

**Overture RSE 2024**

The overture was presented by the Burlington-Fellowship CanRC to Classis Central Ontario September 2024.

It was then presented by CCO September 2024 to Regional Synod East 2024.

It is now being presented by RSE 2024 to General Synod 2025, **along with the entire decision of RSE 2024 (appended below).**

**Proposal to Change Article 55 of the Church Order**

**Introduction:**

For many members of the Canadian Reformed churches, the psalms and hymns in the Book of Praise are songs that they have known and loved from a very young age. Many members can recall learning these songs as memory work while in grade school and the Book of Praise is closely tied to their experience of what it means to be Canadian Reformed. Members have beautiful memories of singing these songs together at worship services, weddings, funerals, and school assemblies. However, while the Book of Praise has been a blessing in many ways, even the earliest Canadian Reformed synods recognized that many of these songs are largely unknown within the broader North American context.<sup>1</sup> This continues to be a challenge today. As the Canadian Reformed churches continue to establish new churches and new relationships with other faithful Reformed denominations, there is wisdom in reconsidering the wording of Article 55 which limits churches to using *exclusively* the psalms and hymns approved by Synod in their public worship. In this overture, Fellowship Church has attempted to work with the advice of General Synod 2019 in order to demonstrate that this has not been the historic practice of the Reformed churches.<sup>2</sup> Based upon this evidence, Fellowship Church believes that the current wording of Article 55 should be revised in order to:

1. Recognize the primary authority and biblical responsibility of the local consistory to safeguard the doctrinal integrity of corporate worship.
2. Return to the historic practice of the Reformed churches.
3. Reflect the church polity common in many of our sister-churches.
4. Respect the particular challenges, demands, and context of local churches and church plants.

For these reasons, Fellowship Church proposes that Article 55 be rephrased to state, **“In the churches, the 150 psalms and hymns approved by Synod shall be sung in public worship. Hymns and alternate psalm renditions that faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung in public worship, provided they are approved by the Consistory.”** Fellowship believes that this revision ought to be implemented

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<sup>1</sup> See Acts of Synod Orangeville, Supplement 7, page 102

<sup>2</sup> See Acts of General Synod Edmonton 2019, Article 130, Consideration 4.1, p.123. Synod 2019 specifically stated “Hamilton-Blessings indicates that RSE Nov. 2018 should have shown why historical arguments for the status quo in regard to Article 55 are relevant. This shifts the burden of proof to the wrong party. Someone who wishes to argue for change should be the one to investigate the grounds for the current situation and show why change is needed.”

1 based upon the biblical, historical, ecumenical and cultural considerations listed in this overture  
2 and asks that General Synod carefully interact with the following arguments.  
3

4 **Biblical Context**

5 Scripture clearly presents the local elders as those who carry the primary authority and the  
6 biblical responsibility for the oversight of corporate worship and the doctrinal faithfulness of the  
7 church. In fact, in the form for the ordination of elders and deacons, elders are specifically  
8 charged with having supervision over the church of Christ. This supervision includes overseeing  
9 the doctrine and life of members, ensuring that worship is conducted in an orderly and honorable  
10 way, and upholding the doctrinal faithfulness of the church by guarding against heresy.<sup>3</sup> This  
11 biblical responsibility for doctrinal faithfulness would certainly include oversight over the  
12 doctrinal integrity of the songs sung in corporate worship.  
13

14 Historically, it has been the practice of the Canadian Reformed churches to work together in  
15 order to determine which songs are sung in public worship. The rationale for this approach has  
16 been that Synod is *better able* to safeguard the doctrinal integrity of the songs that are sung in  
17 corporate worship. For example, General Synod Edmonton 2019 previously argued against  
18 changing the current wording of Article 55, suggesting that “Changing CO Art. 55...opens the  
19 way for less balanced, less well-considered choices than would happen by a deliberative body  
20 representing the churches together.”<sup>4</sup> The point of this overture is not to debate whether Synod  
21 has the greater *ability* to safeguard the doctrinal integrity of the songs that are sung in corporate  
22 worship. The purpose of this overture is to demonstrate that the local consistory has the *primary*  
23 *authority and the biblical responsibility* for safeguarding the doctrinal integrity of the teaching,  
24 preaching, and singing in the local church. While the churches have historically chosen to work  
25 together to develop a common songbook, this does not mean that the local consistories have  
26 given over their *primary authority and biblical responsibility* to oversee what is sung in  
27 congregational worship. Unfortunately, this is not reflected in the current wording of Article 55.  
28

29 While one can certainly appreciate the benefit of working together with other churches to  
30 develop a common songbook, the current wording of Article 55 goes much further and requires  
31 that a local consistory *must* seek the approval of Synod *before* it is able to implement songs into  
32 public worship. This wording gives Synod an authority over the local consistory that, biblically  
33 speaking, does not rightfully belong to it.<sup>5</sup> It also implies that local consistories are not capable of  
34 overseeing the doctrinal integrity of the songs chosen for use in the local church. This impression  
35 is evident in the language of recent synod decisions. For example, General Synod Edmonton  
36 2019 defended the current wording of Article 55 stating, “...a larger body such as synod can  
37 provide a safeguard against local decisions concerning which “new” songs to sing that may not  
38 be well thought out.”<sup>6</sup> This statement creates a hierarchical church structure and suggests that  
39 Synod must ultimately oversee the doctrinal integrity of the songs sung in public worship in  
40 order to safeguard local congregations from the decisions of local consistories. This is

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<sup>3</sup> Book of Praise, Form for the ordination of elders and deacons, p.625.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts of General Synod Edmonton 2019, Article 130, Consideration 4.5, p.124.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Synod does not have this authority over other aspects of worship. For example, Synod has recommended Bible translations and orders of worship, but does not bind a local congregation to these recommendations.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts of General Synod Edmonton 2019, Article 130, Consideration 4.8, p. 124.

