

Denomination Assessment Process

Overview and Report

THE GOAL

The goal of our Denomination Assessment Process has been simple and clear:

What is the best denominational fit for the future of Faith Reformed Church?

WHY DID WE ENTER A DENOMINATION ASSESSMENT PROCESS?

1) **Changes in the Reformed Church in America (RCA)**

While Faith Reformed Church (FRC) has remained consistent in its doctrinal perspectives since its organization in 1964, the Reformed Church in America has not. Here are five significant positions that have changed:

- a. Our Standards of Unity:
The Belhar Confession has been added as a Standard of faith.
- b. Who is Admitted to the Offices of the Church:
The offices of the church have been expanded to include women.
- c. Who is Admitted to the Lord's Table:
Baptized children who have not made confession of faith are now admitted.
- d. The Denominations with Whom We Have Full Communion:
Through the *Formula of Agreement*, we now have full communion with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Each of these denominations approves of and endorses homosexuality and same-sex marriage.
- e. The Removal of the Conscience Clauses from the Book of Church Order (BCO):
Clauses in the BCO, which for forty years gave constitutional standing for those who believe the offices of the church are for men only, have been removed, making those who hold that view eligible for discipline.

2) **Failure to Exercise Church Discipline**

The Belgic Confession states church discipline is one of the marks of the true church.

- a. Professors, pastors, and church officers are not being held accountable:
There are pastors in the RCA who deny: the virgin birth of Jesus, the Trinity, the doctrine of predestination, one or more of the five points of Calvinism, that we can know anything as right or wrong, the practice of infant baptism. Yet, none of these individuals have been the object of church discipline.

- b. When discipline has been exercised, it has been undermined by restoration without repentance:

The one example of church discipline in the RCA due to views and practices of same-sex marriage was the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, General Synod Professor of Theology and President of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Dr. Kansfield officiated the same-sex marriage of his daughter, was charged with violating his ordination vows, found guilty in a trial by the 2005 General Synod, removed from the office of General Synod Professor, and suspended as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. However, Dr. Kansfield was later returned to the office of Minister without recanting or repenting as required to do so by the General Synod.

3) Growing Acceptance of Homosexuality and Same-sex Marriage

- a. The RCA has debated the topic of homosexuality for over four decades.
See the accompanying document entitled: *An Overview of Matters Related to the Subject of Homosexuality in the RCA*
- b. Ordination and Installation of Homosexuals
 - i. Greenpoint Church, Queens, NY – Ann Kansfield serving as lay pastor
 - ii. Rev. Ursula Cargill transferred into the Classis of New Brunswick
 - iii. Ordination of Jonathan Vanderbeck by the Classis of Holland in 2016
 - iv. Certificate of Fitness and ordination of Chad Pack in 2017
- c. Failure in 2017 to Achieve a 2/3s Majority of the Classes in Order to Approve Marriage as Between One Man and One Woman
- d. Acceptance of *Room for All* and Advocates of Homosexuality
 - i. 2005 Letter to General Synod, “Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable, Too”
A letter from numerous RCA officers was written to the 2005 General Synod, at which Dr. Kansfield was on trial for officiating the same-sex marriage of his daughter. The letter, accepted as new business, included the following statements:
We believe that committed same-sex relationships are not sinful, but rather a blessing from God.
We believe that the Reformed Church in America ought to confess its sinfulness in adhering for too long to an oppressive position on homosexuality and ought to seek the forgiveness of its lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered brothers and sisters.
 - ii. *Room for All*
Room for All, organized in 2005, is a group of RCA leaders, members, and churches. Their Vision and Mission is:
Compelled by the inclusive love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit, Room for All is a community of Christ-followers in the Reformed Church in America. Our vision and mission statements indicate our commitment to the welcome

and affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people and their allies...and advocate for a radically inclusive welcome and affirmation of the full spectrum of God's people in all aspects of our congregational and denominational ministries.

As of June 2016, Room for All had as members: 34 congregations, 224 RCA pastors, 9 General Synod Professors (past or current), and 14-21 RCA staff members (past or current).

