. Following the provision in the RSGL *Rules of Order*, the privilege of the floor was granted to those employed as classis leaders, stated clerks, or RCA staff that were present, and those non-delegates and members of the RSGL task forces, committees, and ministry teams who were asked to present reports to the Synod.

#### **Limits to Debate**

The president requested that all the delegates observe a two-minute time limit for speaking on any motion that comes before the Assembly.

### **Approval of the 2021 Assembly Minutes**

The Minutes of the last Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes that was held on May 3, 2021, 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 RSGL Executive Committee. The President asked for any additions or corrections to the minutes. Since none were offered, he declared that the minutes of May 3, 2021, will stand approved as printed.

### **Appointment of Standing Committees**

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

#### Classical Minutes Committee

Andrea DeWard, chair  
Tom Boehm  
Alissa Davis  
Gary Morris  
Howard Moths (staff)

#### Tellers

Scott VanHaitsma, Chair  
Kevin Hart  
Drew Peterson  
Kevin Yurk  
Bob Smith

#### Resolution/Leave of Absence Committee

Jim Beezley, chair  
Linda Cline  
Alison DeBoer (staff)

#### Study Committee

Kevin Hart, Chair  
Andrea Poppleton  
Hugo Vasquez  
Ken Williams  
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 motion was made and seconded:

**R-1**

**To approve the agenda as printed in the Assembly Workbook with the addition of the Study Committee report. (ADOPTED)**

### **OPENING DEVOTIONS AND PRAYER**

Devotions were led by Stephanie Gillett and the Rev. Kathryn (Katy) Sundararajan, a Minister of Word and Sacrament and member of the Holland Classis. The assembly joined in singing *Revelation Song* and *In Christ Alone*, led by Stephanie Gillett. Katy Sundararajan opened the meeting with a prayer of illumination. She read from Ezekiel 37:1-14 and shared a meditation with the title, "Through the Eyes of a Child, and Believing God's Story of Life." She closed the opening worship with a prayer.

### **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

Dan Gillett, reporting

As Dan presented his report, our vice-president, Michelle Chahine, took the chair. Dan began his report with prayer and then presented the following report.

Gail was a neighbor. Gail lost her beloved husband very tragically to a heart attack at a young age. Gail was then diagnosed with breast cancer. She became a survivor and started volunteering with the American Cancer Society helping others cope. Her eldest son was at U of M in pre-med and was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Driving home from Ann Arbor on a snowy night she let God have it and did everything but cuss Him out. I know this because she confessed it to me worried that she had done a terrible wrong. She also confessed she had a strange sense of peace after letting loose on God.

I shared with her that she was being very biblical, that one third of our psalms are lament psalms and they complain honestly about circumstances, other people, and even God himself. We complain the most

honestly to the people we are closest with, and God often comes even closer to us as we entrust all, even our complaints, to Him.

I am speaking to a room full of Pastors and Elders and so I know you 'get it' and have similar stories and beliefs. I share it as a reminder of what we, I believe, as the Reverend Regional Synod, are called to do. We must lament our situation honestly, and help our congregations lament our situation honestly.

27 of our 184 churches have petitioned to leave, there will probably be more. If counted by confessing membership, this is 30%. You will hear that we are planning to reduce from 7 Classes to 3 or 4. You will also hear about the severe financial impact. Those are the numbers.

The relational and emotional effects are even more severe. People I respect and love and whom I have served alongside for decades are walking away. People I have baptized, married, and ordained have severed ties. Churches and even families within churches are divided and in pain. Our witness to the world has been tarnished and outreach and ministry impeded in significant ways. You have similar heartaches.

This is not a recommendation but a counsel and request. As leaders, help those around you grieve and lament. Give yourself space to grieve and lament. THIS IS NOT a speed bump, this is a tragedy of historic proportions, meaning it will be remembered for a long time. The Reformed Church in America, the longest continuously operating denomination on this continent is splintering. There is much pain and heartache.

One of our losses that I grieve revolves around world mission. Our denomination has a presence in world mission that is stunning.

We are like the tribe of Judah, a small denomination, yet used by God to impact our world for Christ in stunning ways, disproportionate to our size. When China descended into Communism, most missiologists agreed that the newly planted infant church in China was not strong enough to survive. A few years ago, I did a funeral for Jeanne Walvoord who was a mission nurse and fled for her life out of China. When we did get a chance, decades later to look back into China, we discovered millions of Christians. The Presbyterian Church of South Korea was founded by a New Brunswick Seminary Graduate H. G. Underwood and now has almost 3 million members. Eighty plus years ago John and Mabel Kempkers left to do mission work in the southernmost state of Mexico and now there are over 1 million Christians in the Presbyterian Church in Chiapas and they are a sister denomination to us, no longer our mission. And it would be hard to calculate how many people came to Christ through the work of the Scudder family in India, and Dr. Ida Scudder is the third most famous and respected name in India. And if you are saying numbers aren't everything, I agree and say it is also hard to calculate the impact of our medical mission in the Middle East. A friend of mine heard about Secretary of State John Kerry's meeting with the King of Bahrain. Mr. Kerry greeted the king and gave thanks that the United States – Bahrain friendship has blossomed over the 45 year history between the U.S. Government and Bahrain. The US opened its embassy in Bahrain in 1971. But the King corrected Secretary Kerry and said that Bahrain's relationship with America started over 100 years ago in 1890 when missionaries from the Reformed Church in America came to Bahrain and established the American Mission hospital. The RCA and their medical mission was the reason they were friends with the United States. The RCA missionaries came before there was oil and before there was anything and cared for us, said the King. How precious is trust and respect in the Middle East? And the RCA has both in amazing measure.

There is something in our corporate DNA, this sharing of the gospel in Word and deed that has profoundly impacted our world. I lament the possibility that this witness will be diminished.

Helping our churches and each other grieve and lament is a pastoral concern of this Reverend Regional Synod.

Leadership is also the charge entrusted to this Regional Synod.

The Executive Committee, in consultation with John Messer and the staff team, are suggesting it is crucial that we pivot from managing the crisis to a Vision for the Future. God is not done with the RCA nor the RSGL. We still have a mission and a call to share the gospel in word and deed to a world that is so broken and hurting, yet so loved by God. We know some are just coming into the reality of the grief stage, but we as leaders must also plan for a future. The apostle Paul was involved in a shipwreck, but saw God still at work and even as they ran around on the island after the storm, Paul proclaimed the gospel to his shipmates and the Islanders in a powerful way. Shipwrecks are sometimes just the prelude to significant works of the Holy Spirit.

You will hear of ways, thanks to John and staff for their great work, in which this pivot is already happening. Luminex, our very effective training tool, is positioned to be independent and continue ministry no matter what comes next. Conservative spending and budgeting has put us in a 'still okay, still in operation' position. We will need to reorganize Classes and discussions are underway as to optimal size and configurations. John has several teams thinking ahead, and you will hear more from him.