1 inconsistent with what Scripture teaches about the primary authority and biblical responsibility  
2 of the local elders. According to Scripture, the local elders are not only expected to have the  
3 ability to safeguard the doctrine of the church (Titus 1:9, 1 Timothy 3:2), they alone are  
4 specifically given the primary authority and the biblical responsibility to do so knowing that they  
5 will ultimately give an account before God for their decisions (Hebrews 13:17). It is important  
6 that Article 55 of the church order explicitly recognize this Scriptural principle.  
7

### 8 **Historical Context**

9 When examining the synodical decisions from the mid-1500's to the present day, it is clear that  
10 until the 1930's the majority of synods defended and upheld the primary authority and biblical  
11 responsibility of the elders over the congregational worship and singing of the local church.<sup>7</sup>

12 While the earliest synods leaned heavily in the direction of exclusive Psalm singing, these  
13 synods consistently recognized the freedom of local consistories to determine which melodies  
14 and rhymings of the psalms were sung in corporate worship. The following synodical decisions  
15 provide a brief overview:

- 16 ● ***Convent of Wezel 1568*** - In 1566, Petrus Datheen [Dathenus] published a Dutch  
17 translation of the Genevan Psalter. Though there was another psalter available that had  
18 been produced by Jan Utenhove it was of a more poetic nature and Datheen's psalms,  
19 which were more literal, were *provisionally recommended* for use in the church services.<sup>8</sup>
- 20 ● ***Synod of Dordrecht 1574*** - This synod dealt with the question of whether more hymns  
21 should be added. In certain areas, particularly in the lowlands, certain Lutheran hymns  
22 were very popular. For the sake of unity in the churches, this synod chose to adopt the  
23 Psalter of Peter Datheen as the common songbook and made the decision to reject the  
24 singing of hymns.<sup>9</sup>
- 25 ● ***Synod of Middelburg 1581*** - This synod revisited the previous decision of Synod  
26 Dordrecht 1574. This was due in part to the fact that Philips van Marnix van St.  
27 Aldegonde had published a new Psalter in 1580 with original versifications and the  
28 inclusion of a few select hymns. VanDellen and Monsma, in their commentary on the  
29 history of the church order, argue that the psalms of Marnix were superior to Datheen's in  
30 many ways but were less popular.<sup>10</sup> This synod affirmed the position of exclusive  
31 psalmody but allowed local consistories the freedom to determine which psalter to sing  
32 from. Article 51 stated, "In the churches *only the Psalms of David* will be sung, while the  
33 hymns not found in Scripture will be omitted." Though this Synod still promoted  
34 exclusive psalmody, it also allowed exceptions for hymn singing to certain rural  
35 congregations where German hymns were popular.<sup>11</sup>
- 36 ● ***Synod of Gravenhage 1586*** - Like previous synods, this synod continued to allow local  
37 consistories the freedom to choose which psalter to sing from. Synod concluded, "*The*  
38 *Psalms of David* shall be sung in the churches, omitting the hymns which one does not

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<sup>7</sup> See Acts of General Synod Edmonton 2019, Article 130, Consideration 4.1, p.123.

<sup>8</sup> Faber, R. (2003, February 28). The first Psalters in the Dutch Reformed churches. *Clarion*, 52(5), 113-116. Dr. Faber provides an excellent description of the history and development of the psalter in the early Dutch Reformed churches.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Van Dellen, Idzerd, and Martin Monsma. The Church Order Commentary, Third Edition. [Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan publishing house, 1941], p.281

<sup>11</sup> Faber, R. (2003, February 28). The first Psalters in the Dutch Reformed churches. *Clarion*, 52(5), 116.

1 find in Holy Scripture.” (Art. 62) However, it should be noted that this Synod did decide  
2 that the Psalter of Marnix should be recommended from the pulpit.<sup>12</sup>

- 3 ● **Synod of Utrecht 1612** - This synod is notable for its departure from the position of  
4 exclusive psalmody. Synod Utrecht permitted the publication of a Psalter including 48  
5 hymns, but the use of this psalter among local churches was not widely implemented.
- 6 ● **Synod of Dordrecht 1618-1619** - While the Synod of Dort returned to the position of  
7 (near) exclusive psalmody, VanDellen and Monsma take note of the fact that they did not  
8 choose between the Psalters of Marnix or Datheen but chose instead to leave this matter  
9 to the freedom of the local churches.<sup>13</sup> Synod decided that, “In the churches *only the 150*  
10 *Psalms of David*, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the 12 Articles of Faith, the  
11 Hymns of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon are sung (Art. 69).”  
12

13 When examining these synodical decisions the following two conclusions can be drawn:

- 14 a. The earliest Reformed synods favoured the practice of exclusive psalmody. This flowed  
15 from their desire to sing songs that were faithful to Scripture. Simon N. Jooste and  
16 Johannes C. Potgieter argue, “With the exception of the Remonstrant Provincial Synod of  
17 Utrecht, 1612, in all the church orders set forth at the Convent of  
18 Wesel (1568), Dort (1574 and 1578), Middelburg (1581) and Gravenhage (1586), the  
19 wording is unambiguous to the effect that only the Psalms of David are to be sung in the  
20 church (and hymns should be omitted because they are not found in Scripture).”<sup>14</sup> This is  
21 further supported by the fact that the Synod of Dort included the following phrase in  
22 Article 69, “All other songs will be kept out of the Churches, and if any of them have  
23 already been introduced, they will have to be adjusted by the most appropriate means.”  
24 While the Synod of Dort 1618-19 did allow a few select hymns based on songs and texts  
25 found in Scripture (i.e. Canticles, 10 Commandments, and Lord’s Prayer), this was done  
26 in an effort to provide a small compromise to churches who had already begun to  
27 embrace the singing of certain hymns. Rev. Scott Clark explains, “...the wording of  
28 Article 69 of the church order formulated at this time (during session 162) reflects an  
29 attempt at applying pastoral wisdom to a tenuous ecclesiastical and political situation.”<sup>15</sup>  
30 Given this background, it’s clear that the original intent of Article 69 was not to establish  
31 Synod as the assembly with the primary authority for  
32 “approving” the songs sung in local churches, but rather, the intent of Article 69 was to  
33 establish the practice of exclusive psalmody in Reformed churches (with the  
34 aforementioned exceptions).
- 35 b. While the earliest Reformed Synods supported the position of exclusive psalmody, they  
36 clearly allowed the melody and rhyming of the psalms to be a matter of the local church.  
37 This is evident in the fact that the various synods referred to the “Psalms of David” rather  
38 than to a specific Psalter. Even though Synod Dordrecht 1574 *adopted* the Psalter of  
39 Datheen and Synod Gravenhage 1586 chose to *recommend* the Psalter of Marnix, it is

