

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

**Overture RSW 2024**

The following overture was presented by the Langley Canadian Reformed Church to Classis Pacific West September 26, 2024.

It was then presented by CPW September 26, 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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September 27, 2024

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Re: Overture CO 55 (Approval of Hymns)

To: Regional Synod West 2024

Esteemed brothers,

Classis Pacific West September 26, 2024, received an overture regarding Church Order article 55 from the Langley Canadian Reformed Church. With respect to this overture CPW Sep 2024 did the following:

*Article 8c: Langley CanRC overture re CO 55. Following discussion, taking into consideration submissions from Willoughby Heights, Houston, and Cloverdale, classis decided to forward the overture on unchanged to RSW 2024, requesting RSW 2024 to forward the overture on to GS 2025.*

Please find following the overture referred to for the agenda of RSW 2024 for your consideration.

Though the RSW guidelines do not mention it, given that the general synod guidelines indicate it is the responsibility of the regional synods to distribute overtures to all the churches, we will ensure that all the churches within RSW receive this overture in a timely manner. That way we hope to maximize the time churches will have in which to consider them, and, if they so desire, to submit their thoughts to RSW 2024.

May the Lord bless your deliberations.

With Christian greetings,



Rev. Karlo Janssen

Clerk, CPW Sep 2024

1 **Overture to Amend Article 55 of the Church Order<sup>1</sup>**  
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3 Currently, Article 55 of the Church Order reads as follows:  
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5 *The metrical Psalms adopted by general synod*  
6 *as well as the hymns approved by general*  
7 *synod shall be sung in the worship services.*  
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9 **In accordance with the provision of Article 76 of the Church Order, we believe that the**  
10 **interest of the churches demand that article 55 ought to be changed. Therefore, we request**  
11 **Classis Pacific West to adopt our overture and pass it along to the broader assemblies of**  
12 **Regional Synod West and General Synod 2025. We propose to change Article 55 to read as**  
13 **follows:**  
14

15 *The metrical Psalms adopted by general synod as well as hymns that faithfully and*  
16 *fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity,*  
17 *and are approved by the consistory, shall be sung in the worship services.<sup>2</sup>*  
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19 **Preamble**  
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21 In our immediate historical tradition (Reformed churches in the Netherlands) the metrical psalms  
22 sung in Reformed worship services have been synonymous with a Genevan Psalter since the 16<sup>th</sup>  
23 century. In 1968 the deputies for the committee on the church's song book rejected the adoption  
24 of an eclectic psalter in favour of a complete Anglo-Genevan psalter with the rhyming of the  
25 complete psalms of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> In 1972 the Canadian Reformed churches published for use in the  
26 worship services a complete Anglo-Genevan Psalter.<sup>4</sup> Whether one agrees with the choice our  
27 forefathers made<sup>5</sup>, nonetheless, for 50 years the metrical psalms adopted by our general synods  
28 of 1972 and 2014 have been synonymous with our Anglo-Genevan psalter.  
29

30 It is our conviction that the churches have been well served by these metrical psalms adopted by  
31 general synod. There is no Scriptural precept or principle which requires that the general synod  
32 must adopt the psalms that shall be sung in worship services. However, given the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> All references to acts of general synod in this overture will be noted by the designation 'Acts' the year 'XXXX' and the relevant article and/or page number. All references to the Standing Committee for the Book of Praise are designated SCBP. All references to a specific general synod will be designated with 'GS' and the year 'XXXX'.

<sup>2</sup> We have retained the intentional distinction between 'adopt' and 'approve' as it was explained on p.14 of the report of the committee for the revision to the church order which they presented to GS 1983: *We repeat: we do not "approve" Psalms, only Hymns, and this term "approve" is inappropriate when used of Psalms....When choosing our terms, we gratefully benefitted from the work of the Netherlands sister Churches.*

<sup>3</sup> *The ultimate aim of Deputies is to present to the Churches a complete Psalter comprising all 150 Psalms on the Genevan tunes. They would like to emphasize the phrase 'on the Genevan tunes'...Deputies would like to suggest that the Churches once and for all forsake this concept of an eclectic Psalter and proceed to the completion of a Genevan Psalter.* (Acts 1968, p. 102.)

<sup>4</sup> At the time of presenting the completed Book of Praise, the chairman of the committee (Rev. G. vanDooren) reflected on their pursuit of using only Genevan tunes rather than compiling a psalter from various sources. He concluded his speech as follows, *But we do believe that by the publication of this Book of Praise we have saved and secured, for the generations to come, the Calvinistic, Genevan, Covenantal Book of Praise.* (Acts 1974, Art. 101, p.41.)

<sup>5</sup> In the aforementioned speech to General Synod 1974, the committee chairman admitted that their mandate was somewhat suspect from a church polity perspective when he said, *One may wonder whether Article 30 of the Church Order gave the right for such a mandate but no one will regret that it did so.* (Acts 1974, Art. 101, p.39.)