I propose this Reverend Regional Synod also take some bold leadership steps. I suggest we move into our future honoring our heritage and DNA. I suggest we focus, not on the crisis but on our mission. Cross cultural missions are powerful force multipliers. As we engage in mission in another culture we might think the primary result is the aid of the mission. Whenever I have engaged cross culturally, I end up learning more than I teach and receive more than I give.

I see the gospel more clearly by seeing it in the context of another culture. Some of the cultural accoutrements that I've attached to the gospel become clear. Ideas, vitality, and the fuller operation of the Holy Spirit are often gifts I receive from the other culture. Warm fellowship, joy, and a refired sense of mission refuel my heart. The best analogy I can share is: the gospel seems to move from 2 dimensional to 3 dimensional – sharper, clearer, and more real and accessible.

The mission receives tangible help, a visible witness is enacted, we gain brothers and sisters in Christ from other lands, tongues, cultures, and situations, and Jesus Christ is glorified.

As I reflect on what has helped my church move through this season of strife, COVID, and estrangement, I recognize that it has been the continuing mission that has encouraged us. We recently welcomed a second Afghan family for resettlement. Our nested 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Hispanic church plant now has an office at the local extended stay hotel and has become an aid station and ministry lifeline to many of those most strongly affected by our COVID and other stressors. I hear the stories of ministry and my heart is lifted. I could share more and I'm sure many here would tell similar stories and agree that these are the things that have kept us going these past several years.

Therefore I propose:

P-1

To strongly encourage all churches within the RSGL to engage 10% of their active membership in a cross-cultural mission by 2024.

Reasons:

- “The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.”<sup>i</sup>
- The pivot from crisis and conflict to mission is essential.
- Seeing the gospel within another cultural context sharpens and enlivens our understanding of the gospel.
- Cross pollination of ministry ideas, energy, and understandings promotes faith sharing and gospel witness.
- Cross cultural fellowship is rich because we discover that what we have in common in Christ is far greater than our cultural differences.
- Our youth are attracted to a noble cause.
- It is time to quit playing defense and start playing offense.

If you so agree, I suggest we also move this as an overture to the upcoming General Synod. We often experience God by joining in what He is already doing.<sup>ii</sup> The Synod of the Heartland has seen a movement of the Holy Spirit in a rather stunning way. In 2018 one of the smaller Classes, Central Plains, (13 churches) confessed to God that they were not being what he wanted them to be. They asked God for direction and felt led to set a goal of being 25 churches by 2025. As this was proposed it was received as a stunning and audacious goal that some said was impossible. Central Plains now has 43 churches or ministries with a large number coming from Texas. They have also begun relationships with over 55 churches in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. In addition, there has been contact with 35 churches in the Washington DC area who are interested in joining as well. Little Central Plains Classis is no longer little. One of the Classis leaders called it a tsunami of God at work. The Classis de las Naciones (RCA's newest classis out of the Synod of Mid America) is experiencing even greater exponential growth. I talked last week with General Synod President Phil Assink and he could barely contain his excitement about what has been happening. He was in Columbia, by the way, visiting some of our missions throughout Latin America. I caught him on a break from mixing cement. Subsequently:

P-2

To send the following Overture to the General Synod:

*The Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to strongly encourage all churches within the RCA to engage 10% of their active membership in a cross-cultural mission by 2024.*

Reasons:

- *“The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.”<sup>iii</sup>*
- *The pivot from crisis and conflict to mission is essential.*
- *Seeing the gospel within another cultural context sharpens and enlivens our understanding of the gospel.*

- *Cross pollination of ministry ideas, energy, understandings, promotes faith sharing and gospel witness.*
- *Cross cultural fellowship is rich because we discover that what we have in common in Christ is far greater than our cultural differences.*
- *Our youth are attracted to a noble cause.*
- *Our General Secretary, our director of Global Missions, and the Synod the Heartlands have all been following the Holy Spirit's leading and an amazing work has already begun.*
- *It is time to quit playing defense and start playing offense.*

Can you imagine if 10% of our active membership engaged in some form of cross-cultural mission? Please don't limit this vision to foreign travel. . We have ethnic populations in our communities that are open to partnerships in mission. One example would be the outreach to the Nepali-speaking community within the Great Lakes City Classis. We can also bring cross cultural mission exposure to our congregation. We recently took a special offering for Ukrainian relief. Our monthly special offerings are usually a little over a thousand dollars. We have received over nine thousand dollars, and the reason is Hungarian Pastor Arnold Mezo was an intern with us ten years ago after he graduated from Saraspotak Seminary. He learned from us and we learned from him and my kids still call our fourth bedroom Arnold's room. Arnold's parsonage back porch overlooks the Ukraine. Our congregation experienced mission through Arnold coming to us and we hold him and his congregations in our hearts.

I have talked with Rev. JP Sundararajan, our RCA global mission director, and he welcomes this as a friendly overture. He also believes it is very important for voices other than staff to trumpet the call to mission.

As God has led the Regional Synod of the Heartland, so He can lead us. A wise start in discerning further things God might be saying to us as a Regional Synod would be to see what God is doing in our sister Regional Synod of the Heartland. Therefore, I propose:

P-3

To direct Regional Synod of the Great Lakes leader John Messer to confer with the Regional Synod of the Heartlands to discover potential confluence between mission activities of the Heartlands and RSGL, with report back to the Executive Committee no later than fall 2022.

I have conferred with John Messer, and he wholeheartedly agrees with the potential value of this exploration.

My first exposure to RCA polity and bureaucracy was a GSC meeting in Toronto. I was very green, very young, and dumbly excited about going to Toronto for a meeting. My fellow Grand Rapids airport GSC travelers laughed at me. They said one hotel conference center looked the same as another and if I wanted to see Toronto I'd need to look quickly between the airport and hotel because that would be the total extent of my view. Then they soberly warned me that I shouldn't expect much change to happen, maybe after 6 or 7 meetings I might experience a smidgen of change, but that was just a maybe. Sadly, they were spot on. The RCA bureaucracy was entrenched and immovable.

There is an incredible opportunity for change before us. Yes, much is being thrust upon us, and much of it we don't want, and yet it is still a huge opportunity to move in mission, tie into what God wants to do, and be open to the Holy Spirit and his moving.

*<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.<sup>iv</sup>*

The President's Report was referred to the Study Committee.

