

**Overture RSE 2024**

The overture was presented by the Brampton-Grace CanRC to Classis Northern Ontario September 2024.

It was then presented by CNO 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 CNO)**

**The Current Article 49**

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*

1           *with procedural fairness and due process” is also lacking. The key word is “perception.”*  
2           *Classis Pacific East does not say there is no procedural fairness and due process but is*  
3           *concerned merely with “perception.” This is not a good ground to make changes in*  
4           *delegation.*

5  
6           Three years later, GS Chatham 2004 received an appeal from the Guelph church (Guelph-  
7           Emmanuel) against the decision of GS Neerlandia 2001, Article 75. GS 2004 decided to “accede  
8           to the church at Guelph to rescind the decision of Article 75 of the Acts of Synod Neerlandia  
9           2001 and to “amend the first paragraph of Article 49 of the Church Order” to its current wording.  
10          The Acts of General Synod Chatham 2004, Article 15, lists the following considerations in  
11          sustaining Guelph’s appeal:

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

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

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

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

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

40  
41           *4.4. The church at Guelph does not prove that a major shift in direction of general synod*  
42           *can be avoided through an increase in the number of delegates to synod. Scripture does,*  
43           *however, assert that “many advisors make victory sure” (Prov.11:14; cf. Prov.15:22).*  
44

1           4.5. *The church at Guelph is correct when it states that the likelihood of an increase in*  
2           *the number of regional synods is remote. With no increase in the number of regional*  
3           *synods, there will also be no increase in delegation to general synod.*  
4

## 5   **The Present Context**

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7   By the time GS Aldergrove 2025 convenes, a full twenty-one years will have passed since the  
8   decision of GS Chatham 2004. In the intervening two decades, seventeen new Canadian  
9   Reformed churches have been instituted!<sup>1</sup> One church—Emmanuel American Reformed Church  
10   1 in Denver, Colorado—has been disbanded. This reflects a net growth of sixteen congregations  
11   (or approximately 34% growth in churches) in a federation that currently consists of sixty-seven  
12   churches. Presently, these newly instituted churches account for nearly a quarter (23.8%) of the  
13   total number of churches in the federation.  
14

15   Both GS Neerlandia 2001 and GS Chatham 2004 assert that increasing the number of delegates  
16   to general synod is not a solution for proportionate representation. Moreover, they state that  
17   Reformed church polity is based on regional representation rather than proportionate  
18   representation. Still, this “either-or” argumentation is difficult to maintain when one considers  
19   the manner in which the United Reformed Churches in North America and the Orthodox  
20   Presbyterian Church send delegates to their general synods and general assemblies, respectively.  
21

22   In both these sister churches, representation is much more proportionate than at the general  
23   synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In other words, another increase to the number of  
24   delegates to general synod is not as radical as GS Chatham 2004 claims, nor a departure from  
25   Reformed polity.<sup>2</sup>  
26

27   Today, as we reconsider the considerations and standing decision of GS Chatham 2004 in light  
28   of a drastically changing ecclesiastical landscape, it would appear prudent to decide once more to  
29   increase the number of delegates to general synod. In theory, any number of delegates could be  
30   proposed. For example, among the United Reformed Churches in North America, each  
31   consistory sends a delegation of two office bearers to general synod. In the Canadian Reformed  
32   context, however, a dramatic increase from the current 24 delegates to 134 delegates would  
33   undoubtedly destroy the deliberative character of general synod while substantially increasing  
34   financial costs associated with general synod (although it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove  
35   when the number of total delegates enters into the territory of non-deliberative character).  
36

37   A modest increase to the number of delegates is preferable. It would help achieve better regional  
38   and proportional representation without destroying the deliberative character of general synod,  
39   nor burdening the churches with significant extra costs associated with general synod. Additional  
40   delegates to general synod would also help reduce the overall workload of each delegate and  
41   advisory committee, thereby reducing the time spent at synod. The minimum increase possible is

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<sup>1</sup> Fergus North (July 2004); Hamilton Providence (2007); Guelph Living Word (2011); Hamilton Blessings (2015);  
1 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).

