

Overture RSE 2024

The overture was presented by the Flamborough-Redemption 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.

Proposal to Modify CO Article 49 – Broader Representation at GS (from CCO)

The current version of Article 49 in the Church Order states:

“The general synod shall be held once every three years. Each regional synod shall delegate to this synod six ministers and six elders. If it appears necessary to convene a general synod before the appointed time, the convening church shall determine the time and place with the advice of regional synod.”

The wording of Article 49 requires the churches, via regional synods in the East and West, to delegate to general synod six ministers and six elders from each region. This wording reflects the decision of Chatham GS 2004 to increase the number of delegates to general synod to six ministers and six elders from each regional synod, instead of the previous four ministers and four elders.

Historical Background

The discussion about increasing the number of delegates to general synod first came to the table of GS Neerlandia 2001 via Regional Synod West after RSW received two overtures from classes in its region suggesting the change. General synod denied the overture. The *Acts of General Synod Neerlandia 2001*, Article 75 lists the following considerations in denying the overture:

4.1. Classis Alberta/Manitoba simply states the opinion that an increase in delegates will allow for matters to be dealt with more efficiently. There is no evidence that the workload of General Synods has increased along with the increase in the number of churches.

4.2. The argument that an increase of delegates would give more representation to the churches and that this is necessary due to the increase in churches misses the important point that General Synods are not representative assemblies. Reformed Church polity works with the principle of delegation. Further, an increase of delegates cannot ensure proportionate representation from the various classes and churches since delegates are elected in a free vote.

4.3 The second argument of Classis Pacific East that by increasing delegation “the perception would be promoted” that “General Synod will deal with items on its agenda with procedural fairness and due process” is also lacking. The key word is “perception.” Classis Pacific East does not say there is no procedural fairness and due process but is

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1 concerned merely with “perception.” This is not a good ground to make changes in
2 delegation.
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4 Three years later, GS Chatham 2004 received an appeal from the Guelph church (Guelph-
5 Emmanuel) against the decision of GS Neerlandia 2001, Article 75. GS 2004 decided to “accede
6 to the church at Guelph to rescind the decision of Article 75 of the *Acts of Synod Neerlandia*
7 *2001* and to “amend the first paragraph of Article 49 of the Church Order” to its current wording.
8 The *Acts of General Synod Chatham 2004*, Article 15, lists the following considerations in
9 sustaining Guelph’s appeal:

10
11 4.1. The church at Guelph is correct in asserting that there is an “indirect representation”
12 of churches to a general synod in that the churches are represented in their assemblies.
13 This is affirmed by the following statements:
14

15 Like the regional and general synods, we call it a major assembly, which does not
16 mean that it is a higher authority with more power, but simply an assembly
17 formed by a larger number of churches through their representatives (G. Van
18 Rongen and K. Deddens, *Decently and in Good Order*, p. 58).
19

20 At a general synod all the churches are represented. Article 49 deals with the
21 general synod, our broadest assembly. A general synod is a meeting where all the
22 churches of the federation are represented (cf. W.W.J. Van Oene, *With Common*
23 *Consent*, pp. 133, 139).
24

25 4.2. Synod Neerlandia is correct that “an increase of delegates cannot ensure
26 proportionate representation.” On the other hand, the church at Guelph is also correct in
27 stating that the likelihood of proportionate representation from the various classes and
28 churches could increase. However, the argument for proportionate representation is not a
29 relevant consideration within Reformed church polity. In our Church Order
30 representation is regional representation or delegation (C.O.Art. 47). Should
31 proportionate representation of classes and churches be desired, it would require a radical
32 change to our current church polity.
33

34 4.3. The argument of Synod Neerlandia “...that General Synods are not representative
35 assemblies but...that Reformed Church Polity works with the principle of delegation”
36 (Acts of Synod Neerlandia 2001, Art. 75 Consideration 4.2, p. 88) does not exclude the
37 possible increase in the number of delegates.
38