## **ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT**

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

## **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT**

Dan Gillett, reporting

### Summary of Actions Taken in the Past Year

The *Rules of Order* of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (RSGL) state that among other duties, the Executive Committee shall "administer the affairs of the Regional Synod between sessions of the assembly." Since the 2021 Assembly meeting, the Executive Committee has met four times. A summary of

each meeting is printed below. With the exception of the January meeting, the meetings were held in person at the Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids

At the June 28, 2021 meeting, the committee:

- welcomed new members Mike Johnson (At-Large) and Lee DeYoung (GLCC).
- approved the Assembly Minutes of May 3, 2021 for distribution.
- participated in a Bible Study led by Wayne Otten on the topic of resiliency.
- evaluated the 2021 Assembly of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes.
- approved the date of Monday, May 2, 2022 for the next RSGL Assembly.
- tentatively scheduled a special session of the RSGL Assembly in November or early December.
- received a report from John Messer on his work as our Regional Executive.
- reviewed documents produced by the RSGL Transition Team in response to the Vision 2020 Report.
- discussed the viability of the Luminex Group (LuminexGroup.org) and approved \$7,000 for Philanthropy/Development Training.
- confirmed our delegates for the General Synod meeting at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona from October 14-19, 2021.
- received word that Scott Lokers will be retiring on October 1 from his work in Transition Ministry and as a Church Optimization Catalyst within our region. A retirement event was held for Scott on June 27.

At the November 1, 2021 meeting, the committee:

- received a report from the General Synod meeting on October 14-19, 2021.
- cancelled the special RSGL Assembly meeting that was tentatively scheduled.
- affirmed the RSGL Transition Guidelines and the Reconstructing Process proposed in John Messer's report.
- welcomed Tom Grabill as our new Transition Ministry Catalyst.
- explored the ways our Luminex Group ministry is growing (Teachable courses, seminars, eBooks).
- reviewed the Finance Committee report presented by Mike Gafa.
- approved amounts for the 2022 housing allowance for staff members: Mike Gafa, John Messer, and Howard Moths.
- reviewed the Guiding Principles of the Synod of the Great Lakes and made changes to the Addendum that was adopted in January of 2021.
- nominated Judy Nelson to serve a second term as our representative on the Commission on Nominations of the General Synod.
- appointed Rev. Dan Gillett to serve as the regular delegate from the RSGL to the 2022 General Synod.

At the January 5, 2022 special meeting, the committee:

- met virtually after hearing that Rev. Tom Grabill transitioned to a full member of the RSGL staff on January 1, 2022, as our new Transition Ministry Catalyst.
- voted to approve a housing allowance designation for Tom Grabill for 2022.

At the March 21, 2022 meeting, the committee:

- received a written and oral report from John Messer on his work. He discussed the change roller coaster and the various responses within our region to the 2021 General Synod decisions regarding the Vision 2020 report.
- discussed several proposals for restructuring the classes within the regional synod and employing the staff of the regional synod. This process will require consultation with the present classis leadership.
- reviewed a report from the Finance Committee including revisions to the 2021/2022 Ministry Fund Budget.
- voted to affirm the recommendation of the Finance Committee to keep the 2023 RSGL assessment the same at \$18.50.
- voted to affirm the recommendation of the RSGL Finance Committee of a 6% increase for the 2023 salary guidelines for both ministers and church staff.

- conducted a review following the Guiding Principle AP1.b.2 requirement for “monitoring of the performance of the Regional Executive and its own work as a board.”
- reviewed Addendum additions to the RSGL Guiding Principles as part of monitoring the performance of the RSGL Executive Committee.
- approved a new T-MP7 in the Transition Guidelines Addendum: “The Regional Executive shall a cast vision for a preferred future to support and encourage fruitful and thriving ministry among regional synod, its classes, and their churches.”
- reviewed a rough draft of the Nominations Report that will be presented to the 2022 RSGL Assembly.
- voted to nominate Mike Johnson to serve a second term on the RSGL Executive Committee as an at-large member.
- voted to nominate Michelle Chahine as our presidential candidate following the provision of the RSGL Rules of Order.
- voted to nominate both Nancy Boote and Suzanne Hart to the office of vice-president.
- voted to nominate five ministers from the list of delegates to the RSGL Assembly with the understanding that they will be contacted one at a time in the specified order and the first minister who accepts the nomination will appear on the ballot for the office of vice-president.
- discussed the agenda for the annual RSGL Assembly that will be held in the DeWitt Ministry Center at the MRC on May 2, 2022 starting at 9:00 a.m.
- asked John Messer to present the big picture for a future vision of the region and to set up dialogue groups for the Assembly meeting.
- authorized the officers to approve the final draft of the 2022 Assembly agenda.
- set the dates for the next two meetings of this committee: Monday, June 27, 2022, and November 7, 2022.

This report was submitted in writing for the information of the delegates. The president encourages the delegates to ask questions or share comments on the work of the committee.

## **NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS**

### RSGL Executive Committee Members

The Rules of Order for the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (RSGL) state that each of its classes nominates one representative to the RSGL Executive Committee to be approved by the Assembly. Nomination of members to serve on the RSGL Executive Committee include the following main points:

- Nine members of the Executive Committee (not counting officers) 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 of the seven classes in our region for approval at the Assembly meeting as needed. Each 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 RSGL Executive Committee will nominate two at-large members for approval by the Assembly, as needed, to ensure a balance of leadership gifts, ethnic/gender/age perspectives, and other skills as may be helpful on the Executive Committee.
- Terms begin on June 1 and end on May 31. Should any of the members resign or otherwise vacate their position, the classis (or the RSGL Executive Committee in the case of an at-large member) nominates a new person to serve the remainder of the unexpired term for election at the next Assembly meeting.

Not counting our Regional Executive and the four elected officers of the regional synod, the classes are currently represented by the following people on the RSGL Executive Committee, listed with the year that their term on office expires. Also listed are the two at-large members of the Executive Committee, bringing the total number to nine.

| <b>Classis</b>     | <b>Committee Members (class) M=Minister</b>               |
|--------------------|---|
| Great Lakes City   | Lee DeYoung (2023, 1 <sup>st</sup> term)                  |
| Holland            | Deb Yurk (2022, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term) M                   |
| Muskegon           | Oswaldo (Wally) De La Fuente (2023, 1 <sup>st</sup> term) |
| Northern Michigan  | Paul DeBoer (2024, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term)                  |
| North Grand Rapids | Nancy Boote (2022, 1 <sup>st</sup> term) M                |



|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Southwest Michigan | Suzanne Hart (2024, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term) M      |
| Zeeland            | Jami Alferink (2024, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term)       |
| At-Large           | Mike Johnson (2022, 1 <sup>st</sup> term)        |
| At-Large           | Jen Holmes Curran (2023, 2 <sup>nd</sup> term) M |

Deb Yurk will be completing her second term in 2022 and Holland Classis will need to nominate a person who is not a minister to replace her. Nancy Boote will be completing her first term in 2022 and is eligible to be nominated by North Grand Rapids Classis for a second term. Mike Johnson was elected at the 2021 Assembly to fulfill an unexpired term of an at-large member on the RSGL Executive Committee. His first term is expiring in 2022 and he was nominated for a second term by the RSGL Executive Committee. Since Lee DeYoung was appointed by the Great Lakes City Classis to replace Michelle Chahine who was elected as our vice-president, he will need to be elected by the 2022 Assembly to serve the remaining year of his term.