33 Anglo-Genevan Psalter in our churches, the love that remains for it and the unifying effect it has  
34 had, it seems prudent to maintain the current language of Article 55 concerning the psalms so as  
35 to ensure that our present psalter is preserved for the foreseeable future.

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37 The practice of general synod approving hymns for use in the worship services has a different  
38 history and character than that of the adoption of metrical psalms. The reason for this is that the  
39 original polity of Dort did not set out to have general synod *approve*<sup>6</sup> hymns for use in worship  
40 but rather to *limit* them to a small handful of songs of Scripture as found in the New Testament.  
41 It was believed that the psalms were sufficient for singing in worship services and that hymns  
42 should be rejected.<sup>7</sup>

43  
44 The underlying convictions of Dort seem to have largely been shared by the earliest assemblies  
45 of the Canadian Reformed Churches. GS 1954 appointed a committee for the introduction of an  
46 English psalter into the churches composed of rhymed versions of the psalms<sup>8</sup>. It is significant  
47 that this synod did not establish a committee for a psalter-hymnal. However, when this  
48 committee reported to GS 1958<sup>9</sup>, its first recommendation was that deputies be mandated to  
49 compile a collection of psalms in the English language, ‘*including, if possible, other songs of*  
50 *Scripture*’.<sup>10</sup> GS 1958 agreed with this recommendation and mandated the deputies for the  
51 psalter accordingly.<sup>11</sup> It is clear from the report of the deputies that *other songs of Scripture*  
52 functioned in line with the ‘exceptions’ of Dort. Such exceptions stood in a far different category  
53 from the various English hymns of the time, which the deputies for the psalter were highly  
54 critical of both in terms of content and style. It was their conviction that the deformation of the  
55 church was connected to the abandonment of Reformed psalm-singing and its replacement by the  
56 singing of Methodist hymns.<sup>12</sup> Even the psalter-hymnal of the Christian Reformed Churches was  
57 deemed a trojan horse that would be detrimental to the character of the newly formed Canadian  
58 Reformed Churches.<sup>13</sup> The oft repeated phrase in the report attributed to Calvin captures well  
59 their views on what songs to sing in worship - *who will teach us better than the Holy Spirit*  
60 *himself?*

61  
62 GS 1965 shifted from this tradition when, as a result of an overture from Regional Synod 1965, it  
63 stopped using the phrase, *other songs of Scripture*. Instead, the deputies for the psalter were  
64 mandated to *include in the “Book of Praise” beside the Psalms also hymns that are scriptural,*  
65 *preferably rhymings of parts of Scripture, especially of poetic character, which are considered*

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<sup>6</sup> This word was first added to the Church Order by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) in 1978 and taken over by the Canadian Reformed committee for the revision of the Church Order on p.26 of their report to GS 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Church Order of Dort 1618-1619 – Article 69 - *In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the 12 Articles of Faith, the Songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon shall be sung. It is left to the freedom of the churches whether to use or omit the song, ‘O God, who art our Father’. All other hymns are to be resisted by the churches, and any that have already slipped into the churches are to be removed by the most appropriate means.* (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Acts 1954, art. 56, p.34-35 (Dutch version)

<sup>9</sup> The 56-page report was authored by Rev. G. VanDooren and written in Dutch with the title, *Op Weg Naar Een Engelse Reformatorische Psalm bundel (Towards An English Reformed Psalter)*.

<sup>10</sup> *Op Weg* p.54 (author’s translation).

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1958, art. 172, p.42

<sup>12</sup> *Op Weg* p.15

<sup>13</sup> *Op Weg* p.20

66 *suitable*.<sup>14</sup> This statement was repeated by GS 1968.<sup>15</sup> The advisory committee for GS 1968  
67 expressed its feeling that the question of whether or not a hymn is scriptural *is not determined by*  
68 *the fact that its origin can be traced back to the Old or New Testament, but by the fact that its*  
69 *contents are in agreement with the divine revelation in the Old and New Testament*.<sup>16</sup> Neither GS  
70 1965 or 1968 provided a rationale for this greater latitude. In subsequent years there was greater  
71 latitude in the inclusion of hymns both in number<sup>17</sup> and style, although once again without  
72 providing a rationale for this greater latitude.<sup>18</sup>

73  
74 It is our conviction that such latitude is in fact warranted by the apostolic command that the  
75 church *address one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making*  
76 *melody to the Lord with your heart* (Ephesians 5:19). Therefore, we submit to you the following  
77 grounds for having the consistory approve these hymns and spiritual songs instead of the general  
78 synod.