- iii. General Synod Worship Leader – Rev. Jacqui Lewis
Rev. Lewis, female pastor of the open and affirming Middle Collegiate Church (RCA) in Manhattan, was the worship leader for the 2007 General Synod.
- iv. Distribution and Book Signings at General Synod
RCA authors of pro-gay books have been granted the privilege of having book signings at General Synod meeting. At the 2016 General Synod, all of the delegates were given a book which included a favorable history of *Room for All*.
- v. *Room for All* was allowed to hold worship services at Western Seminary during the 2017 General Synod.
- e. Seminary and College Professors Writing Books Advocating Homosexuality
RCA General Synod Professor of Theology, James Brownson, who teaches at Western Theological Seminary, has written one of the leading evangelical books, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, advocating for the affirmation of homosexuality.
Dr. David Meyers, Hope College professor, has written: *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*.

4) Church Polity that Hinders Addressing Issues

- a. The Inability to Discipline Across Classes
The BCO does not provide any provisions to allow members from one classis to initiate discipline against another classis. Nor can the General Synod or a Regional Synod initiate discipline against a classis. As a result, the RCA has no ability to hold rogue classes accountable.
- b. The Neglect of the Authority of General Synod
The Preface of the BCO establishes our polity as representative, meaning members of the RCA are subject to the rulings of the assemblies which oversee them. The Preface also states General Synod has declarative authority, meaning it can make determinations as to what the Bible says. However, the prevailing view is that only what is written in our Standards of Unity and the BCO are authoritative. As a result, nothing the General Synod says or does, apart from amending the Constitution, holds any authority. Hence, all of the decades of statements by the General Synod saying the homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture are considered to be a mere matter of opinion and require no accountability.

5) Our Standards of Unity are No Longer the Standard

The primary thing that identifies and unites us as a denomination is that we confess to adhere to our creeds and confessions, known as our Standards of Unity, and commit together to live out our faith with one another in accordance with those Standards.

The abandonment of our Standards as standards is evidenced by the failure to exercise discipline in the RCA.

Many classes in the RCA, without reservation, knowingly license, ordain, and/or install Ministers who reject doctrines contained in our Standards of Unity.

There is a lack of agreement, and even the acceptance of contradictory views, on the definition and meaning of doctrines and principles, such as:

- the inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture;
- proper biblical hermeneutics;
- what is and is not sin;
- what it means to be Reformed;
- what it means to be Presbyterian;
- the nature of biblical unity;
- what is the gospel;
- the mission of the church;
- the authority of General Synod.

As a result, the very purpose and value of being a denomination has eroded.

6) A Lack of Trust in Our Seminaries, Colleges, Denominational Events and Resources

RCA college and seminary professors and instructors are not required to teach in accordance with our doctrinal Standards. Key doctrines about Scripture are rejected, the Doctrines of Grace/Five Points of Calvinism are mocked, complementarians are marginalized, and homosexuality and same-sex marriage are affirmed. These practices, along with the confusion about the issues listed in point 5 above, means we cannot as a congregation trust what is being taught in our educational institutions, at denominational events, or in our publications.

7) Faith Reformed Church's Financial Assessments are Being Used to Support Doctrines and Policies We Believe Are Unbiblical

The doctrines and policies practiced in the RCA which we believe are unbiblical are listed throughout this document. We recognize there will always be areas of disagreement in any denomination about various practices or applications of doctrine. Living with these differences is what the Preface of the BCO calls us to accept as part of "The Representative Principle." However, we are also obligated as a denomination to adhere to doctrinal purity for the sake of the peace and unity of the church. Therefore, we should not be compelled to support elements of our institution which we believe encourage false doctrine.

8) **A Diminishing Number of Orthodox Pastors for Future Leadership**

Perhaps the greatest personal concern for Faith Reformed Church is the future pastoral leadership of our congregation. If our seminaries are educating our future pastors with unorthodox teachings, and it undesirable and/or difficult for orthodox pastors to enter the RCA from other seminaries, the prospects of finding orthodox pastors in the future is greatly diminished. As history has shown, as the seminaries and pastors go, so go the congregations and denomination. Right now, the future does not look promising.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OTHER CLASSES?

We are not a congregational denomination, in which each congregation decides what is right in its own eyes. We are a confessional, covenantal denomination. This means we cannot turn a blind eye to what happens in other congregations or areas of the denomination. As a covenantal community, what affects one of us affects all of us. We are all “owners” of what happens under the name of the Reformed Church in America. Therefore, we have accountability to and for one another across the denomination. When the integrity of Scripture and/or the church is tarnished, it affects each one of us. Because we bear the name of the RCA, outsiders will look at, and relate to us either favorably or unfavorably, according to what they know and see takes place under our shared name, RCA.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE IN THE DENOMINATION ASSESSMENT PROCESS?