The North Grand Rapids Classis nominated Nancy Boote to be elected to her second term on the RSGL Executive Committee. Nancy Boote was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania. She graduated from Hope College with a major in Religion and minor in music. After graduation, Nancy explored her ministry gifts through the RCA's Adventure in Ministry program where she served at Bethany Memorial Reformed Church in New York City. Nancy has served in various ministry positions and administrative roles in churches in Madison, Wisconsin and in Columbia, Missouri where she and her husband, Evan raised their two sons. From 1998-2004, Nancy was the Associate Teaching Director for Community Bible Study in Columbia. During this time, Nancy was called to seminary. She graduated from Western Theological Seminary's Distance Learning Program in 2011 with a M.Div. After moving to Grand Rapids, MI in 2012, she served as the Pastor of Congregational Care at Ridgewood CRC in Jenison until 2018. She was ordained in 2013 and is a part of the North Grand Rapids Classis. Nancy is currently serving on the Regional Synod Executive Team (2019-2022) and Regional Synod's transitional team. She also is the co-chair/co-founder of the RCA's Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings that take place the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of the month. She also is serving with RCA staff in planning the pre-General Synod prayer gatherings. Nancy and her husband attend worship in both Grand Rapids and Holland. Besides her passion for prayer and evangelism, Nancy also enjoys walking, reading, writing, music, and being a grandma.

**R-2**

**To elect Nancy Boote for a second three-year term on the RSGL Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2022, as the representative from the North Grand Rapids Classis. (ADOPTED)**

The RSGL Executive Committee nominated Mike Johnson for a second term on the RSGL Executive Committee as an at-large member. Mike Johnson grew up in the Cadillac Christian Reformed Church in Cadillac, Michigan. He served as a deacon before moving from the area. He and his wife, Kelly, became members of the Immanuel Community Reformed (Lansing) in 1990, and he has served in several roles including deacon, elder, adult Sunday School teacher (10 years) and middle school Sunday School teacher (10 years) as well as other committee work. He and Kelly raised their three sons at Immanuel, too. He worked in several different school districts as a teacher, coach, principal, and central office administrator. He retired from Grand Ledge Public Schools in 2019 after spending the last 29 years of his 40 year career in GL. He is an elder at ICRC and the VP of consistory. He earned his BS and MA from Central Michigan University and his PhD from MSU in 2000 although his allegiance continues to be with the Big 10 school down the road. Go Blue! Mike enjoys spending time with family and sporting activities.

**R-3**

**To elect Mike Johnson for a second three-year term on the RSGL Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2022, as an at-large member. (ADOPTED)**

Lee DeYoung was appointed by the Great Lakes City Classis to replace Michelle Chahine who was elected as our vice-president. According to our Rules of Order, Lee needs to be elected by the 2022 Assembly to serve the remaining year of his term. Lee DeYoung retired from Words of Hope in 2019. He served that Grand Rapids-based international media ministry for 33 years as its Vice President for International Ministries which entailed travel to 90 different countries. Lee earned a B.A. from Hope College (1971) and an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business (1983). He also attended Western

Theological Seminary from 1971-1972. Lee has served as an elder and vice president of the Consistory at Hager Park Reformed Church in Jenison, MI where he also participates in worship, IT, the prayer team, and occasionally preaches. In the RCA, Lee has served as the President of the General Synod (2017-18), Moderator of the General Synod Council (2018-19), and Moderator of the Commission on Nominations (2014-16). In Great Lakes City Classis, Lee has served two terms as classis president, Emerging Leaders Team chair, and as a member of the classis leader search team. Lee currently serves on the boards of Transforming Leaders in Asia, Facilitators International (Nepal), the Remember Niger Coalition, and the Malawi Reformation Network. Lee grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago. He and his wife Sheri live in Jenison, MI where they moved in 1985. God has blessed them with four adult children (Peter, Kevin, Kristen, and Karissa) and 30 grandchildren.

**R-4**

**To elect Lee DeYoung to serve the remainder of an unexpired term on the RSGL Executive Committee, ending on May 31, 2023, as a representative of the Great Lakes City Classis. (ADOPTED)**

Holland Classis is nominating Gary Morris to be elected to his first term on the RSGL Executive Committee as their new representative. Gary Morris grew up in Temperance Michigan in the southeast corner of the state. He was active in the Nazarene Church through high school and into college. But as he examined Nazarene theology while in college, he became uncomfortable with several of their major tenets. Upon graduation, his federal career took him to several different towns where he belonged to a United Methodist church, two Baptist churches, a Calvary Chapel and finally Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia. He has concluded from his denominational wanderings that he is committed to reformed theology. He and his wife retired to Holland 10 years ago and he has been active in First Reformed there. He has served as an Elder, chair of the Outreach team, as a worship leader, and is currently Vice President of Consistory. Gary has a bachelor's degree in economics from Michigan State and a master's degree in Artificial Intelligence from the University of Pennsylvania. He spent 32 years in the IRS. Upon retirement he returned to Penn for 8 years to do doctoral research on a Machine Learning problem for Wycliffe Bible Translators. He received a PhD for this work in 2008. He is an avid cyclist and an occasional sailor.

**R-5**

**To elect Gary Morris for a three-year term on the RSGL Executive Committee, beginning on June 1, 2022, as the representative from the Holland Classis. (ADOPTED)**

2022 Presidential Candidate (our current vice-president)

The RSGL Rules of Order specify that the president is elected by ballot and the current vice-president is the sole nominee on the first ballot. If the candidate receives a majority vote of the delegates present at the meeting, the current vice-president shall be declared elected. Michelle Chahine is our current vice-president.

**Michelle Chahine** and her husband Joe have been members of Immanuel Community Reformed Church in Lansing, MI for over 30 years. They have two adult sons, Casey, age 32 and Mitchel, age 27. She is currently serving as the Vice President of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes Executive Committee, member of the General Synod Council and member of the RCA Re-structuring Team. Most recently she served as the Great Lakes City Classis President and Vice President, Great Lakes City Classis Classis Leader Search Team Moderator, and RCA General Secretary Search Team Member & Communications Coordinator.

She has served in many roles in her local church as Elder, Consistory Vice President, Consistory Clerk, Pastoral Search Team Chairperson, Youth Director Search Team Chairperson, Outreach Ministry Team Leader, Club Mom & Girlfriends Ministry Co-leader and other various projects and committees.

