

***Regional Synod West – Overture from CPE re CO Article 55***

The following overture was presented by the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church to Classis Pacific East June 6, 2024.

It was then presented by CPE June 6, 2024, to Regional Synod West 2024.

It is now being presented by RSW 2024 to General Synod 2025, along with the entire decision of RSW 2024.

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1 **Proposal to change Article 55 of the Church Order**

2 1. The **current version** of Article 55 reads as follows: "The metrical Psalms adopted by general  
3 synod as well as the hymns approved by general synod shall be sung in the worship services."

4 **2. History of Article 55.**

5 a. From the beginning of their history, the Reformed churches of the Netherlands have  
6 considered the song of the church a matter to be dealt with by the churches in common.  
7 The Synod of Dordrecht of 1618-1619 decided the following: "In the churches only the  
8 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Our Father, the 12 Articles of Faith, the  
9 Hymns of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon are sung."<sup>1</sup> This provision stood for nearly two  
10 centuries. Later, it was decided in various Reformed churches that the stipulations of Dort  
11 on hymn singing were too restrictive and room was made for larger collections of hymns  
12 (e.g. Synod of Middelburg, 1933).<sup>2</sup> However, the principle that the churches should sing in  
13 public worship only songs approved by a General Synod was consistently maintained in  
14 many Reformed federations of churches.<sup>3</sup>

15 b. From the beginning of their existence, the Canadian Reformed Churches have shared the  
16 assumption that the song of the churches should be determined and regulated by the  
17 churches in common. This is evident in their early adoption of an adapted version of the  
18 Church Order of Dort which includes provisions for the regulation of the song of the church  
19 by General Synod.

20 c. While the various Church Order commentaries provide a history of synodical decisions  
21 regarding the content of the song of the church, none of them appear to deal with the  
22 underlying assumption that the song of the churches should be regulated by the broader  
23 assemblies (Regional or General Synods) instead of by local churches. This widely shared  
24 assumption needs some critical scrutiny.

25 **3. Arguments for a common song book for the churches.**

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/508>.

<sup>2</sup> For the history of synodical regulation of the song of the church in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, see H. Bouman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, chapter 96, "Psalms and Hymns" at <http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/2735>. The historical discussion is extensive but no rationale is given for the type of restriction found in Article 55 of the Church Order.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Article 66 of the Church Order of *The Reformed Churches of New Zealand* reads as follows: "Psalms and Hymns. In the worship services of the church only the 150 Psalms and the collection of Hymns for church use, approved and adopted by Synod, shall be sung. However, while the singing of Psalms in divine worship is a requirement, the use of the approved hymns is left to the freedom of the churches." Similarly, Article 69 of the Church Order of *The Free Reformed Churches of North America* reads: "In the worship services only the metrical version of the 150 Psalms (450 Psalters, contained in the Psalter published through Reformation Heritage Books, 1999 printing or newer and the Dutch Psalms, 1773 edition) and the 9 hymns composed of portions of Scripture, which have been approved by Synod, shall be sung. The approval of Synod shall be required before any other hymns composed of portions of Scripture shall be used in the worship services"

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27 a. Having a *Book of Praise* approved by the General Synod may act as a unifying force  
28 among the Canadian Reformed churches.
- 29 b. Restricting the song of the churches to a fixed collection may contribute to familiarity  
30 and excellence in singing.
- 31 c. Having a Synodically approved *Book of Praise* may provide a layer of protection  
32 against hymns or other songs which may degrade the churches because of deficiencies  
33 in their teaching/content or in their musical style.
- 34 d. Restricting the number of hymns and other songs will likely lead to greater familiarity  
35 with the Psalms.<sup>4</sup>
- 36 e. Creating a complete collection of Psalms and hymns is a job too big for many local  
37 churches.

38 **4. Difficulties related to Article 55 of the Church Order.**

- 39 a. Article 55 as currently applied by General Synod restricts the churches to metrical Psalms  
40 set to melodies originating from one short period of church history (a portion of the  
41 16<sup>th</sup> century). While opinions about the suitability of these melodies are varied, limiting  
42 the singing of the Psalms to settings with Genevan melodies seems needlessly  
43 restrictive. There are many beautiful non-Genevan tunes which could be used in the  
44 singing of the Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Especially in this time of increasing multiculturalism and