39 4.4. The church at Guelph does not prove that a major shift in direction of general synod
40 can be avoided through an increase in the number of delegates to synod. Scripture does,
41 however, assert that “many advisors make victory sure” (Prov.11:14; cf. Prov.15:22).
42

43 4.5. The church at Guelph is correct when it states that the likelihood of an increase in the
44 number of regional synods is remote. With no increase in the number of regional synods,
45 there will also be no increase in delegation to general synod.
46

1 **The Present Context**

2 By the time GS Aldergrove 2025 convenes, a full twenty-one years will have passed since the
3 decision of GS Chatham 2004. In the intervening two decades, seventeen new Canadian
4 Reformed churches have been instituted!¹ One church—Emmanuel American Reformed Church
5 in Denver, Colorado—has been disbanded. This reflects a net growth of sixteen congregations
6 (or approximately 34% growth in churches) in a federation that currently consists of sixty-seven
7 churches. Presently, these newly instituted churches account for nearly a quarter (23.8%) of the
8 total number of churches in the federation.

9
10 Both GS Neerlandia 2001 and GS Chatham 2004 assert that increasing the number of delegates
11 to general synod is not a solution for proportionate representation. Moreover, they state that
12 Reformed church polity is based on regional representation rather than proportionate
13 representation. Still, this “either-or” argumentation is difficult to maintain when one considers
14 the manner in which the United Reformed Churches in North America and the Orthodox
15 Presbyterian Church send delegates to their general synods and general assemblies, respectively.
16 In both these sister churches, representation is much more proportionate than at the general
17 synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In other words, another increase to the number of
18 delegates to general synod is not as radical as GS Chatham 2004 claims, nor a departure from
19 Reformed polity (see *Acts of Synod Chatham 2004*, Article 15, consideration 4.2).

20
21 Today, as we reconsider the considerations and standing decision of GS Chatham 2004 in light
22 of a drastically changing ecclesiastical landscape, it would appear prudent to decide once more to
23 increase the number of delegates to general synod. In theory, any number of delegates could be
24 proposed. For example, among the United Reformed Churches in North America, each
25 consistory sends a delegation of two office bearers to general synod. In the Canadian Reformed
26 context, however, a dramatic increase from the current 24 delegates to 134 delegates would
27 undoubtedly destroy the deliberative character of general synod while substantially increasing
28 financial costs associated with general synod (although it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove
29 when the number of total delegates enters into the territory of non-deliberative character).

30
31 A modest increase to the number of delegates is preferable. It would help achieve better regional
32 and proportional representation without destroying the deliberative character of general synod,
33 nor burdening the churches with significant extra costs associated with general synod. Additional
34 delegates to general synod would also help reduce the overall work load of each delegate and
35 advisory committee, thereby reducing the time spent at synod.

36
37 The current wording of Article 49 stipulates that “Each regional synod shall delegate [to general
38 synod].…” Even with an increase of delegates to general synod, inherent difficulties remain with
39 this model of choosing delegates for general synod for these reasons:

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¹ Fergus North (July 2004); Hamilton Providence (2007); Guelph Living Word (2011); Hamilton Blessings (2015); Neerlandia Hope (2016); Nooksack Valley (2018); Sardis (2019); Abbotsford Pathway (2020); Devon (2020); Niagara South (2020); Langley Refuge (2020); Grimsby Living Light (2021); Dunnville (2022); Elm Creek (2022); Arthur (2022); Hamilton Mercy (2023); Caledonia (2024).

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1 First, each regional synod consists of four classes,² although additional classes may be added in
2 the future. It is possible, and it has happened on more than one occasion, that an entire classis is
3 overlooked in the process of selecting delegates to general synod, while another classis is
4 simultaneously more heavily represented at general synod. While this isn't always avoidable
5 because of various circumstances (e.g., vacancies, elders who have volunteered their names,
6 etc.), it can be perceived as inequitable when it is avoidable.