She has also served as the General Synod Council Moderator and the Synod of the Great Lakes Regional Representative to the General Synod. Prior to serving in ministry roles, she enjoyed a career in Customer Service, Operations & Project Management and served on boards for non-profit organizations; St. Vincent Catholic Charities and Lansing Area Parents' Respite Center. She graduated from Michigan State University with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication. She has a passion for strategic leadership and developing systems that drive organizations and people to serve well and has a deep sensitivity for other cultures.

### 2022 Vice-Presidential Candidates (nominated by the RSGL Executive Committee)

Under ARTICLE V. ELECTIONS, our Rules of Order contain the following rules for the nomination and election of the Vice-President of the Synod of the Great Lakes:

Sec. 2. The vice-president shall be elected by ballot from among the list of the delegates enrolled at the regular session. The office of vice-president shall be filled by a minister of Word and sacrament only on alternate years. The Executive Committee shall recommend a minimum of three (3) eligible candidates for the office of vice-president. Other nominations of delegates may be offered from the floor of the assembly on the nominating ballot (first ballot).

Sec. 3. The election for vice-president shall not begin until the president has been elected. The nominees recommended by the Executive Committee and others nominated from the floor shall appear on the nominating ballot. If any of the nominees receives two-thirds of the total number of ballots cast on the nominating ballot, the nominee shall be declared elected. If this is not the case and more than three nominees were on the ballot, the three nominees receiving the highest number of votes will be placed on the electing ballot. If only three nominees were on the nominating ballot, the names of the two nominees receiving the highest number of votes will be placed on the electing ballot. A simple majority of ballots cast on the electing ballots will constitute an election to the office. If the second ballot (the first electing ballot) does not result in an election, the names of the two nominees receiving the highest number of votes will be placed on the next electing ballot.

### 2022 Candidates for Vice-President

This year we must nominate a person who is a minister of Word and Sacrament for the office of vice-president of the regional synod. All those who are ministers and are serving on the RSGL Executive Committee and all those who are serving as minister delegates from the classes to this Assembly are eligible for nomination. Here is a list of the ministers who are currently serving on the RSGL Executive Committee: Jen Holmes Curran, Deb Yurk, Nancy Boote, and Suzanne Hart. A list of the delegates from the classes will be distributed at the March 21 meeting.

**Nancy Boote** was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania. She graduated from Hope College with a major in Religion and minor in music. After graduation, Nancy explored her ministry gifts through the RCA's Adventure in Ministry program where she served at Bethany Memorial Reformed Church in New York City. Nancy has served in various ministry positions and administrative roles in churches in Madison, Wisconsin and in Columbia, Missouri where she and her husband, Evan raised their two sons. From 1998-2004, Nancy was the Associate Teaching Director for Community Bible Study in Columbia. During this time, Nancy was called to seminary. She graduated from Western Theological Seminary's Distance Learning Program in 2011 with a M.Div. After moving to Grand Rapids, MI in 2012, she served as the Pastor of Congregational Care at Ridgewood CRC in Jenison until 2018. She was ordained in 2013 and is a part of the North Grand Rapids Classis. Nancy is currently serving on the Regional Synod Executive Team (2019-2022) and Regional Synod's transitional team. She also is the co-chair/co-founder of the RCA's Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings that take place the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of the month. She also is serving with RCA staff in planning the pre-General Synod prayer gatherings. Nancy and her husband attend worship in both Grand Rapids and Holland. Besides her passion for prayer and evangelism, Nancy also enjoys walking, reading, writing, music, and being a grandma.

**Tim Dieffenbach** was raised in the Reformed Church. He is a son of Ross Reformed Church (Illiana Classis). Tim attended Central College in Pella, Iowa before transferring to Hope College in Holland, Michigan in his sophomore year. During his college years he served for 3 years at Camp Manitoqua in Frankfort, Illinois. Upon graduation from Hope, he entered Western Theological Seminary and graduated with his M Div. in 1988.

He was already working on the staff at Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids in youth ministry. Tim served on various committees in North Grand Rapids Classis, the Regional Synod Youth Team, was a regional trainer for the National Institute of Youth Ministry and Youth Unlimited, as well as led student colloquy groups at Western Seminary. Tim believes serving the larger church to be an important part of his calling.

After 18 1/2 years at Central he started serving Thornapple Community Church in 2005. He and his co-pastors, Paul Wesselink (former) and Kent Frens (present), have embraced the learning and rhythm of Ridder Church renewal to help shape the life and ministry of the church. In Great Lakes City Classis he has also served on various committees including a recent term on executive team that included his leadership as Classis president. Tim also serves as the Chaplain to the Cascade Fire Department.

Tim is married to Brenda Hoffman Dieffenbach. They are parents of two sons, Zachary, married to Breanna, and Trevor, married to Sabrina. They also have two daughters, Abby and Emily, who are students at Hope. They enjoy hiking, fishing, and travel and look forward to a day they might be blessed to spoil grandchildren.

**Suzanne Hart** grew up in upstate New York. She attended Hope College, where she met her husband, Kevin. They were married in 1991. After college, she went to grad school at Binghamton University to pursue a PhD in English, but after two years realized that both she and Kevin were being called to ministry. They attended New Brunswick Theological Seminary together and graduated in 1997. They co-pastored the Federated Church of Kerhonkson, NY and the Reformed Church of Three Bridges, NJ. Suzanne also served on the Denominational Youth Team for many years, and as the RCA Call Waiting Coordinator, working to lift up the vocation of ordained ministry before the denomination, and helping those struggling to discern their call. She ran the Call Waiting program for youth and college delegates at General Synod for five years. After taking several years off from full time ministry to focus on family, Suzanne was on staff at Second Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, MI as the Pastor for Transformational Ministries for three years. She is currently serving as the Transitional Pastor at Lakeland Reformed Church in Vicksburg, MI and is Chair of the Classis of Southwest Michigan's Vitalization Team, whose focus is transitions, health, and equipping. She also sits on the Classis Leadership Team. Suzanne and Kevin have four children: Elizabeth (and Dan), Benjamin (20), Nathan (16), and Anna (12). They have three grandchildren. Her ministry passions are preaching and all things transformative. Suzanne enjoys being outdoors, particularly in the mountains of her home state, and near the Michigan shore, and time spent with family.

#### General Synod Commissions

The General Synod Commission on Nominations requested that the RSGL nominate two representatives to serve on commissions of the General Synod.

Rev. John (Chip) Sauer is serving as our representative on the Commission on Judicial Business. His first term ends in 2022, and he has decided not to serve another term. The RSGL Executive Committee voted to nominate Susan Vogel-Vanderson to take his place and she accepted the nomination.

