

Classis Renewal Group Report

I. Mandate

The Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture presented its final report to Synod 2015, including the following, which resulted in the appointment and work of the Classis Renewal Group:

6. That synod instruct the executive director to appoint and resource a working group (Classis Renewal Group) to build on the work of the existing Classis Renewal Ministry Team, including an examination of the nature, scope, and purpose of classes, with the objective of boldly exploring and innovatively addressing revisions to structures and to the Church Order that will enable classes to flourish.
7. That synod instruct the executive director to present an interim report on the Classis Renewal Group to synod's authorized governing board in May 2016 and a final report to the same group in 2017.

(Acts of Synod 2015, p. 680)

Because of the hire of a classis renewal consultant in 2016 and the desire to fully engage in the work that was under way of the Classis Renewal Group, a one-year extension for reporting was granted by the Board of Trustees of the CRCNA in February 2017. The group here presents its final summary and recommendations for consideration by the Council of Delegates and subsequently synod.

II. Historical context

Classis renewal is not new to the CRC. The history of classis renewal is outlined within many documents accessible for reference via a link on the CRC classis webpage (crcna.org/classis). Following is a brief and incomplete sketch of that history, but it provides a collated and accessible entry point into the context in which the Classis Renewal Group (CRG) has done its work:

- 1992: Christian Reformed Home Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission) and CRWRC (now World Renew) officially approve the formation of a task force on "The Role of Classis in the 21st Century." Its mandate is to support the development of vibrant classes to enhance local church growth and community ministry—and includes development of papers such as Craig Van Gelder's "Looking Back—Seeing Forward."
- 1995, 2000, and 2002: National conferences are held on enhancing the role of classis through strategic planning and support. The task force is named the Classical Renewal Ministry Team (CRMT).
 - Nine benchmarks of a healthy classis are developed.
 - Conferences on developing a strong classis are held regionally.
 - Classical ministry teams replace classical home missions committees and diaconal committees/conferences.
 - Staff positions within classis are established by a few classes.
 - Many classes incorporate deacons into their meetings.
- CRMT is staffed with a classis coach on a part-time basis, pioneered by Rev. Al Hoksbergen and Rev. Thea Leunk.
- 2010: The classis coach role is incorporated into the CRCNA Network.

- 2014: Classis coach Karl Westerhof is incorporated into the Better Together team of Pastor-Church Relations (now Pastor Church Resources). The role is recognized as vital to supporting the ongoing development of the role of classis in ministry.
- 2015: Significant changes in Church Order are adopted, formally incorporating deacons into the assemblies of the church. Church Order Article 75 calls for classes to have a formal ministry plan, establishing a ministry expectation for classes. The Classis Renewal Group is formed, recognizing the importance of developing clarity regarding the role of classes and supporting classes as a vital part of a healthy denomination.
- 2016: Rev. Al Postma is hired on a full-time basis as classis renewal consultant to support classes and to recommend next steps in creating a healthy denominational structure with a vibrant middle judicatory.
- 2017: The Board of Trustees of the CRCNA receives an interim report from the Classis Renewal Group and approves a one-year extension for the final report and recommendations.

III. Nature, scope, and purpose of classis

One of the tensions in understanding the purpose of classis is whether it is a gathering of churches or a group of churches. Historically a classis has often been understood to be a deliberative assembly (i.e., a gathering). Today, however, the general understanding and expectation of classis is much broader. The word *classis* has a variety of meanings.

This lack of clarity can bring about frustration as expectations go unmet or even unrecognized. However, in the past year the classis renewal consultant listened to classis leaders around the denomination and began to sense the following four basic expectations or desires by classis leaders as they expressed their understanding of the nature, scope, and purpose of classis.

A. A place of discerning the Spirit in community

The church belongs to Christ, and Christ's body always exists in a plurality. Just as the walk of faith is not a solo endeavor for individual Christians, congregations need one another in order to better discern and follow the Spirit's leading. When delegates gather, they do so not as representatives of their own local congregations; instead, they are sent to discern God's will with others on behalf of their church community. Trusting in the Spirit's leading, a church must be willing to both submit to the discernment of the wider body and to speak into the ministry life of other congregations. Classis, as a deliberative assembly, is a community in which this may happen.

B. A network of support and accountability

We are created to live in relationships, and church leaders need a setting in which they are not only asked to come to a decision or to achieve something together. Instead, we seek out a community of churches with which to share joys and struggles, to be encouraged and challenged. As such, there is a desire for spending time together that goes beyond making decisions and instead allows for networking, mutual support, and being equipped for ministry.