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<sup>12</sup> Kisluk-Grosheide, D (2000). Dating a Book by its Cover: An Early Seventeenth-Century Dutch Psalter. *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 35, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Van Dellen, Idzerd, and Martin Monsma. The Church Order Commentary, Third Edition. [Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan publishing house, 1941], p.281

<sup>14</sup> Jooste, S.N. & Potgieter, J.C., (2020, July 6). The legacy of singing Scripture only in the Reformed Churches in South Africa: The regulating role of the Word from Heidelberg to Dordrecht’, *In die Skriflig*, 54(2), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, R.S., 2008, *Recovering the reformed confession*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ.

1 notable that subsequent synods almost immediately returned the choice of Psalter to the  
2 freedom of the local church. Furthermore, though the Synod of Dort 1618-19 was under  
3 substantial pressure from three regional synods to provide clarity around the singing of  
4 psalms and hymns, they made no effort to mandate the Psalters of either Datheen or  
5 Marnix. While Datheen’s Psalter ultimately became the Psalter preferred in the churches,  
6 this was not a matter regulated by Synod. In fact, F.L Rutgers, in his church order  
7 commentary, notes that under the church order of Dort local churches were free to  
8 implement other psalm rhymings - and many were tried!<sup>16</sup>  
9

10 Over the years, the criticism of Datheen’s psalms grew and eventually, in 1773, the government  
11 of the Netherlands implemented a new Psalter for use in the churches.<sup>17</sup> This Psalter, which was a  
12 cooperative effort of the government and not the churches, drew from multiple sources and was  
13 the subject of much critique. The Psalter was approved by the council of the States General, and  
14 it was *ordered* to be implemented for use in the churches by January 1, 1775.<sup>18</sup> At the same time,  
15 there was a growing desire in the churches to introduce more hymns than the modest amount  
16 included in the recently released Psalter. The provincial synods established a committee who,  
17 without the input of the churches, produced a hymn book to supplement the psalms. The  
18 *Evangelical Hymns*, published in 1805, contained 192 hymns and the provincial synods required  
19 that, as of January 1, 1807, churches were *required* to sing one hymn per Sunday.<sup>19</sup> Faber argues  
20 that both the content of the hymns and the manner of their implementation contributed to the  
21 Secession of 1834.<sup>20</sup> The first Synods of the seceded churches returned to an emphasis on  
22 exclusive psalmody. However, it is worthwhile to note that the freedom of local consistories to  
23 sing from different Psalters was once again recognized. Faber explains, “While a few  
24 congregations reverted to using the archaic versification of Datheen (De Psalmen Davids of  
25 1566), most employed the Staatsberijming of 1773; in a very few places the custom was  
26 maintained of singing one hymn per service.”<sup>20</sup>  
27

28 It was not until the Synod of Middelburg in 1933 that Article 69 was amended to include the  
29 language of hymns “approved” by Synod. When the Canadian Reformed churches originally  
30 federated, they adopted the wording of Article 69 and from 1950-1983 the church order stated,  
31 “In the Churches the 150 Psalms shall be sung, and the Hymns, maintained and adopted for  
32 ecclesiastical use by the Synod of Middelburg in 1933.”<sup>21</sup> Over time, the concept of synodical  
33 approval began to take root and was applied not only to the adoption of hymns, but also to the  
34 melodies and rhymings of the psalms used in the churches. In 1983, the Canadian Reformed  
35 churches established the current wording of Article 55, which limited churches to *exclusively* the  
36 psalms and hymns of the Book of Praise.  
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<sup>16</sup> F.L. Rutgers. <https://kerkrecht.nl/node/1347/>. P. 291.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that General Synod had not met for many years and that the churches at this time were being governed by a council appointed by the government.

<sup>18</sup> Faber, R. (2003, September 12). The Introduction of Evangelical Hymns in the Dutch Reformed Churches: Eighteenth Century Developments. *Clarion*, 52(19), 448.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 449. <sup>20</sup>

*Ibid*, 449.

<sup>20</sup> Faber, R. (2003, July 4). The Introduction of Evangelical Hymns in the Dutch Reformed Churches: Reaction in the Secession of 1834. *Clarion*, (Year-End), 584.

<sup>21</sup> Holtvluwer, P. (2010, January 15). Testing the Revised Psalm Lyrics, *Clarion*, 59(2), 34

1 Unfortunately, the current wording of our church order fails to recognize the primary authority  
2 and biblical responsibility which was acknowledged by the adopted church orders throughout the  
3 vast majority of Reformed history.

4  
5 Reformed synods consistently recognized that the specific decision over which Psalter should be  
6 sung was a matter of the local consistory. Elders were understood to be both responsible and  
7 capable of determining which rhymings were faithful to Scripture and acceptable for corporate  
8 worship. Given this background, the current wording of Article 55 should be modified to reflect  
9 the historic practice of the church.