Our Denomination Assessment Process was birthed out of concern expressed by our Executive Committee in January 2017. Concerns about the RCA, however, have been discussed by the Consistory at least as far back as the time when Pastor Slotman was here. As the Executive Committee discussed the idea of doing a goal assessment for Faith Reformed Church, it became apparent that turmoil in the RCA might make it difficult to invest our energies in significant new local initiatives. Hence, the Executive Committee made a recommendation to the Consistory to enter into a Denomination Assessment Process. The Consistory agreed, and called a meeting of the Great Consistory in March to share its concerns with the broader leadership of the congregation. The Great Consistory supported having a Denomination Assessment Process.

Knowing Hingham and Gibbsville Reformed Churches were having similar discussions, our Board of Elders invited the Boards of Elders of those two congregations to a joint meeting on March 16 in order to inform one another of what was happening in each congregation. The Elders agreed to keep one another informed and acknowledged that there could be wisdom in walking through this process together.

At its April meeting, the Consistory voted to formally initiate the Denomination Assessment Process. The Classis of Wisconsin and the Consistory of First Reformed Church of Cedar Grove were informed by letter of our decision. Two courses of action were established at that meeting. An Exploratory Team was formed with the

responsibility to do research on behalf of the Consistory to examine potential, compatible, denominational fits for Faith Reformed Church in addition to the RCA. The Consistory also committed to provide a series of informational meetings for our congregation to explain the Consistory's concerns about the RCA. Four Congregation Education Classes were held following worship services, two in May and two in June.

At its May meeting, the Consistory approved a working statement, entitled "Denomination Expectations," listing what we would like to see in a denomination. The Consistory's discussion included an evaluation of the past and current values of Faith Reformed Church, including: our reformed theology, our Presbyterian form of church government, and a complementarian view of church offices. The Consistory determined it was not in the best interests of the congregation to change our views on these core values. The Denomination Expectations were presented to the congregation at the last of the four Congregation Education classes in June.

The Exploratory Team submitted its report to the Consistory in September. The report provided information on the similarities and differences of five denominations: the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the United Reformed Church in North America (UNRCNA), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and the Evangelical Free Church of America (ECFA). The Consistory gratefully received the report. The Exploratory Team Report was presented to the congregation at a special Congregational Meeting following the worship service on October 8.

At its November meeting, the Consistory decided to narrow its consideration of potential alternative denominations to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The Wisconsin Presbytery of the PCA was invited to send representatives to our December Consistory meeting. Two PCA pastors met with our Consistory on December 19. Elders from Gibbsville Reformed Church were also invited and attended.

The Consistory invited the Classis of Wisconsin to send representatives to its January 2018 meeting. The Interim Classis Leader, Tony De La Rosa, and the chair of the Revitalization and Multiplication Commission, Kevin Van Wyk, attended our meeting on January 23. Elders from Gibbsville Reformed Church also were invited and attended. Rev. De La Rosa provided responses to a series of questions from the Consistory.

The following night, January 24, four of our Elders and Pastor Sanford attended a video interview at Gibbsville Reformed Church with Rev. Bob Bouwer, pastor of Faith Church in Dyer, IN, and co-founder of the Gospel Alliance. Rev. Bouwer responded to a series of questions from the Gibbsville elders.

WHY DOES THE CONSISTORY CONSIDER THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA TO BE OUR BEST DENOMINATIONAL FIT?

- 1) Who is the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)?
See the accompanying document entitled:
A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church in America
- 2) How is the PCA similar to the RCA?
Both denominations are reformed, which describes our theology. Both denominations are presbyterian, which describes our form of polity (church government). So, the core components of our two denominations are fundamentally identical.
- 3) How is the PCA different from the RCA?
See the accompanying document entitled:
Distinctives of PCA Polity
- 4) What would change if Faith Reformed transferred to the PCA?
The reason for transferring to the PCA is so our values and commitments as a congregation would not change! Nothing in our outward appearances or practices would change. Our worship and ministries would continue as they are. Pastors would be called in a similar process, as would Elders and Deacons.
Beneath the surface, there would be some adjustments:
There would be a few differences in terminology, for example:
Consistory → Session, Classis → Presbytery.
The Elders alone, in contrast to the current structure of Elders and Deacons, would become the ruling body of the congregation.
The Board of Deacons would assume a greater role of service.
We would not be paying assessments to the denomination, freeing up more resources for our congregation's ministry.