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<sup>4</sup> But see 5.f below.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the early synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches encouraged the deputies for the Book of Praise Committee to be open-minded about various non-Genevan melodies. Synod 1962 decided: "To appoint new Deputies and instruct them to review the Book of Praise, expand it and change it where needed, giving special attention to parts that have been criticized, so that in the near future a complete Psalter can be presented to the Churches. Deputies do not have to confine themselves to Mr. D. Westra's Psalms or to the Genevan tunes. They need to give careful attention, however, to see that the psalms and hymns are not only faithful to Scripture but also that they can be understood and sung in the churches." See Article 21.2 of the English Short Report of the "General Synod, Hamilton, 1962," page 69. Even more clearly, Synod 1965 specifically stated that the committee "...not be restricted to Genevan tunes, but be authorized to use other melodies which are in harmony with the purpose of congregational singing in the church service: the praise of the Lord." See Acts of Synod 1965, Article 35 of the English summary (pg. 70). However, in their Report to Synod 1968, the deputies for the Book of Praise stated that they did not avail themselves of the freedom given by Synod 1965 to consider non-Genevan melodies. Instead, they suggested that "the churches once and for all forsake this concept of an eclectic Psalter and proceed to the completion of a Genevan Psalter." See Supplement 7, Acts of Synod 1968, page 102. Synod's own advisory committee disagreed with the Deputies. It stated: "Though your committee is not opposed to a Psalter on Genevan tunes, it would regret a removal from the Book of Praise of the beautiful non-Genevan tunes which are used in the Psalm section. Those tunes have found as good a reception in the churches as the well-known Genevan ones and it would be a loss, in the opinion of the committee, if the churches would be deprived of them. Your committee wonders also if

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45 ecclesiastical connectivity, freedom to sing Psalms with other metrical settings and with  
46 other melodies, such as those found in the Psalters of some of our sister churches and  
47 elsewhere, would be a gain.

48 b. Under the current application of Article 55, there is little point of contact with our North  
49 American sister churches when it comes to the song of the assembled people of God.  
50 We thereby isolate ourselves to a degree from our North American sister churches. It  
51 would be better to leave room for the churches of our federation to incorporate  
52 selections from the song books of our sister churches.

53 c. The current Article 55 might be a stumbling block to federative unity with the United  
54 Reformed Churches. In the interests of ecclesiastical unity, it would be better to have  
55 fewer restrictions on the song of the church.

56 d. Article 55 prevents the singing in corporate worship of many excellent, Biblically-  
57 grounded and well-known Hymns and Christian songs. It also prevents the churches  
58 from using new songs, including those composed by our own members. This seems  
59 an unnecessary impoverishment of worship.

60 e. Restricting the song of the church to the Genevan Psalms and a relatively small list of  
61 hymns approved by General Synod could make it more difficult for people coming to  
62 the Canadian Reformed churches from other Christian backgrounds to adjust to life  
63 among us.

64 f. Restricting the churches to singing Psalms only with Genevan melodies may be  
65 hindering the use of the Psalms in corporate worship. Many people have observed  
66 that only a relatively small number of the Psalms are used in the worship services of  
67 the Canadian Reformed churches. A study published in the Reformed Music Journal  
68 in 1998 stated, "About one half of the songs are sung frequently, and the remaining  
69 73 are sung rarely or not at all."<sup>6</sup> In another even more detailed survey, it was  
70 revealed that 35% of the Psalms are used over 80% of the time.<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable to  
71 consider that some of the Psalms are not used in worship because the melodies are  
72 not appreciated.

73 g. It is not clear why approval of the songs for public worship should be exclusively the duty  
74 of a General Synod. Consistories should be seen as capable of establishing guidelines for

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the existence of a Psalter with Genevan tunes only and of a hymnary with non-Genevan tunes will not have the result that outside the church services the Psalter will be forgotten and the hymnary used." See Supplement 9 of the Acts of Synod 1968, page 107. In the end, Synod decided to "give preference to the Genevan tunes as melodies for the rhymed Psalms." See Article 87.7.d of the Acts of Synod 1968, page 30.

<sup>6</sup>P. Janson, "Singing in the Canadian and American Reformed Churches," Reformed Music Journal X, no. 2 (1998), page 54. The survey discussed in this article covered a period from March 9, 1997 to May 25, 1997. 23 of 46 churches participated in the survey. In total, the survey recorded 3083 Psalm/Hymn selections in 552 morning and afternoon services.

<sup>7</sup>This information is based on a private survey by Tim Nijenhuis. This survey examined a total of 1231 CanRC worship services from across the federation.

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75 the approval of songs for public worship. Every office-bearer in a church has signed the  
76 *Form of Subscription* and this gives confidence that the consistory of a church is well-  
77 able to discern whether a song is Biblical and edifying for public worship.<sup>8</sup> Each  
78 consistory could establish its own guidelines for the song of the church. Leaving such  
79 matters largely to a General Synod may, in fact, discourage a strong sense of local  
80 responsibility for the worship of the church.