Rev. Judy Nelson is serving as our representative on the Commission on Nominations until 2022 when she is eligible to be nominated to a second term. She is currently vice moderator of the commission. The RSGL Executive Committee voted to nominate Judy for a second term, and she has accepted the nomination.

Bruce Deckinga is serving as our representative on the General Synod Council until his term expires in 2023. The 2013 General Synod approved an amendment to the BCO which stated that regional synod representatives to the GSC must be from among its "regular classical delegates to the immediately preceding General Synod" (BCO 3.1.3.1b). The RSGL will need to nominate an individual to fill this opening from the group of delegates who attended the 2022 General Synod from one of the classes within the bounds of our regional synod. At this time, it is likely that the CoN will ask the RSGL to name a minister to serve on GSC. It is possible that in order to meet the BCO's requirement that GSC be comprised of half elders and half ministers, that our regional synod might be asked to name an elder instead of a minister.

#### General Synod Delegates

General Synod is planned for Thursday afternoon, June 9, through Tuesday, June 14, 2022, on the campus of Central College in Pella, Iowa. Each regional synod is entitled to appoint:

- one regular, voting delegate (BCO 1.IV.1)
- two women corresponding delegates (BCO 3.I.9.11a)
- one young adult corresponding delegate (BCO 3.I.9.11b)
- its regional synod executive as a corresponding delegate (BCO 3.I.9.11c)

Dan Gillett will serve as our regular delegate. Deb Yurk and Jennifer Holmes Curran will be attending General Synod as the women corresponding delegates from the RSGL. We are not sending a young adult corresponding delegate this year.

**BREAK**

#### **FUTURE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL SYNOD**

Michelle Chahine framed expectations for this discussion and introduced John Messer. John presented a PowerPoint that included the Change Rollercoaster and restructuring process that included the three steps: 1) Reevaluate, 2) Refocus, and 3) Restructure. After the presentation, the delegates were asked to discuss at their tables a number of questions regarding the process of reevaluate, refocus, and restructure. The delegates were asked to choose one person to report after lunch on the result of their discussion.

## ELECTION OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT

Nancy Boote, Tim Dieffenbach, Suzanne Hart and 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 Nancy Boote and Tim Dieffenbach were presented for the second ballot. Tim Dieffenbach was elected to the office of Vice-President on the second ballot.

## LUNCH

## WORSHIP

Worship was led by Dan Gillett using a responsive reading from Scripture, acapella singing of *Holy, Holy, Holy*, a prayer of confession, a season of prayer around the tables, acapella singing of *There is a Redeemer*, and a closing prayer.

## FUTURE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL SYNOD

The delegates were asked to their response to the questions regarding the process of reevaluate, refocus, and restructure of the regional synod. Discussion groups considered what aspects of the presentation they would promote, what they would resist, and what they would change. Based on very good discussion around the tables, feedback from the groups emphasized the positives of:

- Getting back to basics of gospel and mission
- The importance of “costly discipleship”
- The necessity of ongoing evaluation questions

In addition, they identified that some questions must be answered as we progress:

- What is fruit?
- What is a denomination in a secular age?
- What defines the RCA?

Some discussion also recommended that we “ask if we are missing any voices in this discussion” and “move from conceptual to practical.”

## REGIONAL EXECUTIVE REPORT

John Messer, reporting

John Messer presented an oral report on the work of the regional synod along with the written report below.

Our current reality is problematic, filled with significant challenges and uncertainties. We are facing numerous trials and tests of faith, as individuals and as congregations. For many, it is difficult to trust God’s word in James: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

Currently, 27 churches, comprising approximately one-third of confessing members of the regional synod have filed petitions to withdraw from the RCA. We anticipate that even more will submit petitions in the future. Even beyond decisions to stay or go, we face numerous issues—relational, administrative, financial, and ministerial, among others. Church leaders are encountering devastating ministry conditions. COVID has drastically changed the ministry context. Deepening cultural secularity compounds the contextual demands on churches and ministers. Unsurprisingly, ministers are burning out and resigning in record numbers. Simultaneously, congregations are shrinking, and churches are closing.

Yet, as James told us, there is good news in the midst of the bad news. The trials we are facing are opportunities to persevere. Challenges that are trying our faith are opportunities to examine ourselves, to reevaluate and to refocus. Although we may not feel like it, now is the time to step back, take a big breath, and start seeing our circumstances and spiritual condition from a different perspective. We can focus on the opportunities that God is providing in the midst of the challenges.

Let’s begin by focusing on three important questions to define our current reality and the opportunities presented:

1. Who we are now,
2. What are we called to do now, and
3. Who is our neighbor now?

As suggested above, the answers to these questions have changed in the last number of years. What does that mean for our congregations and our ministries? How can we adapt to be most effective in light of these wide-ranging changes?

### **The Opportunity to Reevaluate**

Something is not right. Relationships, the substance of fruitful ministry, are strained at best. We know that outward antagonisms and conflicts reflect our inward realities. Jesus said, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:45, NIV). Change is needed, but not in someone or something else. I need changing. We need changing. If nothing else, the last number of years have revealed our spiritual condition, if we are willing to see. We must let perseverance continue its work, so that we can grow and mature in Christ. We must take this God-given opportunity to reevaluate our ministries, our values, our assumptions, and our priorities to see if we are focusing on what's most important.

For example, is it possible that we have been so focused on outward "ministry" that we have become complacent about the need for ongoing spiritual growth? Have we been satisfied with quick fixes rather than long-term solutions to our deeper issues? When we consider our current condition, is it possible that our discipleship has not been adequate, that our communities of faith have been more focused on doing than being? Is it possible that we have adopted cultural values that conflict with, or even undermine, our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior? Have we demonstrated the willingness to address difficult questions, doing the work of self-examination, confession and repentance, individually and corporately?

### **The Opportunity to Refocus**

An honest, authentic reevaluation of where we are equips and empowers us to refocus our values and priorities. When we consider biblical values and priorities, two stand out as standards to focus our discipleship and ministries on.

#### **Mark 12:28b-33 (NIV)**

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

<sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

<sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup> "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

And: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:11, 19-20).

Our source of love is God himself. God's love for us and in us is also the basis of our love for our neighbors. The love of God, our love for God, and the love of God for our neighbors and one another should be the expression of our ministries, and therefore, of our individual and group spiritual formation processes. As J. C. Ryle wrote, "Love of God is prior to love of neighbor and establishes its possibility." Loving God and neighbor is so important, that "even the most sacred duties...do not take precedent over agapē love — and they have no meaning unless they are expressions of it." In this sense, ministry is completely about love. To love God is to love your neighbor; to love your neighbor is to love God.

I propose this is the most necessary standard by which we evaluate ourselves, and by which we refocus our ministries. The love of God and neighbor is a valid standard by which to evaluate ourselves, our ministries, and our circumstances. As Ryle wrote, "By them let us try every difficulty of conscience that may happen to beset us as to right and wrong. Happy is that [person] who strives to frame [their] life according to these rules." Accepting the two great commands as our standard shapes our discipleship, which shapes our servant leadership, and ultimately our ministries.