OTHER THAN TRANSFERING DENOMINATIONS, WHAT OPTIONS ARE THERE?

- 1) We do nothing, and stay as we are in the RCA.
- 2) We stay in the RCA, and invest our energy as a congregation into turning the denomination around.
- 3) The RCA changes as a result of discussions on the future of the denomination:
In 2015, the President of General Synod proposed the gathering of a Special Council, whose goal was to settle the RCA's position once and for all regarding our positions on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The 2016 Special Council failed to accomplish that goal, and passed the baton on to the 2016 General Synod, which also failed to accomplish that goal. At the 2017 General Synod, the General Secretary proposed a denomination-wide discussion about the future of the RCA. This was a new approach in that it was not focused on resolving gender issues. Rather, it acknowledged the division with the RCA, and focused on that. Each classis over the past year has engaged in a

denominationally-guided discussion about the future of the RCA. Perspectives from those meeting are in the process of being gathered, reviewed, and compiled for a report to the 2018 General Synod this June. What, if any, recommendations or outcomes from those discussions are unknown at this time. Options could include: a) no recommendations for immediate changes, b) agreeing to disagree and keep moving forward as we are, c) a strategy for reconciling our differences, d) a recommendation for a peaceful separation or split as a denomination, or e) some other alternative. The timeline for any changes is also unknown.

4) *The Gospel Alliance*

a. Background of *The Gospel Alliance*

The Gospel Alliance was formed in 2017 by three RCA pastors of large congregations at the urging of at least one denominational leader. Their website introduces their alliance this way:

The Gospel Alliance is a movement of covenant partners who are engaging leaders and communities with the transforming message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make more and stronger disciples. This movement was started by a group of leaders from within the RCA (Reformed Church in America) but all churches and leaders are invited to join.

They describe part of their distinctives as:

To equip one another in relationship toward:

Establishing and multiplying churches

Strengthening churches

Diversity in churches

Missional effectiveness locally and globally

Strong leadership development systems

Mercy and Justice ministries locally and globally

The Church solemnizes a marital union between a man and a woman to reflect the covenantal love of Christ and His Church

b. The goals of *The Gospel Alliance* in changing the RCA

i. Publicly stated:

1. Church renewal and planting

To plant enough new, evangelical churches to shift the balance of power in the denomination.

2. Influence on Western Theological Seminary

To encourage changes in the seminary leadership and faculty.

ii. Not publicly stated:

1. Influence in numbers

There are over 500 individuals and 100 churches who have signed onto *The Gospel Alliance*. The hope is to gather sufficient critical mass of membership to have influence on the denomination.

2. The potential seed of a new denomination

If favorable changes do not take place in the RCA, *The Gospel Alliance* could be the foundation for a new denomination.

c. The prospects of *The Gospel Alliance*

i. The failure of *RCA Integrity*

In 2006, a group called *RCA Integrity* was formed with the intention of bring renewal to the RCA. *RCA Integrity* also held annual gatherings to encourage revitalization in churches. *RCA Integrity* also developed and implemented strategic plans for policy changes at the General Synod level. While having a significant impact at General Synods, it did not change the ongoing drift of the RCA. Nor did it gain the necessary critical mass of support. *RCA Integrity* disbanded in 2012.

ii. Lack of a short-term strategy

The Gospel Alliance's strategy is a long-term one. It does not have a strategy for strategically affecting the RCA in the short-term. Even if the balance of power can be tipped in favor of evangelicals, that would still only be a political victory, and does not resolve the doctrinal divisions in the RCA.

iii. Weakness of divided commitment

The fight to restore the RCA to its historic, doctrinal roots will be costly and time-consuming. It will require total commitment from those who are willing to engage in the battle. Those who enter half-heartedly will be likely to flee or surrender before victory could be won. Simultaneously trying to change the RCA and be thinking about a new denomination is not a healthy formula for perseverance in restoring the RCA.

iv. The character of a “Gospel Alliance” denomination

During the video interview with Rev. Bouwer which four of our Elders attended, Rev. Bouwer explained that Faith Church had also explored the option of transferring to another denomination. The denomination he thought was the best fit for Faith Church was the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in America (EPCA). This would suggest any new denomination started by *The Gospel Alliance* would be similar to the EPCA, a denomination we have not considered as a best fit for Faith Reformed.

