



## CLASSIS OF DAKOTA

*Reformed Church in America*  
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Greetings to the congregations in the Classis of Dakota,

I feel I need to update you on some of the happenings in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Classis of Dakota. We have finished General Synod in Grand Rapids Michigan held June 6-11. There have been many years of discussion at the denominational level concerning the issue of human sexuality. In reality, we are talking about the issue of the interpretation of scripture.

There are many congregations in the RCA that hold a very conservative and traditional stance on the interpretation of scripture and others who are much more liberal. Some have gone so far as to performing same sex marriages, and have taken a Unitarian position. It has gotten to the point where some churches have already left the RCA with many more making preparations to sever ties with the denomination.

At General Synod 2018 a team was organized to study the health of the denomination and make a recommendation from three options. The options are:

1. Remain as we have been.
2. Radical Reorganization
3. Grace-filled separation.

The Vision 2020 Team has put together a website to give details and explain the process they are taking to accomplish the task given them. The link is <https://www.rca.org/vision-2020-team>. The Vision 2020 team will give a full report of their findings and recommendation during General Synod 2020 in June 2020.

At the Classis of Dakota level, we have churches who are also exploring their options and their future with the RCA. In light of that, we have organized our own Discernment Team. We are not making plans to leave the RCA at this time but we are being pro-active and researching our options if the future of the RCA does not align with the path we think the RCA needs to take. At this time the Discernment Team is putting together a list of the requirements required to align with our values in the Dakotas. We are planning to have a discussion to get the input of the whole classis at the 2019 Fall Classis meeting or even possibly call a special classis meeting yet late summer or early fall.

We are not alone in this process. There are many more classes in the RCA that are considering and exploring their options.

Please pray for the RCA, pray for the RCA leadership, pray for the Classis of Dakota leadership, and pray for the pastors and leadership in your congregations. If you have questions don't hesitate to contact me or someone else in leadership.

May God bless your ministry and may God bless the RCA,

Duane Wolbrink  
Classis President

## VISION 2020

### SCENARIO ONE: “STAYING TOGETHER”

Scenario 1 considers the RCA’s future should our denomination keep our current position, structures, and governances. On the one hand, our default future seems to point to continual mistrust, polarization, and decline. But what if it were possible to stay together *and* find a hopeful way forward? This scenario also explores the possibility of being unified in Christ and our core theological commitments while allowing for certain differences among classes and local congregations.

#### **1A. Staying together in which we don’t do anything differently than we are currently doing.**

If we continue to do “business as usual,” the default future seems to be one of continued tension, frustration, and polarization over our differences, especially regarding the presenting issue of human sexuality and marriage. These arguments and debates will likely continue to dominate our time and energy as a denomination, distracting us from our priority of advancing the gospel. Anxiety and mistrust in our denominational system will likely only be heightened, and we’ll see a continuing pattern of people, churches, and classes feeling emotionally and spiritually fatigued. As many as 40 percent of our churches (including entire classes) have indicated they will leave the RCA within the next two to five years.

The trajectory of “staying the same and doing nothing” is one of continued decline, which impacts our capacity to be missional and reach our communities and regions with the good news of Jesus Christ.

#### **1B. Staying together with a new and different approach to our shared life.**

Another option for staying together with the current structures and governance is for the RCA to move away from a “boundaried-set” paradigm for identity and belonging, which places the emphasis on boundaries for who’s in and who’s out, for who’s right and who’s wrong. Instead, we’d adopt a “centered-set” paradigm that focuses on key theological beliefs and convictions that unite us. As we move toward the center (those key beliefs and convictions), we are drawn and held together, even with our differences.

In this scenario, the RCA would allow consistories and/or classes to decide where they stand on matters beyond the key theological convictions. One of these places of “permissible difference” would be biblical interpretations and practices around human sexuality and marriage. Each classis would discern and decide if it holds an “open and affirming” view, a “traditional” view, or something in between.

This option preserves current RCA structures and governance (in other words, it’s not the radical restructuring that you’ll see in Scenario 2), but we believe its changes are possible and, dare we say, even hopeful, though not without their challenges.

### **Questions for participants in first triads**

- As you have thought about Scenario 1, what do you think you would lose if we chose to *stay together*? What would you, your congregation, your classis, or the overall denomination lose if General Synod adopted this scenario in 2020?
- As you have thought about Scenario 1, what are you curious about when considering *staying together*? What are you wondering about related to this scenario? What questions have been raised for you?

### **Questions for participants in second triads**

- What is your reaction? If the options are “mad,” “sad,” “glad,” or “scared,” what feeling are you most aware of?
- What do you see as the biggest impacts if we went down this road? What can you say about the impact you can see on you, your congregation, your classis, and/or the denomination?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what are you resisting?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what do you affirm?

## VISION 2020

### SCENARIO TWO: “RADICAL REORGANIZATION”

This scenario examines whether it is possible for the RCA to restructure its organization and leadership in such a way that Christians with diverse beliefs and missional expressions can stay together and collaborate in kingdom-focused gospel work.