### 10 11 **Ecumenical Context**

12 One of the great joys that the Canadian Reformed churches have experienced over the past 70  
13 years has been the growing relationships that have been built with other Reformed and  
14 Presbyterian churches in North America. When examining the church order of these respective  
15 churches, particularly some of those with whom we have close sister-church relationships, it is  
16 evident that they continue to maintain the historic Reformed position which recognizes the  
17 primary authority and biblical responsibility of the local consistory when it comes to the songs  
18 which are sung in public worship. For example:

- 19 1. ***Reformed Churches of the United States*** - The Constitution of the RCUS does not  
20 contain any directives for the songs of the church. The RCUS Directory for Public  
21 Worship states: “Since the metrical versions of the Psalms are based upon the Word of  
22 God, they ought to be used frequently in public worship. Great care must be taken to  
23 ensure that all the materials of song are in complete accord with the teaching of Holy  
24 Scripture. The tunes as well as the words should be dignified and Public Worship  
25 elevated. The stately rhythm of the chorales is especially appropriate for public worship.”
- 26 2. ***United Reformed Churches of North America*** - Article 39 of the Church Order of the  
27 United Reformed Churches of North America stipulates the following: “Psalms and  
28 Hymns. The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches.  
29 Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the  
30 Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.”
- 31 3. ***Orthodox Presbyterian Churches*** - In its Directory for the Public Worship of God, the  
32 OPC specifies the following for the guidance of the churches:
  - 33 a. Congregations do well to sing the metrical versions or other musical settings of  
34 the Psalms frequently in public worship. Congregations also do well to sing  
35 hymns of praise that respond to the full scope of divine revelation.
  - 36 b. In the choice of song for public worship, great care must be taken that all the  
37 materials of song are fully in accord with the Scriptures. The words are to be  
38 suitable for the worship of God and the tunes are to be appropriate to the meaning  
39 of the words and to the occasion of public worship. Care should be taken to the  
40 end that the songs chosen will express those specific truths and sentiments which  
41 are appropriate at the time of their use in the worship service.

42  
43 The proposed Article 55 would not only provide a return to the biblical and historical principles  
44 of Reformed church polity but would allow the Canadian Reformed churches to adopt a practice  
45 which is consistent with some of our closest sister-churches. This would also help to overcome  
46 the obstacle that Article 55 currently presents when it comes to conversations pursuing federative

1 unity with other denominations. The Joint Committee responsible for working towards a  
2 proposed joint church order with the URCNA acknowledged this difficulty in its report to Synod  
3 Smithers (2007). The Acts of Synod state, “The Joint Committee reports disagreement regarding  
4 the inclusion of the complete Anglo-Genevan Psalter in the Common Songbook. Discussion  
5 papers revealed that it was not that far-fetched that this issue could become an obstacle to real  
6 unity.”<sup>22</sup> The Canadian Reformed churches could avoid this obstacle by revising Article 55 to  
7 acknowledge the Book of Praise as the recommended resource for corporate worship, rather than  
8 the exclusive resource mandated for corporate worship. It is evident that the practice of our  
9 sister-churches has not compromised their doctrinal integrity, or the faithfulness of the songs  
10 sung in public worship.

### **Cultural Context**

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13 While cultural arguments are often seen as a “slippery slope” or “subjective”, it is evident that  
14 when the Canadian Reformed churches were first established in Canada, they wanted their  
15 worship to be understandable and accessible within the broader North American context. For  
16 example, when providing a mandate to the committee responsible for developing an English  
17 psalter, Synod 1962 encouraged the deputies to avail themselves of the many great psalms and  
18 hymns which were already available in North America. Synod insisted that “Deputies do not  
19 have to confine themselves to Mr. D. Westra’s Psalms or to the Genevan tunes. They need to give  
20 careful attention, however, to see that the psalms and hymns are not only faithful to Scripture but  
21 also that they can be understood and sung in the churches.”<sup>23</sup> Again, Synod 1965 specifically  
22 stated that the deputies “...not be restricted to Genevan tunes, but be authorised to use other  
23 melodies which are in harmony with the purpose of congregational singing in the church service:  
24 the praise of the Lord.”<sup>24</sup> However, in their Report to Synod 1968, the deputies for an English  
25 Calvinistic Psalter responded by stating that they had chosen not to avail themselves of the  
26 freedom given by Synod 1965 to consider non-Genevan melodies. Instead, they suggested:

27  
28 We have come to the unanimous conclusion, after many lengthy discussions, not to  
29 recommend to the churches to add another one of the many existing Psalters, which are  
30 *composed of a number of tunes well-known in the Anglo-Saxon world* together with the  
31 beloved Genevan tunes (italics ours). If this were the result of their work, Deputies would  
32 consider the work previously done a waste of time and money since there are many of  
33 this type of Psalters available in our country. Instead, Deputies would like to suggest the  
34 churches once and for all forsake this concept of an eclectic Psalter and proceed to the  
35 completion of a Genevan Psalter. If our churches achieved this [an English Genevan  
36 Psalter] - and Deputies are convinced that this is certainly possible within a reasonable  
37 period of time - then our Churches would not only possess a well-balanced Psalter, but  
38 would have contributed in a unique manner to the culture of our nation, *which is for the*  
39 *most part unfamiliar with the magnificent Genevan tunes* (italics ours).<sup>25</sup>

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41 Synod Orangeville 1968 urged the deputies to follow the mandate given by the previous synods.  
42 The advisory committee wrote to the deputies, saying, “Your committee, though not indifferent

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<sup>22</sup> See Acts of Synod Smithers 2007, Article 104. Observation 2.3.4.4.

<sup>23</sup> See Acts of Synod Hamilton 1962, Article 21.2 of the English Short Report of the “General Synod

<sup>24</sup> See Acts of Synod Edmonton 1965, Article 35.3.f

<sup>25</sup> See Acts of Synod Orangeville, Supplement 9, page 102.

