

**RCA SPECIAL COUNCIL
REPORT FROM THE “GROUP OF FIVE”
Chicago, Illinois, April 15-18, 2016**

Responding to a recommendation by General Synod president Greg Alderman, General Synod 2015 passed the following recommendations:

R-26

That the General Synod form a special council to meet for the express purpose of describing a constitutional pathway forward for the Reformed Church in America to address the questions of human sexuality as it relates to ordination and marriage, and to empower this council to bring recommendations to General Synod 2016.

R-27

That a “Wise Council” of Five will be formed from among past General Synod presidents, including Carol Mutch, Brad Lewis, Irving Rivera, Chuck Van Engen, and Tony Vis. They will convene the special council referred to in R-26 and have the following responsibilities:

- Set the time for the meeting(s)
- Prepare the meeting(s)
- Prepare the members
- Officiate the meeting(s)
- Inform the church of the results

R-28

That members be sent to the special council referred to in R-26 who will represent Jesus Christ above all and reflect the rich diversity of the RCA: one selected by each classis (forty-four) and thirty at-large members selected by the “Wise Council” to ensure that the full counsel of the Holy Spirit is present from the church with special attention that the entire delegation include diversity of gender, sexual orientation, age, race, region, expertise, and offices of the church.

The “Wise Council,” choosing to refer to themselves as the [Group of Five](#), began to interact with one another in mid-July of 2015; their first conference telephone call took place on August 13, 2015. The general direction of their task was mutually understood, and a letter was drafted to be sent to classes’ stated clerks, urging each classis to begin thinking about whom they might name as their council participant.

An in-person meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, took place on September 22-23, 2015. At the meeting the Group of Five agreed upon the need for a consultant to come alongside them to assist them in formulating a process for the meeting of the special council. Bob Logan of Logan Leadership was invited to fill that position, agreed to take it, and served as a valuable resource person through to the end of the council’s gathering. The dates of April 15-18, 2016, were set for a meeting of the special council at the Sheraton Chicago O’Hare Airport Hotel.

Realizing that the selection of the 30 at-large participants to ensure the diversity desired by the General Synod would be a major task, the Group of Five reached out to various constituencies and leaders in the RCA for suggestions. Suggested participants were asked to fill out a brief profile form to assist the Group of Five in the final selection process.

The Group of Five met again in Grand Rapids on December 8-10, 2015. They selected the 30 participants who would fill General Synod's diversity mandate and began planning the process for the meeting of the special council. The planning and finalization of the process happened over the ensuing months leading up to the meeting of the special council.

The special council met April 15-18 in Chicago. In attendance were 74 participants (44 individuals selected by their classes, and an additional 30 persons selected by the Group of Five to provide diversity of gender, sexual orientation, age, race, region, expertise, and offices of the church, as mandated by the 2015 General Synod). The participants were reminded that they did not represent any ecclesiastical body or group. They were not delegates to a legislative assembly, but rather were present as individuals called to "represent Jesus Christ above all and to reflect the rich diversity of the RCA."

The participants were:

Eddy Alemán, David Annand, Jennifer Bendelius, Anna Bishop, Clyde Bradley, Denny Brand, Randy Bremmer, Shari Brink, Greg Brower, Pete Burrill, Leonor Caballero, Paul Campbell, Eric Carpenter, Tony Chapman, Scott Christiansen, Jeff Chu, Ron Citlau, Charlie Contreras, Caitlyn Conway, Alfred Correa, June Denny, Perry DeGroot, EJ de Waard, Travis Else, Alejandro Evangelista, Mike Gafa, Tom Goodhart, Kenita Harris, Nancy Hoag Rasweiler, Carly Hubers, Sandeep Jadhav, Lynn Japinga, Laura Jonker, Seth Kaper-Dale, Jes Kast-Keat, Hyongsang Ko, David Landegent, Jim Lester, Shirley Lin, Noah Livingston, Jeff Ludington, Darren Major, John Messer, Kate Meyer, Sherri Meyer-Veen, Bev Miller, James O'Connell, Neal Ooms, Ron Opmeer, Marilyn Paarlberg, Nolan Palsma, Jen Petersen, Barbara Pimentel, Jim Poit, Lee Pranger, Phillip Pratt, Nathan Pyle, Bob Reid, Annie Reilly, Tim Schaaf, Richard Schuler, Tom Smith, Jill Sweet, Greg Town, Chris Vande Bunte, John VandenOever, Cameron Van Kooten Laughead, Scott Van Oostendorp, Janet Van Wyk, Susan Vincent-Cox, Dennis Voskuil, Susanah Wade, Bob Wierenga, and Imos Wu.