Three sub-options were explored, with the greater emphasis on the third option:

#### **2A. Affinity silo structure (three mini-denominations)**

This option would create three “affinity silos” (conservative, progressive, centrist), allowing distinctive theological views and practices to coexist within the RCA structure. Congregations and classes would join one of the three. Essentially, the organizational and leadership structure would be divided into three mini-denominations, either with or without the denominational umbrella. (We are also researching how this option could be done in collaboration with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.) *Its still a sin*

#### **2B. Denomination–classis structure (eliminate regional synods)**

This option would eliminate regional synods but preserve much of the RCA’s current structure, including classes and General Synod. The responsibilities of the regional synod would transfer to the General Synod. This alternative scenario would achieve many of our restructuring goals, while requiring minimal organizational and leadership restructuring. Staffing and resourcing for missional ministry would be centralized in the denominational staff. Affinity classes are possible within this option but not mandatory.

#### **2C. Networks (larger affinity groups, formed around prioritized mission)**

In this option, on which we focus most of our attention, the General Synod would function as an umbrella structure for a number of “networks.” Current regional synods and classes would be dissolved and new networks would be formed around common mission. Churches would self-select into the networks. They would be staffed, resourced, and accountable for ministry within their bounds. While the entire denomination would be united around the priority of mission, networks would be united in a more localized missional focus and strategy. For example, one network might focus on evangelistic outreach and the formation of new church plants as a disciple-making process. Another network might focus on social justice ministries and serving their neighbors as their primary missional identity. The network structure allows flexibility in the expression of our core identity as a confessional, Reformed, and missional denomination. The *Book of Church Order* would address only issues of common denominational agreement, while networks would address the unique expressions of their beliefs and mission.

Obviously, these changes would take time and wouldn’t take effect without transitional processes. Part of the pain would come from learning to relate to one another in new ways as we grew into our new structure. We would need to ask questions of one another throughout the process, not expecting every answer to be provided in advance. Many details would need to be worked out along the way.

### **Questions for participants in first triads**

- As you have thought about Scenario 3, what do you think you would lose if we chose *grace-filled separation*? What would you, your congregation, your classis, or the overall denomination lose if General Synod adopted this scenario in 2020?
- As you have thought about Scenario 3, what are you curious about when considering *grace-filled separation*? What are you wondering about related to this scenario? What questions have been raised for you?

### **Questions for participants in second triads**

- What is your reaction? If the options are “mad,” “sad,” “glad,” or “scared,” what feeling are you most aware of?
- What do you see as the biggest impacts if we went down this road? What can you say about the impact you can see on you, your congregation, your classis, and/or the denomination?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what are you resisting?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what do you affirm?

## VISION 2020

### SCENARIO THREE: “GRACE-FILLED SEPARATION”

This scenario explores the impacts of grace-filled separation into two or more separate organizations. What does grace-filled really mean? Is it possible for people to treat each other with the grace of God when they are separating from each other? What would the impacts of separation be on real people—churches, members, classes, regions—and on our mission in the world? We researched three options:

#### **3A. Theologically moderate; make provision for those who wish to leave**

This option would involve a determination that the RCA is theologically moderate (living in the tension) on issues of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously. This would require developing a theologically moderate position that determines to live in the tension between polarities and makes space for differing viewpoints.

#### **3B. Theologically traditional; make provision for those who wish to leave**

This option would involve a determination that the RCA holds to a theologically traditionalist view of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously.

#### **3C. Theologically progressive; make provision for those who wish to leave**

This would involve a determination that the RCA is theologically open and affirming on issues of sexuality, marriage, and ordination, and those who do not agree can leave graciously.

In each of these options, we acknowledged that special considerations would need to be made:

- Each would require *BCO* amendments.
- Would clarifying our theology (whether moderate, traditional, or progressive) ensure that a split wouldn't happen again?
- None of these addresses other underlying issues and theological differences.
- We would still need a radical change of attitudes for those who remain to be able to interact in a grace-filled way.
- What would happen to those who leave? Would they be assisted in their discernment? How would assets be divided?
- None of these options addresses the need for discipline or enforcement. How would the moderate/traditional/progressive membership be regulated?

Each of these options would require the RCA to develop an orderly process for separation, one in which the entire denomination is collaboratively involved in deciding on a mutually beneficial strategy for separation, in which members, churches, classes, and regions are helped in their discernment and next steps. The impacts of grace-filled separation would be profound—on people, finances, our social-political involvement, our spirituality, and ultimately, on the kingdom of God. One thing we know: if we must split, we think that our ability to do it with grace would be more profound than our reasons for separating. Let us be clear: we cannot split unless we can do it with costly grace.

### **Questions for participants in first triads**

- As you have thought about Scenario 2, what do you think you would lose if we chose a *radical reorganization*? What would you, your congregation, your classis, or the overall denomination lose if General Synod adopted this scenario in 2020?
- As you have thought about Scenario 2, what are you curious about when considering *radical reorganization*? What are you wondering about related to this scenario? What questions have been raised for you?

### **Questions for participants in second triads**

- What is your reaction? If the options are “mad,” “sad,” “glad,” or “scared,” what feeling are you most aware of?
- What do you see as the biggest impacts if we went down this road? What can you say about the impact you can see on you, your congregation, your classis, and/or the denomination?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what are you resisting?
- As you think about engaging this scenario, what do you affirm?