1 to the arguments of deputies when they speak of the unique contribution which our Churches  
2 could make to the culture of our nation and to its Psalmody by composing a Psalter on the  
3 Genevan tunes, and though moved by the enthusiasm of musicologists, is of the opinion that our  
4 Churches need a Book of Praise which can be sung by old and young, and is used in school as  
5 well as in church, at the campfire as well as in the meetings of our societies.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the  
6 repeated concerns raised by subsequent synods, the deputies for an English Calvinistic Psalter  
7 were determined to press forward with an exclusive Genevan Psalter.  
8

9 Unfortunately, 70 years later the concerns brought forward by the first synods remain as valid as  
10 when they were first raised. The culture of our nation remains, for the most part, unfamiliar with  
11 the Genevan tunes. This can be seen in the fact that virtually every Canadian Reformed church  
12 plant has sought permission from their sending churches to sing additional songs from outside of  
13 the Book of Praise (i.e. Ambassador Canadian Reformed Church – Winnipeg Redeemer<sup>27</sup>,  
14 Messiah Canadian Reformed Church - Smithers, Streetlight Ministries - Ancaster). They made  
15 these requests because they were ministering in a context where those who were visiting had  
16 little, if any, familiarity with the Canadian Reformed churches. Many of their guests came from  
17 different social, cultural, ethnic or church backgrounds. In each case, the local consistory  
18 recognized the unique cultural context of these ministries and the benefits of allowing greater  
19 freedom to the local ministry. Considering the request for advice received from Winnipeg  
20 Redeemer, Classis Manitoba noted it had “no objection to using the supplemental hymns either  
21 before or after the worship services.”<sup>28</sup> Classis did not object to the use of these hymns during  
22 the worship service, but (ironically) noted that their use in worship would introduce tension that  
23 would be difficult to resolve in the event of institution.  
24

25 The lack of familiarity with the Book of Praise is not merely a challenge for church plants but is  
26 a challenge which is increasingly faced by Canadian Reformed churches who are striving to  
27 share the Gospel in major urban city centres. Due to the significant increase in the cost of  
28 housing, Surrey, Cloverdale, Toronto, Brampton, and the Burlington churches have seen a steady  
29 decline in membership as younger individuals and families move away to seek more affordable  
30 housing. For churches in these urban centers there remains an exciting opportunity (and need) for  
31 sharing the Gospel, but this will involve reaching individuals and families in our communities  
32 who often come from a range of different social, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds. Over the last  
33 few years Fellowship has begun to experience the unique challenges that this presents. While  
34 many of our guests come with some type of Christian background, and they express appreciation  
35 for the Reformed faith, they are often completely unfamiliar with the songs in the Book of  
36 Praise. Given these challenges, Fellowship consistory has supplemented our worship by allowing  
37 the selection of faithful, biblical psalms and hymns to be used as “gathering” and “parting”  
38 songs. We have not done this to be “new” or “different”, but instead are driven by the same  
39 desire of our earliest Synods; to include some psalms and hymns that are better-known in our  
40 North American context.  
41

42 While some might suggest that Fellowship should go the synodical route in order to include  
43 additional “gathering” or “sending” songs, the process of seeking to have new songs included in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See Acts of Classis Manitoba, March 23, 2018. Point 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid



1 synodically approved lists is tedious and overly complicated and fails to recognize the primary  
2 authority and biblical responsibility of the local consistory over corporate worship. By modifying  
3 the wording of Article 55, the Church Order would recognize the particular challenges faced by  
4 churches and church plants who may be ministering in a context that would benefit from the  
5 freedom to select certain songs outside of the Book of Praise. As Article 76 states, “If the interest  
6 of the churches demand such, they [the articles of the Church Order] may and ought to be  
7 changed, augmented, or diminished.”  
8

### 9 **Proposal**

10 In light of the biblical, historical, ecumenical and contextual grounds provided, Fellowship  
11 Canadian Reformed Church proposes to Classis Central Ontario that it propose to Regional  
12 Synod East to propose to General Synod 2025 that Article 55 should be changed to read as  
13 follows: **“In the churches, the 150 psalms and hymns approved by Synod shall be sung in  
14 public worship. Hymns and alternate psalm renditions that faithfully reflect the teaching of  
15 Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung in public worship,  
16 provided they are approved by the Consistory.”**  
17

### 18 **END OF OVERTURE**

### 19 **From Acts of RSE 2024, the article containing the assembly’s decision on the overture**

### 20 **ARTICLE 38: OVERTURE CCO (CO ART. 55)**

#### 21 **1. Materials**

- 22 1.1. Overture from Classis Central Ontario, September 20, 2024, re CO Art. 55
- 23 1.2. Letters from the following churches: Ancaster, Arthur, Attercliffe, Fergus-Maranatha,  
24 Fergus North, Glanbrook-Trinity, Kerwood-Grace, Lincoln-Vineyard, Niagara South  
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#### 28 **2. Admissibility**

- 29 2.1. Both Ancaster and Attercliffe argue that the overture from Fellowship Church does not  
30 present any new arguments that would justify revisiting this issue. Instead, the overture  
31 “primarily reiterates” historical and theological points that have already been addressed  
32 by previous synods, including GS 2019.
- 33 2.2. Kerwood-Grace expresses its concern that “much of what is contained in this overture”  
34 has already been dealt with by GS 2019 (Acts, Art. 130). They recommend the overture  
35 be declared inadmissible.
- 36 2.3. None of these churches (Ancaster, Attercliffe, Kerwood-Grace) have presented the  
37 original overture submitted to RSE 2018. Each acknowledges that at least some of the  
38 content of this overture is new.
- 39 2.4. In response to an appeal from Hamilton-Blessings to the decision made by RSE 2018,  
40 GS 2019 states, “Hamilton-Blessings indicates that RSE Nov. 2018 should have shown  
41 why historical arguments for the status quo in regard to Art. 55 are relevant. This shifts  
42 the burden of proof to the wrong party. Someone who wishes to argue for change should  
43 be the one to investigate the grounds for the current situation and show why change is  
44 needed” (Acts of GS 2019, Art. 130, Consideration 4.1, p. 123).