The special council was called to be a deliberative gathering of Christ's followers to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit as together they sought a "constitutional pathway forward." The three-and-a-half days that the 74 specially invited persons were together was a time of listening, talking, praying, reflecting together, and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Participants were asked to leave behind their positions, perceived power, and personal agendas, and to focus on sharing their personal experience, perspectives, and wisdom—and to listen to the personal experience, perspectives, and wisdom of others.

In preparation for the special council, participants were sent links to the RCA website where they could access relevant documents, current and historical, including video links to the pertinent discussions on the floor of General Synod 2015. The Group of Five also sent them the following:

The Guiding Principles of the Special Council

This special council has been charged by the 2015 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America with the express purpose of dialoguing and processing together to describe and recommend to the 2016 General Synod a constitutional pathway forward to address the questions of human sexuality, particularly same-gender relationships as they relate to ordination and marriage.

Because this is a volatile topic—one that engenders in many people deep passion and strong opinions, it is extremely important that we come into this Special Council aware of the Biblical injunction to “live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10, NLT). With that as our guideline, we covenant together to abide by these standards of conduct:

- We are brothers and sisters in Christ, each of us image-bearers of God, and therefore we honor and respect each other.
- We are called to represent Jesus Christ above all in our interactions and recommendations.
- We acknowledge our differences in attempting to interpret God’s Word faithfully, and humbly realize that because none of us are right all of the time, no one can speak unequivocally on God’s behalf.
- We commit to making our time together a safe place, totally confidential, where participants can share personal experiences and beliefs without fear that what they say will be used against them or shared with others outside the special council without their permission.
- We remember that we stand within the historical witness of the Reformed Church in America, a denomination that highly values the covenantal relationship we have with God and with each other. We value walking together.
- We are aware that how we live and interact together as followers of Christ speaks volumes in our witness to the world. We will conduct ourselves individually and collectively in such a manner that we reflect the Light.

21 Days of Prayer, Fasting, and Devotion throughout the RCA

Prior to the start of the Special Council, the denomination invited all members of RCA congregations to engage in 21 days of prayer, fasting, and devotion. Daily devotionals were provided along with the opportunity to be part of a prayer team undergirding the preparation and proceedings of the special council.

Convening the Special Council

When the council convened on April 15, 2016, participants were assigned to ten groups of seven or eight, with particular attention given to ensuring that each group was diverse with respect to age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, offices of the church, and region. Early on, the assigned groups met for almost three hours during which each individual was given 15 minutes of uninterrupted time to tell his or her own story. These groups met together regularly throughout the entire event.

Beginning on Friday evening, the participants were asked to write their thoughts on response cards, both individually and as a group. All responses were then typed up and handed out on paper to every participant at the next time they gathered. This system of responding and reading all other responses provided a way for all 74 participants to know something of what everyone else was thinking. Many participants expressed their appreciation for this part of the design of the special council gathering. The names of those writing the cards were not disclosed in the typed comments shared with the group.

The aim was to create an environment conducive to listening to God and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit by incorporating elements of worship, communion, times of silence, corporate prayer, individual prayer, and meditation on Scripture.

A number of relevant presentations were made to the whole group on the following subjects:

1. [Dennis Voskuil reviewed how the RCA has resolved conflicts in the past.](#)
2. [Chuck Van Engen led a study of the original Jerusalem Council chronicled in Acts 15.](#)
3. [Tom De Vries outlined how the RCA has dealt with this issue since 1972.](#)
4. [Tony Vis led a session on RCA polity focusing on the concept of a “constitutional pathway.”](#)
5. [Tom De Vries preached during Sunday morning worship.](#)

Each of these sessions included a question and answer time.