81 h. Article 55 is causing some stress within the federation of the Canadian Reformed  
82 Churches. Several churches do sincerely desire to sing songs not found in the Book of  
83 Praise. Because of the diverse membership and missional goals of these  
84 churches, these churches feel a need for greater freedom in the choice of songs.

85 i. We should reduce barriers for other bodies of churches to join our federation. For  
86 instance, what would happen if a Sudanese Reformed church wished to join us? Or a  
87 Korean Reformed church? Would we require them to sing Psalms with Genevan  
88 melodies? Would we restrict them to our Synodically approved songs? Would it not be  
89 more charitable and ecumenical to give freedom for singing the songs with which they  
90 are familiar?

91 j. The process of seeking to have new songs included in synodically approved lists of  
92 metrical Psalms and hymns is tedious. Additionally, due to cost, it is not realistic to  
93 regularly update the *Book of Praise*. We need a more agile process which allows for  
94 local action to meet local circumstances.

95 **5. Practices of our North American sister churches**

96 a. Our North American sister churches such as the RCUS, the OPC and the URCNA do  
97 not mandate synodically-limited collections of metrical Psalms and Hymns. A  
98 review of their policies shows the following:

99 i. The *Constitution of the RCUS* does not contain any directives for the song of the  
100 church. The *RCUS Directory for Public Worship* states: "Since the metrical versions of  
101 the Psalms are based upon the Word of God, they ought to be used frequently in public  
102 worship. Great care must be taken to ensure that all the materials of song are in  
103 complete accord with the teaching of Holy Scripture. The tunes as well as the words  
104 should be dignified and Public Worship elevated. The stately rhythm of the chorales is  
105 especially appropriate for public worship."

106 ii. Article 39 of the *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches of North*  
107 *America* stipulates the following: "Psalms and Hymns. The 150 Psalms shall have  
108 the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully  
109 reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may  
110 be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory."

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<sup>8</sup>See "Principles and Guidelines for the Selection Music in the Church" as adopted by Synod 2004 of the Canadian Reformed Churches, pp. 239-241.

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- 111                   iii. In its *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, the OPC specifies the following for  
112                   the guidance of the churches:  
113                   1. "Congregations do well to sing the metrical versions or other musical  
114                   settings of the Psalms frequently in public worship. Congregations also  
115                   do well to sing hymns of praise that respond to the full scope of  
116                   divine revelation."  
  
117                   2. "In the choice of song for public worship, great care must be taken that  
118                   all the materials of song are fully in accord with the Scriptures. The  
119                   words are to be suitable for the worship of God and the tunes are to  
120                   be appropriate to the meaning of the words and to the occasion of  
121                   public worship. Care should be taken to the end that the songs chosen  
122                   will express those specific truths and sentiments which are appropriate  
123                   at the time of their use in the worship service."  
  
124                   b. From the life and worship of our sister churches in North America, it seems evident that  
125                   the lack of a synodically approved list of metrical Psalms and Hymns does not inevitably  
126                   lead to a decline of Reformed doctrine and life. Indeed, it seems evident that the  
127                   freedom of these churches in choosing their own songs for public worship has been a  
128                   benefit to them.

129                   **6. A new direction.**

- 130                   a. The Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church proposes to Classis Pacific East that it propose to  
131                   Regional Synod West to propose to General Synod that Article 55 should be changed to read as  
132                   follows: "**General Synod shall adopt metrical versions of the Psalms and shall approve**  
133                   **Hymns for inclusion in a song book. These Psalms and Hymns, together with their melodies,**  
134                   **shall have the principal place in the song of the church as it gathers for corporate worship."**

135                   **7. Concluding remarks.**

- 136                   a. Giving the Psalms and Hymns adopted by General Synod the "principal place" in the song  
137                   of the church will serve to maintain unity in public worship throughout our federation. At  
138                   the same time, there is room under this proposal for individual churches to have song  
139                   selections from outside the list of those approved by General Synod. Churches which are  
140                   entirely satisfied with the *Book of Praise* can continue to use it as they have in the past.  
141                   Churches which want to include new songs would have freedom to do so.

- 142                   b. This proposal recognizes that the song of the church is a matter for the churches in  
143                   common; at the same time, it leaves room for diversity among the churches.