1 2.5. The current overture investigates the historic grounds for the current practice of the  
2 Reformed Churches to argue why a change is needed. Furthermore, it elaborates on the  
3 biblical, ecumenical, and cultural grounds to argue for a change to CO Art. 55.

4 2.6. The overture was declared admissible.  
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6 **3. Observations**

7 3.1. The overture proposes that the current wording of CO Art. 55 be changed to reflect the  
8 responsibility of the local consistory to safeguard the doctrine of the church, to return to  
9 the historic practice of the Reformed churches, to reflect the church polity in many of  
10 our sister churches and to respect the particular challenges, demands and context of the  
11 local churches and church plants.

12 3.2. The overture provides the following grounds to recommend a change to CO Art. 55.

13 3.2.1. **To reflect the responsibility of the local consistory to safeguard the doctrine  
14 of the church:**

15 3.2.1.1. The objective of this overture is to demonstrate that the local consistory  
16 has the primary authority and biblical responsibility for safeguarding the  
17 doctrinal integrity of the teaching, preaching and singing in the local  
18 church, and not to discuss which body has the greater ability.

19 3.2.1.2. The wording of CO Art. 55 gives Synod an authority over the local  
20 consistory that, biblically speaking, does not rightfully belong to it.

21 3.2.1.3. According to Scripture, local elders are expected to safeguard the  
22 doctrine of the church as men who must give an account to God (Titus  
23 1:9, 1 Timothy 3:2, Hebrews 13:17).

24 3.2.1.4. The biblical responsibility for doctrinal faithfulness does certainly  
25 include oversight over the doctrinal integrity of the songs sung in  
26 corporate worship.

27 3.2.2. **To return to the historic practice of the Reformed Churches:**

28 3.2.2.1. The current wording of CO Art. 55 does not reflect the historic practice  
29 of the church.

30 3.2.2.2. From the mid-1500s to the 1930s, Reformed synods defended and  
31 upheld the primary authority and biblical responsibility of the local  
32 elders over the congregational worship and singing.

33 3.2.2.3. These assemblies favoured exclusive Psalm singing, while consistently  
34 recognizing the freedom of local consistories to determine which  
35 melodies and rhymings of the psalms were sung.

36 3.2.2.4. It was not until the Synod of Middleburg 1933 that the Church Order  
37 was amended to include the language “approved by Synod.” Over time  
38 the concept of synodical approval began to take root and was applied  
39 not only to the adoption of hymns, but also to the melodies and rhyming  
40 of the psalms used in the churches.

41 3.2.3. **To reflect the church polity common in many of our sister churches:**

42 3.2.3.1. The RCUS, the URCNA. and the OPC in their church orders or  
43 directories continue to maintain the historic Reformed position that  
44 recognizes the primary authority and biblical responsibility of the local  
45 consistory with respect to songs sung in public worship.

- 1 3.2.3.2. The practice of our sister churches has not compromised their doctrinal  
2 integrity or the faithfulness of the songs sung in public worship.
- 3 3.2.3.3. The proposed revision to CO Art. 55 would allow the Canadian  
4 Reformed Churches to return to biblical and historical principles of  
5 Reformed church polity consistent with our sister churches.
- 6 3.2.3.4. The proposed revision would overcome obstacles to close formal unity.
- 7 3.2.4. **The particular challenges, demands and context presented by the overture:**
- 8 3.2.4.1. By modifying the wording of CO Art. 55, the Church Order would  
9 recognize the particular challenges faced by churches and church plants  
10 who may be ministering in a context that would benefit from the  
11 freedom to select certain songs outside of the *Book of Praise*.
- 12 3.2.4.2. When the Canadian Reformed Churches were first established in  
13 Canada, they wanted their worship to be understandable and accessible  
14 within the broader North American context.
- 15 3.2.4.3. GS 1965 specifically stated that the deputies for an English Calvinistic  
16 Psalter “not be restricted to Genevan tunes but be authorised to use  
17 other melodies which are in harmony with the purpose of  
18 congregational singing in the church service.”
- 19 3.2.4.4. In their report to GS 1968, the deputies responded by stating that they  
20 had chosen not to avail themselves of the freedom given by GS 1965 to  
21 consider non-Genewan melodies.
- 22 3.2.4.5. Despite the repeated concerns raised by subsequent synods, the deputies  
23 were determined to press forward with an exclusive Genevan Psalter.
- 24 3.2.4.6. The concerns brought forward by the first synods remain as valid today  
25 as when they were first raised, particularly in the setting of church  
26 plants and mission settings.
- 27 3.2.4.7. These concerns are increasingly felt by Canadian Reformed Churches  
28 who are striving to share the gospel in major urban city centres.
- 29 3.2.4.8. The current process of seeking synodical approval is tedious and overly  
30 complicated.
- 31 3.2.4.9. These concerns have led the Burlington-Fellowship consistory to  
32 supplement their worship by allowing the selection of faithful, biblical  
33 psalms and hymns better known in our North American context to be  
34 used as “gathering” and “parting” songs.
- 35 3.3. In the letters received, the churches expressed the following concerns:
- 36 3.3.1. **On the matter of maintaining doctrinal integrity and federative unity by**  
37 **way of a common songbook**
- 38 3.3.1.1. Attercliffe argues that synods in the Reformed tradition have always  
39 provided limits on local freedom in selecting songs.
- 40 3.3.1.2. Attercliffe, Arthur, Fergus North, and Lincoln-Vineyard emphasize that  
41 the common songbook fosters unity, consistency, and doctrinal  
42 integrity, preventing the introduction of problematic songs.
- 43 3.3.1.3. Kerwood-Grace suggests that the current system of seeking broader  
44 assembly help for song selection provides unity and doctrinal stability,  
45 rather than relying solely on local decision-making.
- 46 3.3.2. **On the matter of authority:**