The final recommended actions that the council will present to General Synod were determined through a small-group process that took place over the course of the council. Each group began by brainstorming ideas, which were gradually sifted, synthesized, and prioritized: a bottom-up process. In the last stage, each group was asked to propose no more than three possible recommended actions. These recommended actions are listed below:

GROUP 1:

- Because of the rich diversity within the RCA, we recommend that the General Synod 2016 reaffirm that authority on these matters (marriage and ordination of LGBTQ people) rests with the consistory/classis. We recommend that a reasonable time frame be given (with accountability to General Synod that this process be completed within the given time frame) for consistories and classes to be educated and discern these matters, culminating in a decision for each classis to state their position: open and affirming, traditional, or no position.

GROUP 2:

- The RCA takes no constitutional position on the topic of human sexuality. Authority and responsibility are held at the classis and church level on the matters of marriage and ordination.
- The RCA makes constitutional the 2002 marriage liturgy. Candidates for ordination will affirm and embody the RCA's constitutional marriage liturgy in ministry and practice and in personal life either through Christian marriage or celibacy.
- Both recommendations would also include:
 - The ability to establish affinity classes.
 - Establishment of a plan for a gracious departure for churches and classes that cannot live in good conscience with this denominational position.

GROUP 3:

- Hold the course; reiterate our polity, i.e. consistory and classis. Continued moratorium at GS level and the issue is discussed at the church and classis level for the next 5 years and during that time, clear, succinct, short information be published and distributed from the classis level and distributed to the 44 classes.
- Recommend that the RCA continue the invitation to the denomination, classes, and churches to reflect deeply on what welcoming looks like, and what it should look like, and graciously repent any thought, belief, or actions that deny Christ's love and grace.
- Implore the RCA on how to standardize a process for working through present and future conflicts and theological differences based in Biblical model and righteous respect at the classis and GS levels.

GROUP 4:

- Recommend to change the *BCO* to affirm a traditional view of marriage and ordination as it pertains to homosexuality.
- Reaffirm that authority on these matters rest with consistory/classis—by adding words to the *BCO*.
- Establish affinity classes and/or conscience clauses to ensure and allow relationship and mission within disagreement.

GROUP 5:

- We recommend that each classis be offered two marriage liturgies and asked to vote to constitutionalize one of the two. One would define Christian marriage as between “one man and one woman,” the other “two people.” A learning packet would be offered to aid the congregation and classis votes.
- A graceful pathway to leave the RCA would be offered to any church which could not in good conscience live with whatever liturgy is constitutionalized.
- If these options are not doable we recommend the current status quo—reaffirming that authority on these matters rests with consistory/classis.

GROUP 6:

- Vote GS up/down for denomination (traditional/progressive) then to classes for vote. No passage results in...
- Reaffirm that authority on these matters rests with the consistory/classis by *BCO* codification of a conscience clause.
- In both cases, allow this to be lived out for 5 years, then grace-filled and orderly separation as needed while continuing to allow churches to petition their classis for withdrawal from the denomination according to the provisions of the *BCO*.

GROUP 7:

- Recommend a vote to affirm a view of marriage as between 2 persons and ratify the liturgy accordingly. If this vote fails, we will then vote to affirm a traditional view of marriage and ratify the liturgy accordingly (the result is that, if both are voted down, we are clear that we continue to live in the tension).
- Reaffirm that authority on these matters rests with the consistories and classes and provide a conscience clause that protects various views on these matters.

GROUP 8:

- Reaffirm the authority on these matters rests with consistory/classis by adding words to the *BCO*, with a conscience clause.
- Vote for a traditional view of marriage and ordination.
- Establish affinity classes for relationship and mission and live this out for 5 years leading to continued partnership or an orderly and gracious separation.

GROUP 9:

- GS would simultaneously approve two amendments to our marriage liturgy or constitutional statements for the classes to vote on. One defines marriage as “between a man and a woman” and the other using the language of “persons.”
- Provide a local option for marriage and ordination to be determined at the classis and consistory level. We believe this needs a conscience clause.
- A desire for 5-7 year covenant together would accompany any decision.