Discipleship, then, is the process of growing in love for God first and also our neighbor. That may seem too simple, but it is true. Discipleship is all about growing in a love relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit. We often try to make it more complicated, but it is not. And although it is simple, it is however, a long, slow process which cannot be microwaved. Maybe our cultural values of quick and easy results influenced our expectation for discipleship. Maybe we have become too dependent on quick and easy products and programs, which contribute to superficial spiritual formation.

However, there is no quick solution to this kind of deep discipleship. We must commit to the long, slow work of deeper discipleship at every level. There is no ministry which will not benefit from a greater focus on loving God and neighbor. Because, by focusing on loving God and our neighbors we become

servants of both. This focus will also help to develop servant leaders, who humbly serve others to help them become all that has purposed for them (Ephesians 2:10). There are many benefits of the focus on love. Our ministries will be more effective. Our relationships will be more satisfying. Our churches will be more inviting. So, let's boldly take a step back and ask ourselves questions. Are we accomplishing what we say we value most? Are we valuing what is most important to Jesus?

Restructuring the synod is necessary, but we will take time to let the dust settle before we implement any changes. We must take this God-given opportunity to do some hard work. Making a decision about staying or going isn't the hard part. It's asking whether we're really accomplishing our God-given purpose in a God-purposed way. Are we increasingly reflecting Christ to our neighbors? Let's aspire to that!

### **The Opportunity for Aspiration, not Desperation**

For years we have been focusing on problems, and often acting out of desperation. Our energy was totally focused on eliminating the problem. In the short term we felt like we were accomplishing something meaningful. But in the long run the same problem kept resurfacing. Ultimately, the problem focus led to spiritual and emotional depletion. We had little, if any, energy or desire to persevere, to consider how God might bring about something new from the old. Maybe we need to try a different approach.

Instead of focusing on problems, let's focus on the vision of becoming better disciples, more faithful apprentices of Jesus, of loving God and our neighbors with all that we are and all that we have. Let's aspire to be more, to greater love, to more faithful lives. Focusing our energy and effort on reaching our aspirations may make us uncomfortable in the short term, but it will bear significant fruit in the long term as we persevere.

In reality, there are no quick fixes for our issues. But God works through difficulties as we persevere, as we reflect and refocus. So, let's trust God to accomplish what only he can do. And let's do what we can do: reevaluate how well we are loving God with all that we are, and loving our neighbors (including one another) with all that God provides. God made a promise to those who do. "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

Deep down, more than anything else, I pray that you all, and many others through you, will receive that blessing!

## **FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT**

Mike Gafa, reporting

Mike gave an oral presentation referring to the financial reports in the agenda packet. In addition he presented the following written report from the Finance Committee.

During the past year, the Finance Committee:

- Reviewed the investment manager's report on earnings for 2021, and the current portfolio with the Synod's investment manager.
- Reviewed financial statements for the year ended September 30, 2021, along with quarters ended on December 31, 2021, and March 31, 2022.
- Updated the Compensation Guidelines For Ministers of Word and Sacrament for 2023.
- Updated the voluntary Church Staff Salary and Benefit Guidelines designed for churches in our region for 2023.
- Reviewed in detail our current financial situation and worked proactively to plan for sharp decreases in revenue in FY'23 and beyond.

## **COMPENSATION GUIDELINES**

The Executive Committee requests that the Finance Committee review and update compensation guidelines for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and for other church staff members, on an annual basis. The Finance Committee has completed its review, and is recommending a 6.0% increase over the 2022 guidelines. Below is the rationale for its recommendation.

The Finance Committee takes into account three key indexes when formulating a compensation recommendation: Consumer Price Index (CPI), which measures the average change in price over time of consumer goods and services purchased by households; Inflation rate, which represents the percentage of change in product and service prices from one year to the next; and the Cost-of-Living-Adjustment (COLA) figure released each year by the Social Security Administration.

At our February 2022 meeting, we established that the key indexes listed above stood at:

- CPI: 7.5% (based on 1/31/21 – 1/31/22);
- Inflation Rate: 7.5% (based on 1/31/21 – 1/31/22);

- COLA for 2022: 5.9% (based on the SSA in November 2021).

For reference, we also considered that in FY'22, our recommendation (later approved) was to increase compensation guidelines by 1.75%. This figure aligned with key economic indexes when it was formulated in March 2020, but in hindsight, given the adverse economic impact of the pandemic, was too low. Furthermore, in the two years prior (FY'21 and FY'20), compensation guidelines were adjusted by 2.0% each year.

We acknowledge the immense challenges that pastors and ministry staff face at this time (as evidenced by Barna reporting in November 2021 that 38% of U.S. pastors have considered quitting ministry in the past year), and that burnout is accelerated when compensation lags significantly behind inflation and cost-of-living. Hence, we believe our recommendation of 6.0%, while difficult for churches to absorb, is appropriate at this time.

The Finance Committee recommended the following motions:

**R-6**

**That the proposed 2023 Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word and Sacrament be approved and recommended to the classes.**

**The motion was made and seconded to amend the minimum annual base salary schedule so that it reflects an 8.5 increase instead of 6 percent. (APPROVED)**

**(R-6 WAS ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

**R-7**

**That the proposed 2023 Church Staff Salary and Benefits Guidelines be approved and recommended to the churches to be implemented on a voluntary basis.**

**The motion was made and seconded to amend the minimum annual base salary schedule so that it reflects an 8.5 increase instead of 6 percent. (APPROVED)**

**(R-7 WAS ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

The decision to increase minimum compensation by 8.5% is in alignment with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and measures the rate of inflation by tracking average change in price over time of consumer goods and services purchased by households. As of March 2022, CPI stood at 8.5%.

For reference, the 8.5% increase in the 2023 Minister of Word and Sacrament Minimum Compensation Guidelines comes on the heels of an increase of 1.75% in 2022, and 2.0% in both 2021 and 2020. In reality, the 2023 increase is akin to salary leveling, and is long overdue in the RSGL.

We acknowledge the immense challenges that pastors and ministry staff face at this time (as evidenced by Barna Research reporting in November 2021 that 38% of U.S. pastors have considered quitting ministry in the past year). We also acknowledge that burnout in ministry is accelerated when compensation lags significantly behind inflation. Hence, the RSGL Assembly believes that an 8.5% increase in minimum compensation is both appropriate and necessary at this time.

## 2022-23 BUDGET

The Finance Committee has spent ample time considering, and giving input to, the formation of a Ministry Fund budget for 2022-23.

