

I previously summarized the options being considered by the 2020 Vision Team. The changes proposed effect our polity and church order. The differences in theology that have grown up over the years are not addressed. Rather, a restructuring is proposed so we can still live together under the RCA banner, but in a much different way. To understand the how much these options change the RCA, we need to understand our present church order.

Our church order grows out of the principle of a 'rule by elders.' This reflects Scriptures description of Israel and the early church were governed by 'elders'. Elders had oversight of the community and we see that they were put in place after the growth of the church to teach and to administrate. Deacons were added to help collect and distribute the material gifts of the church. Along with the Minister of Word and Sacrament (a "specialized elder") to teach and preside over the sacraments, they form the Consistory.

One way to understand our church order is to ask: how do we know when and where the church on earth exists? And so: what is the church? Is it a collection of individuals gathered in a building for worship? Or is it more obtuse, like a spiritual secret society? Medieval Roman Catholicism said the church as the Body of Christ existed when the priest was present celebrating the Eucharist. No one else was needed. So, it came to be in some places that the people stayed in their fields working while the priest worshiped by himself. This is an obvious extreme. The reformation came along and answered that the church exists when a consistory is present doing their stuff: preaching, sacraments and discipline. Or, people understanding the Gospel by hearing the word and celebrating the sacraments and their life together has boundaries. But today church is often treated like a volunteer association of like-minded people; so the subtle thinking that creeps in is that more people means more church. The church as the body of Christ cannot be more or less, it is one. In the RCA, the church order is structured around making space for the hearing of the gospel. Obviously, churches don't pop up out of nowhere, we come from somewhere, from some witness. There is a natural connection to the church. This connection is maintained between congregations through the Classis. A classis (presbytery in Presbyterian circles) is composed of the Ministers and Elder delegates in a particular geographic location and acts like a bishop (episcopos). The classis is responsible for care and oversight of the churches and ministers within its bounds. (More than one classis are classes (long 'e', plural of classis). Oversight centers around supporting the churches in preaching and the administration of the sacraments, which includes ordaining ministers.

The classes get together to form the General Synod. For us this happens every year. The General Synod works on things beyond the bounds of a classis that concerns the welfare of all, like training ministers, witnessing to the broader church and the world, organizing missionaries, and other organizational tasks to help the classes. We are bound together as classes by our *Constitution*. The Constitution is the Book of Church Order, the Liturgy¹ and our Creeds and

¹ Though not all that is in the bound book is in the constitution. For example, the marriage liturgy is not constitutional which means it does not have to followed in either form or language.

Confessions². Those three things are how we've worked out our understanding of Scripture in being the church. It has been our practice not to regulate less important things, like the style of music, political positions or what activity in mission churches take on. But there is a considerable number of other things that we do work out, like how ministers are trained and examined or finding common ground with other parts of the church like Roman Catholics.

But what happens when there are differences among the church? We confess that Scripture is our final authority. The Constitution binds us in how we read Scripture but what happens when we disagree? If something isn't addressed in Scripture or worked out in our Constitution, then we try to live together as best we can. When there is believed to be a violation there is a process. But it usually depends on a classis taking action. The General Synod has appellate oversight of the classes and regional synods. This means if a classis doesn't take action the General Synod doesn't have anything to decide or act on. Appealed decisions are reviewed first by the Regional Synod then if necessary the General Synod. Even then they only decide whether the process was followed. For example, if a classis requires that all ministers must wear blue hats in worship and no one complains in the classis, the odious requirement can't be overturned. If another classis hears about this egregious act, they can't take action against the other classis and General Synod can't step in. The RCA doesn't have a 'top-down' model of polity or church order like other denominations. The highest assemblies can't come down on lower ones. The General Synod could change the Constitution to prohibit this blue-hat wearing requirement and that is its own process. Even then, a classis may ignore it and continue to wear their blue hats.

It's not hard to see how the 2020 Vision Teams proposals are a fundamental reconsidering of how we come together as the RCA. Even the first option of 'doing nothing' is headed for restructuring because classes and churches will eventually choose which side they are on. Will they entertain complaints about who can be married? And then if they find nothing wrong with various configurations of marriage and sexual practice, is there still true fellowship? Or have we found ourselves in much different places with Scripture and who we say God is? Is it different enough to say that we are serving different Lords to different ends? Understanding how church order is designed to work highlights 1) how it's not working very well right now and 2) how drastic changes are being considered.

- Pastor Jeff

² The Creeds are universal to the church: Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed. Our confessions are particular to our branch of reformed churches: Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort, and a new comer: Belhar Confession.