WHY NOT STAY IN THE RCA AND FIGHT FOR REFORMATION?

- 1) Perhaps the progressives will leave the RCA:
 - a. If they were likely to do so, they would have done so already.
 - b. Why would they leave when they are winning?
 - c. They see it as their gospel mission to stay and promote their views of justice.
 - d. They depend upon the financial resources of the conservatives.
- 2) Questions to ask, as a denomination and congregation, about staying and fighting:
 - a. What would we be fighting for?
 - b. Who, in the denomination and in our congregation, is going to lead the fight?
 - c. Who, in the denomination and in our congregation, is going to do the fighting?
 - d. What resources are needed or would be used to fight?
 - e. Why haven't previous efforts to fight been successful?
 - f. Why do we think things would be different now?
 - g. What will it take to win?
 - h. What would winning look like?
 - i. Would this be the best stewardship of our resources?

The question is **not**:

Should we fight or not fight?

Because our culture is changing, we will be fighting no matter what happens.

The question **is**:

Do we want to spend our time fighting about doctrine within our denomination, or standing together with like-minded believers proclaiming the gospel to a fallen world?

WHAT HAPPENS NOW WITH THE CONSISTORY'S RECOMMENDATION?

Should the Consistory vote to recommend transferring to the PCA:

- 1) The recommendation will be presented to the Great Consistory for its counsel.
- 2) A Special Congregational Meeting will be held to introduce the recommendation.
- 3) A series of opportunities for discussion of the proposal would be given to the congregation.
- 4) There would be a congregational vote on the recommendation.
- 5) The Consistory will make the final decision.

WHAT IF FAITH REFORMED DECIDES TO STAY IN THE RCA?

Hopefully, all of the members of Faith Reformed will be willing to accept the majority's decision, and the congregation will stay together as a church family. The Consistory could then decide what, if any actions, should be taken as Faith Reformed continues on in the RCA.

IF FAITH REFORMED DECIDES TO TRANSFER TO THE PCA:

Hopefully, all of the members of Faith Reformed will be willing to accept the majority's decision, and the congregation will stay together as a church family. A request to transfer our denominational membership to the PCA would be submitted to the Classis of Wisconsin.

WHAT IS THE PROCEDURE FOR REQUESTING A TRANSFER?

The RCA Book of Church Order provides a constitutional pathway for a congregation "to withdraw from the denomination for the purpose of affiliating with another denomination." Here is an overview of the process:

- 1) The Consistory must receive acceptance into the other denomination.
- 2) The Consistory files a written petition to transfer to the Stated Clerk of the Classis.
- 3) The Classis will form or designate a committee to handle and evaluate the request.
- 4) The Classis committee will meet with congregation, Consistory, and representatives of the other denomination to:
 - a. ascertain the basic facts and conditions underlying the petition,
 - b. endeavor to ascertain the will of the congregation,
 - c. endeavor to reconcile any differences,
 - d. explore the advantages and disadvantages,
 - e. explore the needs of both the church and denomination, and
 - f. endeavor to ascertain how Christ's Kingdom may best be served.
- 5) Within six months of the filing of the petition, the committee shall report its findings and recommendations.
- 6) The report will be submitted to a meeting of the Classis within sixty days after being received.
- 7) The Classis shall determine whether or not "it is in the best interest of Christ's Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination."

WHAT OPTIONS DOES THE CLASSIS HAVE TO OUR REQUEST?

Should the Classis decide to approve the petition, the Classis also has the responsibility to decide whether or not to allow the church "to retain all or part of its real and personal property free from any claim on the part of the denomination." As indicated in the previous statement quoted from the BCO, the Classis could decide to allow the church to leave with anywhere from none to all of its assets.

WHAT IS THE BOTTOM LINE IN OUR DECISION?

Change is coming. It is inevitable.

The question is:

Will we be intentional and choose our changes, or we will be passive and be changed by others. If we want to maintain our current values, we will have to change our denomination.