The 2022-23 Ministry Fund budget projects a worst-case *graduated* decrease in membership (from 33,741 members to 25,305 members). As shown on the budget, revenue projections vary by quarter based on projected decline.

While the budget projects a significant loss in 2022-23, it is more than offset by the surplus realized in 2021-22. Hence, over a two-year span, the budget is projected to land with a surplus of around \$50,000, which would help navigate through likely additional revenue decreases.

Further, because we recognize the financial challenges our congregations are facing, along with the need to meet our GLR commitments, we are setting the assessment rate at \$18.50/member, which not only matches the current FY2021-22 assessment rate, but represents the third consecutive year we have held this rate (following a 7.5% *decrease* in FY'2019-20).

In spite of financial challenges, we remain optimistic and believe we will have the necessary resources to serve our churches, leaders, and members well in FY2022-23.

## MINISTRY FUND



The 2023 proposed assessment of \$18.50 in our regional synod represents no change from 2022 and remains one of the lowest of the RCA's regional synods. The Finance Committee recommends the following motion:

**R-8**

**That the 2022-23 Ministry Fund Budget and the \$18.50 per confessing member assessment be approved. (ADOPTED)**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE**

Chuck Brower, chair (ZEE)

Tim Elzinga (NGR)

Cindy Lowman (SWM)

Vacant (Holland)

Mike Gafa, Treasurer (Ex-Officio)

Gordon Vander Slice (NMI)

Bob Zielinski (GLCC)

Irv Boersen (MUSK)

Alison DeBoer, staff

John Messer, Regional Executive (Ex-Officio)

**STAFF REPORTS**

Staff Reports from Tom Grabill and Mike Gafa were printed on pages 38 and 39 in the Assembly Workbook along with a Church Multiplication Report that begins on page 40.

**BREAK**

**CLASSICAL MINUTES COMMITTEE**

Andrea DeWard, reporting

Minutes of the seven classes within our region were submitted by the classis clerks and examined by this committee before the meeting. Andrea reported that examined the minutes from all seven classes and found them to be in good order. The committee members completed feedback forms that will be sent to each classis clerk.

**RESOLUTIONS/LEAVE OF ABSENCE COMMITTEE**

Jim Beezley, reporting

The following Resolutions were recommended by this committee:

**R-9**

**To thank Rev. Greg Brower 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-10**

**To thank Rev. Deb Yurk for her six years of service on the Executive Committee. (ADOPTED)**

The committee reported that Todd Bush and Sandra Nikkel were absent without excuse.

**STUDY COMMITTEE**

Kevin Hart, reporting

Kevin Hart reported on behalf of the Study Committee. The Study Committee met during lunch to consider the recommendations in the President's Report. Since the report of this committee is responding to my President's Report, Michelle Chahine was asked to assume the chair.

The first recommendation is in response to P-1 on page 3 in the President's Report: "To strongly encourage all churches within the RSGL to engage 10% of their active membership in a cross-cultural mission by 2024." The recommendation of the Study Committee was to approve this recommendation:

**R-11**

**"To forward a complete copy of the President's Report to each church within our regional synod, and to strongly encourage all churches within the RSGL to engage at least 10% of their active membership in either a local or global cross-cultural mission by 2024, and to request that each classis report to the RSGL through its elected representative on the RSGL Executive Committee on the progress made in implementing this recommendation. In**

**addition, that the RSGL Executive Committee provide resources and training to make cross-cultural mission possible.” (ADOPTED)**

The second recommendation is in response to P-2 on page 4 in the President’s Report: “To overture the General Synod to strongly encourage all churches within the RSGL to engage 10% of their active membership in a cross-cultural mission by 2024.” The recommendation of the Study Committee was to approve the following overture:

**R-12**

**The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to strongly encourage all churches within the RCA to engage at least 10% of their active membership in either a local or global cross-cultural mission by 2024.**

**Reasons:**

- 1. “The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.” - Emil Brunner**
- 2. The pivot from crisis and conflict to mission is essential.**
- 3. Seeing the gospel within another cultural context sharpens and enlivens our understanding of the gospel.**
- 4. Cross pollination of ministry ideas, energy, understandings, promotes learning, faith sharing, and gospel witness.**
- 5. Cross cultural fellowship is rich because we discover that what we have in common in Christ is far greater than our cultural differences.**
- 6. Our youth are attracted to a noble cause.**
- 7. Our General Secretary, our director of Global Missions, and the Synod the Heartlands have all been following the Holy Spirit’s leading and an amazing work has already begun.**

**(ADOPTED)**

The third recommendation is in response to P-3 on page 5 in the President’s Report: “To direct Regional Synod of the Great Lakes leader John Messer to confer with the Regional Synod of the Heartlands to discover potential confluence between mission activities of the Heartlands and RSGL, with report back to the Executive Committee no later than fall 2022.” The recommendation of the Study Committee was to approve this recommendation in response to P-3:

**R-13**

**“To direct Regional Synod of the Great Lakes leader John Messer to confer with the Regional Synod of the Heartlands to discover potential confluence between mission activities of the Heartlands and RSGL, with report back to the Executive Committee no later than fall 2022.”**

**(ADOPTED)**

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Delegates were asked to complete an evaluation form for the Assembly meeting. The delegates to this Assembly meeting will be asked to attend any special session held in 2022 unless otherwise designated by their classis.

## **READING OF THE JOURNAL**

In his role as stated clerk, Howard Moths read the minutes of this session by title: “The 67th Annual Session of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes Minutes, convened at the DeWitt Ministry Center, RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan on May 2, 2022.”

The Executive Committee will review and approve the minutes before publication and after that they will be available on the RSGL website.

## **SEATING OF THE NEW OFFICERS**

The past-president of the regional synod, Greg Brower, congratulated Michelle Chahine, the newly elected president, and Tim Diefenbach, the newly elected vice-president. Greg thanked Dan for his leadership of this Assembly. He offered words of encouragement to Michelle and Dan as they take on the responsibilities of their office.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

The motion was made, seconded, and carried to adjourn this Assembly of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes after the closing prayer. The session was adjourned at 2:50 p.m.

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Michelle Chahine closed the Assembly meeting with prayer.

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

### Documents that appear in the Appendix:

Financial Reports

2023 Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word and Sacrament

2023 Church Staff Salary and Benefits Guidelines

Staff Report: Tom Grabill (Transition Ministry/Church Vitality Catalyst)

Staff Report by Mike Gafa (Luminex Church Vitality Catalyst)

Church Multiplication Report

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<sup>i</sup> Swiss theologian Emil Brunner.

<sup>ii</sup> Henry Blackaby is often credited with proposing this concept in his book, "Experiencing God," which has helped many churches reframe ministry and move into vital ministry.

<sup>iii</sup> Swiss theologian Emil Brunner.

<sup>iv</sup> Eph 3:20-21 NIV