- 1 3.3.2.1. Glanbrook-Trinity and Fergus North argue the overture creates a false  
2 dilemma between the authority of local consistories and the broader  
3 synod and believe mutual consent between churches should be respected  
4 as non-invasive.
- 5 3.3.2.2. Ancaster and Arthur both observe that while local consistory authority  
6 is important, churches choose to federate and abide by the decisions of  
7 broader assemblies, like General Synod.
- 8 3.3.2.3. Niagara South believes the overture undermines cooperation and  
9 accountability between local churches and broader assemblies and  
10 fosters a tendency towards local autonomy.
- 11 3.3.3. **On historical and ecclesiastical precedent:**
- 12 3.3.3.1. Attercliffe acknowledges the historical freedom given to local churches  
13 but notes that it was not without doctrinal oversight and limits,  
14 especially regarding worship.
- 15 3.3.3.2. Fergus North cites historical differences in practice but emphasizes that  
16 common consent and federated unity have long been key components of  
17 the Canadian Reformed Churches.
- 18 3.3.3.3. Glanbrook-Trinity acknowledges the historical autonomy of local  
19 churches in song selection but suggests that mutual consent between  
20 churches should still guide decisions.
- 21 3.3.3.4. Kerwood-Grace agrees with the historical overview but suggests the  
22 current approach of seeking help from broader assemblies is wise and  
23 prevents potential issues arising from too much autonomy. As an  
24 example, they cite the underlying reasons for the development of the  
25 Trinity Psalter Hymnal by the URCNA and the OPC.
- 26 3.3.4. **On practical and logistical concerns:**
- 27 3.3.4.1. Arthur points out the burden on local churches to maintain a collection  
28 of psalms and hymns outside of the *Book of Praise*, arguing that it is  
29 impractical.
- 30 3.3.4.2. Lincoln-Vineyard supports the benefits of a fixed song list, which  
31 minimizes confusion, streamlines worship preparation, and fosters a  
32 more unified practice across churches.
- 33 3.3.5. **On cultural context concerns:**
- 34 3.3.5.1. Attercliffe and Kerwood-Grace dismisses the overture’s cultural  
35 arguments, asserting they lack sufficient evidence. By referencing a  
36 study, Kerwood-Grace asserts that the role of song choice plays a minor  
37 role in the decision for continued membership and discipleship.
- 38 3.3.5.2. Fergus-Maranatha questions whether a change is warranted for the sake  
39 of a minority of churches, suggesting that the existing process for  
40 proposing changes to the *Book of Praise* should be followed.
- 41 3.4. In response to an appeal from Hamilton-Blessings to a decision made by RSE 2018, GS  
42 2019 provides the following considerations (Art. 130, Consideration 4):
- 43 3.4.1. As CO Art. 55 indicates, the churches have agreed to determine together what  
44 songs are to be used in the public worship services.

- 1 3.4.2. Giving freedom to consistories to select songs next to the adopted Psalms and  
2 approved Hymns by route of an appeal instead of an overture does not give the  
3 churches sufficient time to process such a change according to CO Art. 76.
- 4 3.4.3. Hamilton-Blessings assumes that the different approach taken by the URCNA  
5 and the OPC in this matter (greater freedom locally) is superior, using their  
6 assumption as proof for why CO Art. 55 should be changed. However, they do  
7 not show how it might be superior.
- 8 3.4.4. While Hamilton-Blessings states that “offering consistories freedom to choose  
9 some songs” would include “the possibility of mutual concern or cooperation,”  
10 they do not demonstrate that the current structure of collaboration as agreed to by  
11 common consent in CO Art. 55 is inconsistent with Scripture.
- 12 3.4.5. Changing CO Art. 55 as suggested by Hamilton-Blessings opens the way for less  
13 balanced, less well-considered choices than would happen by a deliberative body  
14 representing the churches together.
- 15 3.4.6. The argument based on the freedom of local consistories to choose between  
16 various Bible translations does not prove the point Hamilton-Blessings is trying  
17 to make, since general synods give prior attention to Bible translations.
- 18 3.4.7. Hamilton-Blessings objects to Consideration 6 of RSE 2018 that “the scriptural  
19 injunction to be ‘singing a new song’ (Rev. 14:3) does not prove that new songs  
20 need to be continually added to existing collections.” Revelation 14:3 is not an  
21 “injunction,” but a description of the singing of the redeemed in heaven. New  
22 phases in redemptive history are reflected in Bible passages that refer to or that  
23 call for the singing of a “new song.” Although the Consideration of RSE 2018  
24 could have been worded better, it cannot be sustained that RSE 2018 is  
25 recommending occasional obedience to Scripture, as Hamilton-Blessings  
26 suggests.
- 27 3.4.8. Hamilton-Blessings contends that “RSE 2018 fails to prove how a prescribed  
28 songbook ensures faithfulness while consistorial freedom to choose songs for  
29 worship does not.” As Hamilton-Blessings points out, neither of the two  
30 approaches can guarantee faithfulness. However, their argument leaves  
31 untouched the fact that a collective approach by a larger body such as synod can  
32 provide a safeguard against local decisions concerning which “new” songs to  
33 sing that may not be well thought out.
- 34 3.4.9. The addition of only 19 new hymns between 2001 and 2013 as indicated by  
35 Hamilton-Blessings is indeed a pace that is not satisfactory for various churches  
36 in our federation. However, this does not by definition suggest a need to change  
37 the Church Order. Rather, thought could be given to creative ways to address the  
38 needs expressed by the churches within the parameters of CO Art. 55, which  
39 until now has proven to work well for the churches.
- 40 3.5. GS 2004 (Art. 115, Obs. 6.1.1, Cons. 6.2.1, Rec. 6.3) expresses the principle that Psalms  
41 have a predominant place in the liturgy of the Reformed churches, and on that basis, set  
42 a limit. GS 2022 (Art. 105, 4.2.1) upholds this principle of the primacy of the Psalms.  
43

#### 4. Considerations

- 45 4.1. **Biblical context; to reflect the responsibility of the local consistory to safeguard the**  
46 **doctrine of the church:**

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1 4.1.1. RSE concurs with the overture, GSE 2019, Ancaster, Attercliffe, Fergus North,  
2 Glanbrook-Trinity, Kerwood-Grace, Lincoln-Vineyard, and Niagara South to  
3 acknowledge the primary authority and biblical responsibility of the consistory  
4 over matters of corporate worship.