GROUP 10:

- To reaffirm that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that we seek to be inspired by Christ and Spirit while we wrestle together in real history concerning questions around human sexuality. Because we believe our unity is in Christ, and that we trust God will speak through inspired readings of scripture, we commit to living our faith together; and to let decisions of same-sex ordination and marriage remain under the authority of classes and consistories, respectively; and to create a process for churches and students of ministry to transfer classes if they are unable to adhere to a classis’s current position. To allow a grace filled and orderly separation of churches and classes that cannot pursue ministry in this context.
- To do an up-down vote on a traditional view of marriage. This includes celibate LGBTQ people being ordained and much pastoral grace. To allow a grace filled and orderly separation of churches and classes that cannot pursue ministry in this context.

Recommendations Compiled by the Group of Five

Drawing from the work of each small group as listed above, the Group of Five compiled what appeared to be consensus recommendations and presented them to the entire special council for their affirmation. There were two themes that appeared in the above recommended actions that bear mention. However, these were seen as issues of implementation rather than recommended action. Those were:

- The creation of a conscience clause if appropriate.
- A call for grace-filled, orderly separation over a period of time, if needed.

After discussion and deliberation, the following recommended actions emerged as the conceptual framework for further deliberation by the General Synod 2016. In the weeks to come, the Group of Five will put these recommended actions into an appropriate General Synod format.

RECOMMENDED ACTION OF GENERAL SYNOD: To reaffirm:

- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.

Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups. Nine groups mention this recommendation and seven mention the liturgy changes below. The difference is slight, but should be noted.

RECOMMENDED ACTION OF GENERAL SYNOD: To change the constitution through amendments to the liturgy.

- General Synod would approve an amendment to our marriage liturgy defining marriage as “between a man and a woman” and send it to the classes for ratification.
- General Synod would approve an amendment to our marriage liturgy defining marriage as “between two persons” and send it to the classes for ratification.
- Candidates for ordination will affirm and embody the RCA’s constitutional marriage liturgy in ministry and practice.

Observation from the Group of Five: We believe the council was aware that the first two liturgy recommendations might appear to be contradictory. However, by offering both of them, the General Synod and the church, through its classes, will either declare marriage is “between a man and a woman” or “between two persons.” If neither receives the necessary 2/3 support of the classes, the RCA is not prepared to constitutionally mandate either.

RECOMMENDED ACTION OF GENERAL SYNOD: That Synod establish at least one affinity classis that includes people and congregations regardless of their perspective on human sexuality to ensure and allow relationship and mission together.

Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation did not receive the frequency of mention as the others above. However, it might provide a way for those with differing interpretations of Scripture to remain in the RCA. While we do not see it as having the level of consensus of the others, the idea was frequently mentioned throughout the meeting of the council. We believe it worthy of General Synod attention and would suggest it may also be seen as an issue of implementation.

Additional Recommendation from the Group of Five

In addition to the constitutional recommendations listed above, it was clear to the Group of Five that there was another implementation concern that was voiced by many of the participants and needed to be dealt with in a timely manner. Implicit in the recommendations from the ten assigned small groups was a common concern that if it were not possible for some congregations and classes to stay together with the RCA after whatever actions are taken, there would be a way for grace-filled, orderly separation over time from the RCA. Therefore, believing that we speak to the spirit and intent of the special council participants, the Group of Five offers this additional recommendation.

RECOMMENDED ACTION OF GENERAL SYNOD: That Synod instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a task force to explore and articulate the options and consequences within the RCA for grace-filled and orderly separation over time, should the different perspectives regarding human sexuality keep us from remaining as one, for report back to the 2017 General Synod.

Final Comment from the Group of Five

Many participants shared that they came to the special council wondering if there might be discord and angry arguments, but what they experienced together at the special council was dramatically different. They felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. In their small assigned groups they listened intently to each other and heard personal stories and perspectives that affected the way they viewed each other. They realized that the divide is wide on the topics of same-gender marriage and ordination of non-celibate LGBTQ persons, but when they shared their stories, they experienced respect, graciousness, empathy, love, and concern, even from those who disagreed with them. They affirmed that personal relationships are vitally important in the RCA and to the Christian faith. The guidelines established at the outset by the Group of Five were lived out by council participants, demonstrating that followers of Jesus Christ, in spite of their differences, can conduct themselves individually and collectively in a manner that reflects the love of Christ.

Respectfully submitted,

Brad Lewis, Carol Mutch, Irving Rivera, Chuck Van Engen, and Tony Vis

April 25, 2016