C. Living into a collective calling

At some point, churches that are in healthy relationships with one another will begin to ask how God might be calling them to serve their city or region together. There are ministry opportunities that go beyond the ability of any one church. Groups of churches can have joint prayer initiatives, fund a campus pastor, provide grant funding for a church plant, or start a nonprofit to address economic needs. Some of these will be classis-wide, while others may be in one major urban center of a large, geographically spread classis. Being in relationship often opens our eyes to ways that God may be calling churches to work together in some way.

D. A connection into the wider church

For many people, the main experience of being part of the broader family of the Christian Reformed Church is by way of the local classis. The classis is the context in which churches participate in their denomination, as in sending delegates to the annual synod, which gathers delegates from both Canada and the United States. The ongoing work of classis also connects the broadness of North American ministry into congregations' own regional and local contexts, providing connectivity for meaningful relationships with denominational ministries.

It is our belief that healthy classes are ones that are living into each of these four core purposes in creative, adaptive, and intentional ways. These purposes also seem to be foundational in the sense that however a group of churches is organized (by geographical proximity or by affinity), these four purposes would need to be addressed in any classical ministry structure.

IV. Exploring current challenges for renewal

In listening to classis leaders, the CRG has discerned the following common themes as it relates to the health and renewal of classis.

A. Desire for renewal

We are hearing the expression of a deep desire to recapture the value of connecting and working together regionally. Sometimes this desire is expressed in disappointment that classis is not more effective. However, there is an opportunity to support catalyzing this disappointment into creative and committed energy for renewal.

B. Capacity

Rarely is classis someone's primary priority. While there may be some expectation that ministers serve in various classis roles, the serving tends to be seen as in a volunteer capacity outside of their core pastoral ministry. If a position is paid, remuneration usually consists of a small honorarium. Turnover is high both in the short term (new delegates at every classis meeting; committees with limited terms) and in the long term (pastors moving in and out of the classis), resulting in a lack of sustained visionary leadership. Because church conflicts and difficulties are addressed by the classis, the executive team and/or the agenda for meetings can easily become consumed by such urgent matters. Classis leaders, unsurprisingly, often feel tapped out just by keeping the system running. Some classes have found it helpful to hire a staff person, but many express that they do not have funding for such a position or they do not have a clear expectation of what a staff person would do.

C. Leadership development

Classis is led and managed mainly by pastors. Pastors tend to be the most known and visibly available to fill committee vacancies, so they are the first to be asked. Few classes have strategies in place to intentionally raise up leaders for regional ministry from within the constituent churches.

D. Desire for connecting with others

Many people serving in classis do so in isolation. There is a need to facilitate connections with others serving in similar ways. Some recent examples of connections that have been appreciated are the following (in 2017):

- A gathering of Canadian classis leaders, including the stated clerk and another leader from each classis. Two such gatherings have taken place already.
- A gathering of U.S. stated clerks.
- A classis leaders summit, including representatives from Classes Atlantic Northeast, Heartland, Northern Michigan, and Pacific Northwest.
- A regional pastors biennial gathering (happening for many years).

E. Need for support

Denominational resourcing for classis leaders—such as coaching, consultation, and convening groups for sharing learning—is an important and valued support that encourages classis leaders to do their work well. There can be a sense among classis leaders that they are given a task and are then left on their own to do it. We have been made aware, though, that there is a deep appreciation for direct support that builds their capacity to do what they have been asked to do. Some of the support comes through the work of Rev. Al Postma, the classis renewal consultant, by way of simple cross-pollination and facilitation of the sharing of ideas among classes.

F. Diversity and meaningful participation

Many people indicate that classis is not a place where they can participate in a meaningful way. A sense of exclusion is often expressed in connection with one's ethnicity, gender, age, and/or officebearer designation. This is experienced with respect to having a voice in classis meetings as well as finding inclusion within the organizational structures and procedures. Classes seeking renewal must be intentional with respect to hospitality for diversity.

G. Classis as geographical or affinity based

Today our society leans toward connecting with people who are similar to us. Being a broad-based geographic community that extends across cultural lines can pose challenges. There seems to be a growing desire for churches and church leaders to network with others who share a similar organizational style or share similar values, and yet we recognize that it is an important discipline for the church to learn to be in community with a diversity of people. As Canada and the United States grow increasingly diverse, the urgency for cultural hospitality is greater than ever.