5 4.1.2. All letters are correct to observe that each consistory has voluntarily exercised  
6 this primary authority in deciding to cooperate with its sister churches in this  
7 matter by way of the Church Order, including Art. 55 in its current form.

8 4.1.3. The overture rightly demonstrates how Titus 1:9 and 1 Tim. 3:2 show that local  
9 elders are expected to have the ability and are given the primary authority and  
10 the biblical responsibility to exercise their authority. Yet these texts need not be  
11 interpreted to say that such authority, responsibility, and ability can't reach its  
12 highest and best exercising in the wisdom of seeking many (and also the best)  
13 counsellors.

14 4.1.4. The overture has not established that the current CO Art. 55 wrongfully limits  
15 the authority and responsibility of the consistory.

16 **4.2. Historical context; to return to the practice of the Reformed Churches:**

17 4.2.1. RSE concurs with the overture, Attercliffe, Fergus North, and Kerwood-Grace  
18 that historically (prior to 1933), local churches have had some freedom to choose  
19 between collections of psalms.

20 4.2.2. The summary of past synod interactions shows both a pressing and shared  
21 concern surrounding the songs and singing in worship. In the early synods, this  
22 conversation centred around exclusive psalmody and restricting the use of  
23 hymns.

24 4.2.3. Recent synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches reiterated the principle of the  
25 primacy of the Psalms in worship (see Observation 3.5).

26 4.2.4. RSE observes that, while *the language* of “hymns approved by Synod” was  
27 introduced into the Church Order at Synod Middelburg 1933, *the practice* of  
28 approving and even excluding hymns is clearly represented in Art. 69 of the  
29 Church Order at the Synod of Dort 1618/19:

30 “In the Churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments,  
31 the Lord’s Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, the Song of Mary, that of  
32 Zacharias, and that of Simon shall be sung. It is left to the individual  
33 Churches whether or not to use the hymn “Oh God! who art our Father.”  
34 All other hymns are to be excluded from the Churches, and in those places  
35 where some have already been introduced they are to be removed by the  
36 most suitable means.”

37 **4.3. Ecumenical context; to reflect the church polity common in many of our sister  
38 churches:**

39 4.3.1. RSE concurs that some sister churches in North America do have an approach to  
40 the selection of songs in corporate worship in line with the proposed change to  
41 CO Art. 55.

42 4.3.2. RSE agrees with the overture that Art. 55 has proved to be an impediment to  
43 federative unity sought with the URCNA. This has been demonstrated by the  
44 discussions around Art. 55 in the development of the Proposed Joint Church  
45 Order, Art. 36. See Report submitted to URCNA Synod London 2010 (document  
46 called “Comments on PJCO 2010,” p. 22).

1 4.3.3. Holding a songbook in common is an expression of unity through uniformity  
2 currently enjoyed in the Canadian Reformed Churches. The proposed overture  
3 would compromise this expression within the federation in order to promote  
4 closer unity with the URCNA and OPC churches.

5 4.3.4. RSE recognizes that uniformity is not the same as the spiritual unity that we  
6 enjoy in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Revelation 7:9 reminds us that this  
7 spiritual unity binds together a multitude from all tribes and peoples and  
8 languages.

9 4.3.5. RSE notes that CO Art. 76 duly addresses the opportunity to make changes to the  
10 Church Order when the interest of the churches demands such. It is evident from  
11 the overture that a minority of churches feel restricted by the current article.

12 4.3.6. RSE understands the need for the churches to work together in a way that  
13 promotes trust and unity within the federative bond of churches (see Observation  
14 3.3.1.2).

15 **4.4. Cultural context: to respect the particular challenges, demands, and context of the**  
16 **local church**

17 4.4.1. RSE acknowledges the particular challenges faced by various churches in their  
18 local context.

19 4.4.2. RSE realizes that there is diversity in the experience of members new to the  
20 Canadian Reformed Churches: some struggle to sing the Genevan Psalms, while  
21 others readily appreciate them.

22 4.4.3. RSE also recognizes that among new members, there is a shared appreciation for  
23 the biblical faithfulness of the Genevan Psalms.  
24

25 **5. Other Considerations**

26 5.1. RSE recognizes that on the one hand, some churches trust the current process for adding  
27 songs for use in a common songbook, while on the other hand, a growing number of  
28 churches are increasingly frustrated with the “tedious and overly complicated process”  
29 of including new songs in synodically approved lists.

30 5.2. With respect to the current process adopted by the churches, RSE acknowledges the  
31 merits of working with common principles and guidelines for approving music  
32 appropriate for congregational singing.

33 5.3. In response to concerns raised in the letters received, RSE notes that it is not inevitable  
34 that the current URCNA or OPC practice will lead to doctrinal deformation.  
35

36 **6. Recommendations**

37 6.1. That RSE decide to adopt the overture, and forward it along with this article of the Acts  
38 to GS 2025, with the following recommendations:

39 6.1.1. That the proposed revision of CO Art. 55 include a provision that articulates the  
40 historic emphasis of the principal place of the Psalms in corporate worship.

41 6.1.2. That the proposed revision of CO Art. 55 include a clause directing local  
42 churches to seek concurring advice at Classis before incorporating songs in the  
43 worship service that are not approved by General Synod.

44 6.1.2.1. Grounds for recommendation 6.1.2.:

45 i. This process would balance local concerns with federative unity.

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- ii. This process would involve the whole federation through the published acts of Classis, allowing churches from other Classes to interact with the choice of song.
  - iii. This process recognizes the wisdom of many counsellors.

**ADOPTED**