<sup>2</sup> cf. Acts of Synod Chatham 2004, Article 15, consideration 4.2.

*Regional Synod East – Overture Re CO Art. 49 – Broader Representation at GS (from CNO)*

1 an increase from six ministers and six elders to seven ministers and seven elders from each  
2 region. However, an increase to eight ministers and eight elders from each region is preferred,  
3 especially if this change is made in concert with a change to the minor assemblies tasked with  
4 delegating individuals to general synod.

5  
6 The current wording of Article 49 stipulates that “Each regional synod shall delegate [to general  
7 synod] ...” Even with an increase of delegates to general synod, inherent difficulties remain with  
8 this model of choosing delegates for general synod.

9  
10 First, each regional synod consists of four classes.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, and it has happened on more  
11 than one occasion, that an entire classis is overlooked in the process of selecting the delegation to  
12 general synod, while another classis is simultaneously more heavily represented at general  
13 synod. While this isn’t always avoidable because of various circumstances (e.g., vacancies,  
14 elders who have volunteered their names, etc.), it can be perceived as inequitable when it is  
15 avoidable.

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

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

37  
38 A better model would see each classis delegating two ministers and two elders to general synod  
39 (much like choosing delegates to regional synod), rather than a regional synod determining the  
40 delegation to general synod. With this model, each of the four classes in the East, and each of the  
41 four classes in West, would delegate an equal number of brothers to general synod for a total of  
42 eight ministers and eight elders from each region.

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<sup>3</sup> Regional Synod East consists of: Classis Central Ontario; Classis Northern Ontario; Classis Niagara; Classis 3  
Ontario West. Regional Synod West consists of: Classis Manitoba; Classis Alberta; Classis Pacific East; Classis  
Pacific West.

*Regional Synod East – Overture Re CO Art. 49 – Broader Representation at GS (from CNO)*

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

3  
4 First, it ensures that each classical region is represented at general synod. No one classical region  
5 is represented more or less than another. Admittedly, there may still be congregations not  
6 directly represented at general synod. The only solution to a lack of direct representation would  
7 be a wholesale embrace of the URCNA model, which, as stated previously, presents its own  
8 challenges. Still, in each classis the distance (literal and figurative) between neighbouring  
9 churches is much smaller in a regional synod. A neighbouring church will better understand the  
10 needs and concerns of churches within the classis (e.g., urban or rural challenges), than an  
11 unknown delegate 2000 kilometers away in another province, and another classical region.

12  
13 Second, if delegates to general synod are selected at the classical level, the voting process is  
14 brought much closer to home. The likelihood of classis delegates directly knowing the  
15 individuals on the proposed list for delegation to general synod is significantly higher! This  
16 fosters greater confidence in the voting process, and in better representing the concerns of a  
17 classical region at general synod.

18  
19 Third, an increase in the number of delegates, and the fact that they come from each classical  
20 region will serve to limit the number of general synod delegates who abstain from discussing or  
21 voting on a matter they have dealt with previously at a minor assembly (i.e., regional synod).

22  
23 Fourth, when each classis sends a delegation to general synod, the consistories have greater  
24 reason to take ownership of general synod decisions. As a result, unity and harmony in the  
25 churches will be fostered to the glory of God, and the flourishing of the churches.

26  
27 **Proposal:**

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

31  
32 “The general synod shall be held once every three years. **Each classis shall delegate two**  
33 **ministers and two elders to general synod.** If it appears necessary to convene a general  
34 synod before the appointed time, the convening church shall determine the time and place  
35 with the advice of regional synod.”

36  
37 Further, the adoption of this proposal also requires changes to Church Order Articles 44 and 47:

38 Proposed change to Church Order Article 44:

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

41  
42 Proposed change to Church Order Article 47:

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