H. Strategic planning

While many classes currently have vision/mission statements, few have an actual strategic plan for effectively bringing their vision to life in both the short term and the long term. Classis

leaders already know many of the challenges they are facing, but a strategy to address them is often either lacking or unarticulated. When a classis is revisioning, the core structures (e.g., classical rules for procedure) are easily left untouched. Without organizational alignment the classis can easily fall back into default modes of behavior. Further, there often seems to be a lack of sustained visionary leadership in the implementation stage, perhaps due to turnover or to burnout from the expectation that those who are best at developing a vision will also be the most effective implementers.

I. Accountability

Classes can make decisions, but follow-through is often lacking. There may be many reasons for this (e.g., capacity, energy, funding, etc.), but we have noticed that there are very few accountability structures in place for classis other than in disciplinary cases. When Synod 2015, made up of delegates from each of the classes, decided, for example, that all classes adopt a ministry plan, no specific plan was developed to ensure that this would happen. Lack of accountability can cause even the most well-intentioned classes to remain in default behaviors. To assist with developing accountability, one of our recommendations proposes that all classes share with one another, by way of a new Classis Renewal Advisory Team, how they have been living into the commitment to establish a ministry plan.

V. Exploring and addressing Church Order

The Church Order is less limiting to the effectiveness of classis or to the creative space for renewal than many may assume. The many structures and visions for ministry in the classes are not uniform across the denomination, yet all of their variety fits within the Church Order. Some classes meet over the course of one day, with the farthest-away delegates driving less than an hour to reach the meeting. Others schedule multiday meetings that involve lodging and flights for delegates and, understandably, significant expense. Some classes see their meetings as an opportunity to rekindle friendships, spending intentional time encouraging and challenging one another. Some classes are appreciated for their efficiency and business-oriented administrative proceedings, allowing for the least amount of disruption in delegates' schedules. These differences merely scratch the surface on the variance we find across the CRC; yet, again, they all fit within the Church Order.

In some cases, classis health may be found in places that are living into the current Church Order in fresh and creative ways (perhaps without realizing it). For example, some of the vibrant and thriving classes may be ones that have taken seriously the requirement of Church Order Article 41 to dedicate sufficient time for sharing advice and/or learning more about specific ministry issues. Or perhaps classes that no longer make use of church visitors might still live deeply into the calling of Church Order Article 42 by having people dedicated to providing counsel and advice to churches in a variety of ways.

One thing the Classis Renewal Group notes that is lacking in Church Order is an articulated purpose of classis. Describing the overall goal of churches as being in community with one another may assist the process of developing a vision for ministry and a subsequent strategic plan. We recommend adopting a revision to Church Order Article 39 to more specifically name the varying activities of classis as outlined in the “nature, scope, and purpose” section above. The proposed text for Article 39 follows (new text indicated by *italics*):

Article 39

A classis is a group of Christian Reformed churches that come together to seek, discern, and submit to God's will; offer one another mutual support and accountability; find ways to live out a collective calling within their region; and allow for a healthy and sustained connection to the wider denomination. A classis shall consist of a group of neighboring churches. The organization of a new classis and the redistricting of classes require the approval of synod.

VI. Continuing the work

Given both the need and the long-standing support for classis renewal within the CRC, we recommend that the current Classis Renewal Group be dismissed and that a new advisory team be established under the leadership of the classis renewal consultant. This new team, including both denominational staff and people involved in their own local classes, will be tasked with continuing the conversation about the role of classis in the life of the church today and will ensure that there is ongoing support for the increased health and effectiveness of classes.

Overall, our work in classis renewal is adaptive ministry. We look forward to continued work with classes as they take a closer look at how they may strategically address their ministry needs today.

VII. Recommendations

A. That the COD take note of and inform synod of the establishment of a new Classis Renewal Advisory Team coordinated by the classis renewal consultant and composed of staff and volunteers, who will do the following:

1. Continue to explore and address the challenges and opportunities facing classes in an ongoing and adaptive way.
2. Assist classes in developing and implementing a ministry plan (as described in Church Order Article 75).

B. That synod request all classes to develop and share their ministry plan (cf. Church Order Art. 75, adopted by Synod 2015) with the Classis Renewal Advisory Team so that the team can provide the COD with a summary of the plans (to be forwarded to Synod 2020).

C. That synod adopt the following revision to Church Order Article 39 (new text indicated by *italics*):

Article 39

A classis is a group of Christian Reformed churches that come together to seek, discern, and submit to God's will; offer one another mutual support and accountability; find ways to live out a collective calling within their region; and allow for a healthy and sustained connection to the wider denomination. A classis shall consist of a group of neighboring churches. The organization of a new classis and the redistricting of classes require the approval of synod.

Note: The COD judges that the above changes are not substantive and are therefore recommended for adoption by Synod 2018.

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