7
8 Second, the geographic range of each regional synod is not insignificant—with regional synod
9 West comprised of classes in three provinces. Additionally, as the Canadian Reformed federation
10 has grown over the decades, so has its diversity. It is not as small of a community as it was in the
11 past. As a result, when delegates to regional synod vote for delegates to general synod, they are
12 often asked to vote on individuals they do not know because they have never met them, or
13 previously heard of them. It is already a challenge knowing each of the 100+ Canadian Reformed
14 ministers, but imagine, for example, at regional synod west an elder delegate from Winnipeg,
15 Manitoba being asked to vote on delegates from Surrey, British Columbia, or Neerlandia,
16 Alberta. There must be a better model to fit the present ecclesiastical landscape.

17
18 Third, due to the previous concerns, it is not uncommon that many of the elders delegated to the
19 last regional synod prior to general synod are subsequently delegated to general synod. That is, if
20 they are also included in the nomination list of names for general synod. This reality isn't
21 entirely surprising considering the fact that a day spent together at regional synod will make
22 them marginally more familiar to fellow delegates compared to the unknown elders on the
23 nomination list. The difficulty in such scenarios arises when the brothers delegated to a regional
24 synod and subsequent general synod are involved in the area of appeals, especially those
25 involving persons. The number of delegates at general synod able to judge an appeal can become
26 quite limited (this is also true when the same ministers are delegated to regional and general
27 synod).

28
29 A better model would see each classis delegating two ministers and two elders to general synod
30 (much like choosing delegates to regional synod), rather than a regional synod determining the
31 delegation to general synod. With this model, each of the classes in the East, and each of the
32 classes in the West, would delegate an equal number of brothers to general synod.

33
34 There are a number of benefits in moving from the current system of delegation to a system in
35 which each classis delegates brothers directly to a general synod.

36
37 First, it ensures that each classical region is represented at general synod. No one classis is
38 represented more or less than another classis. Admittedly, there may still be congregations not
39 directly represented at general synod. The only solution to a lack of direct representation would
40 be a wholesale embrace of the URCNA model, which, as stated previously, presents its own
41 challenges. Still, in each classis the distance (literal and figurative) between neighbouring
42 churches is much smaller in a regional synod. A neighbouring church will better understand the

² Regional Synod East consists of: Classis Central Ontario; Classis Northern Ontario; Classis Niagara; Classis Ontario West. Regional Synod West consists of: Classis Manitoba; Classis Alberta; Classis Pacific East; Classis Pacific West.

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1 needs and concerns of churches within the classis (eg., urban or rural challenges) than an
2 unknown delegate 2000 kilometers away in another province, and another classis.

3
4 Second, if delegates to general synod are selected at the classical level, the voting process is
5 brought much closer to home. The likelihood of classis delegates directly knowing the
6 individuals on the proposed list for delegation to general synod is much higher! This fosters
7 greater confidence in the voting process, and in better representing the concerns of a classis
8 region at general synod.

9
10 Third, an increase in the number of delegates, and the fact that they come from each classical
11 region will serve to limit the number of general synod delegates who abstain from discussing or
12 voting on a matter they have dealt with previously at a minor assembly (i.e., regional synod).

13
14 Fourth, when each classis sends a delegation to general synod, the consistories have greater
15 reason to take ownership of general synod decisions. As a result, unity and harmony in the
16 churches will be fostered to the glory of God, and the flourishing of the churches.

17
18 **Proposal**

19 Regional Synod East (November 2024) proposes to General Synod 2025 that Church Order
20 Article 49 be changed to read as follows:

21
22 “The general synod shall be held once every three years. **Each classis shall delegate two**
23 **ministers and two elders to general synod.** If it appears necessary to convene a general synod
24 before the appointed time, the convening church shall determine the time and place with the
25 advice of regional synod.”

26
27 Further, the adoption of this proposal also requires changes to Church Order Articles 44 and 47.

28
29 Proposed change to Church Order Article 44:

30 Add another paragraph, which reads, “**At least six months before the general synod, classis**
31 **shall choose delegates to that general synod.**”

32
33 Proposed change to Church Order Article 47:

34 **Delete the final paragraph**, which reads, “The last regional synod before the general synod
35 shall choose delegates to that general synod.”