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**END OF OVERTURE**

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148 From Acts of Regional Synod West, the article containing the assembly's decision on the overture

149 **ARTICLE 31 [6A]: CPE OVERTURE RE: CO ARTICLE 55**

150 **1. Materials:**

151 1.1 Overture from CPE (Appendix B)

152 1.2 Letters from the following Canadian and American Reformed Churches: Willoughby  
153 Heights (6a.a), Nooksack Valley (6a.b), Winnipeg Redeemer (6a.c), Chilliwack (6a.d),  
154 Lynden (6a.e), Carman East (6a.f), Edmonton Immanuel (6a.g), St. Albert (6a.h), Langley  
155 (Refuge) (6a.i), Smithers (6a.j), Elm Creek (6a.k), Coaldale (6a.l), Taber (5x)

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157 **2. Observations:**

158 2.1 This is a matter that belongs to the churches in common.

159 2.2 The overture from CPE noted the following difficulties with CO Article 55:

160 2.2.1 In this time of increasing multiculturalism and ecclesiastical connectivity,  
161 freedom to sing Psalms with other metrical settings and with other melodies, such  
162 as those found in the Psalters of some of our sister churches and elsewhere, would  
163 be a gain.

164 2.2.2 It would be better to leave room for the churches of our federation to incorporate  
165 selections from the song books of our sister churches.

166 2.2.3 In the interests of ecclesiastical unity, it would be better to have fewer restrictions  
167 on the song of the church.

168 2.2.4 Article 55 prevents the singing in corporate worship of many excellent, Biblically  
169 grounded and well-known Hymns and Christian songs. It also prevents the  
170 churches from using new songs, including those composed by our own members.  
171 This seems an unnecessary impoverishment of worship.

172 2.2.5 Restricting the song of the church to the Genevan Psalms and a relatively small list  
173 of hymns approved by General Synod could make it more difficult for people  
174 coming to the Canadian Reformed churches from other Christian backgrounds to  
175 adjust to life among us.

176 2.2.6 Restricting the churches to singing Psalms only with Genevan melodies may be  
177 hindering the use of the Psalms in corporate worship.

178 2.2.7 It is not clear why approval of the songs for public worship should be exclusively  
179 the duty of a General Synod. Consistories should be seen as capable of  
180 establishing guidelines for the approval of songs for public worship.

181 2.2.8 The process of seeking to have new songs included in synodically approved lists of  
182 metrical Psalms and hymns is tedious. Additionally, due to cost, it is not realistic  
183 to regularly update the Book of Praise.

184 2.3 The following churches registered opposition:

185 2.3.1 Nooksack Valley noted that this proposal will create a two-tiered classification of  
186 songs, effectively nullifying our current vetting and consultation process.

187 2.3.2 Nooksack Valley doubts the capability of local churches to correctly evaluate  
188 songs.

189 2.3.3 Lynden believes the proposal will open the door to more, not less, strife within the  
190 churches.

191 2.3.4 St. Albert and Winnipeg (Redeemer) believe that the proposal will diminish  
192 federative unity and could lead to doctrinal drift and disunity among churches. Our

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193 present system provides a high level of accountability, guarding against songs that  
194 may be unsound or harmful.

195 2.3.5 Coaldale and Elm Creek believe the Psalms in our Book of Praise are a rich  
196 treasure, and a unique marker of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

197 2.3.6 Chilliwack noted that the proposal does not interact with the limit of 100 hymns  
198 set by previous synods.

199 2.3.7 Chilliwack noted that this matter has been dealt with by previous Synods.

200 2.3.8 Carman-East noted that the Standing Committee for the Book of Praise (SCBP) has  
201 expertise unlikely to exist in individual congregations.

202 2.4 The following churches provided reasons to support the overture:

203 2.4.1 Smithers noted that more freedom in song choice would help with mission work  
204 in Prince George.

205 2.4.2 Smithers noted that our identity as churches should be rooted in our desire to be  
206 faithful and not out of a desire to be distinct.

207 2.4.3 Langley (Refuge) noted that there are instances where the Psalms have been put  
208 to music with greater faithfulness to the Biblical text alongside an easier tune.

209 2.4.4 Langley (Refuge) holds that consistories are capable of monitoring the  
210 theological faithfulness of songs which are sung in the worship services.

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212 **3. Considerations:**

213 3.1 These matters continue to arise in our federation. This suggests that a change to Article 55  
214 may be necessary.

215 3.2 Matters for the churches in common such as this belong on the table of General Synod.

216 3.3 Neither this proposal nor the current Article 55 address the matter of the Psalms having a  
217 predominant place in worship services.

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219 **4. Recommendation:**

220 4.1 That Regional Synod West forward the overture to General Synod, noting the above  
221 observations and considerations.

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223 **Adopted**

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