79

### 80 **Grounds for changing the provision around the hymns approved:**

81

- 82 1. There is no Scriptural precept or principle which requires that general synod, rather than  
83 the local consistory, must approve all the music used in the local churches. To suggest  
84 that the consistory cannot or should not make decisions about what hymns shall be sung  
85 is inconsistent with the governing principle found in this section of the church order  
86 (Articles 52-65) which emphasizes the consistory's oversight of all matters related to  
87 worship, sacraments, and ceremonies. Furthermore, while the various Church Order  
88 commentaries provide a history of synodical decisions regarding the content of the song  
89 of the church, none of them demonstrate why the song of the churches should be  
90 regulated by the broader assemblies rather than local churches.<sup>19</sup>
- 91  
92 2. Mandating general synod to approve all hymns sung in the worship services ends up  
93 laying an unnecessary burden on some local churches.<sup>20</sup> Article 55 is causing some stress  
94 within the federation of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Some churches desire to sing  
95 songs not found in the Book of Praise and they feel a need for greater freedom in the  
96 choice of songs for reasons that vary from having a younger demographic or a diverse  
97 membership to specific missional goals. Consequently, some of these churches feel  
98 compelled to adopt creative measures related to parsing the church order term 'worship  
99 service' as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 1965, art. 19, p.70

<sup>15</sup> Acts 1968, art. 87, p.30

<sup>16</sup> Acts 1968, p.107

<sup>17</sup> 62 hymns in the 1971 Book of Praise and 85 hymns in the 2013 Book of Praise.

<sup>18</sup> On the number of hymns the Standing Committee for the Book of Praise proposed a limit of 100 hymns in their report to GS 2004 with the ground that the preface to the Book of Praise states that psalms have a predominant place in the liturgy of the Reformed churches (see Acts GS 2004, p.174). However, there was no ground offered for the expansion of hymns other than that GS 2001 had mandated the committee to receive hymns from the churches in agreement with an overture from Regional Synod East, via Classis Central Ontario (see Acts GS 2001, art.97, p.109-111).

<sup>19</sup> For the history of synodical regulation of the song of the church in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, see H. Bouwman, 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>20</sup> The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was judicious when writing in their letter to the churches, *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements*. While the context is different the principle remains - that broader assemblies should not lay unnecessary burdens on the churches.

- 100 a. Defining a ‘worship service’ as per Article 52 to be those liturgical acts that occur  
101 between the greeting and the benediction so that the provision of Article 55  
102 applies only to songs sung between these two liturgical elements and not to those  
103 sung before or after these elements. While some might argue that such a practice  
104 demands compliance with Article 55, we believe that such a practice underlines  
105 the need for Article 55 to be amended since there is no scriptural or confessional  
106 principle that would prevent such a change.
- 107 b. Stating that the commemoration of certain events in Christ’s life (eg. Christmas  
108 and Good Friday) need not be done in a worship service so that article 55 need not  
109 apply.<sup>21</sup> This practice further underlines the need for Article 55 to be amended.  
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- 111 3. Removing the mandate of general synod to approve all hymns sung in the worship  
112 services nonetheless maintains the freedom of practice among those churches that are  
113 convinced that only a limited number of hymns or a limited category of hymns should  
114 function in the worship of the church.<sup>22</sup>  
115
- 116 4. Mandating general synod to approve all hymns sung in the worship services prevents the  
117 singing in corporate worship of many excellent, Biblically grounded, and well-known  
118 hymns and Christian songs from both the past and the present.  
119
- 120 5. The frequent addition and subtraction of hymns approved by general synod is neither  
121 sustainable nor fiscally responsible as evidenced by the following:
- 122 a. The churches express frustration over this process since inevitably it is judged  
123 to be too fast or too slow and to result in too many or too few hymns being  
124 added.
- 125 b. The churches experience fatigue with the seemingly endless process so that  
126 some churches have begun calling for a moratorium on any changes to the  
127 psalms and hymns in the Book of Praise.<sup>23</sup>
- 128 c. The present hymn cap of 100 and the present testing of 37 hymns means either  
129 22 hymns that will have been tested for six years will no longer be allowed to  
130 be sung or any number of hymns already in the Book of Praise will be  
131 removed to make room for more than 15 new hymns. Either way this will lead  
132 to yet greater frustration among the churches.
- 133 d. The SCBP faces ongoing challenges in incorporating copyrighted hymns in  
134 the Book of Praise.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Acts 2022, Article 142, p. 80-81.

<sup>22</sup> We do well to remember that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands there was a period where general synod made the singing of hymns mandatory which led to much upheaval in the Reformed Churches since among some churches there was still an aversion to singing hymns.

<sup>23</sup> As illustration of this point Niagara South Canadian Reformed Church submitted a letter to GS 2022 dated February 23, 2022 interacting with the SCBP report. Their letter concludes with the following statement, *Our recommendation to General Synod Guelph-Emmanuel, 2022 is for the foreseeable future to leave the Book of Praise as it is.*

<sup>24</sup> As stated in the letter and accompanying survey the SCBP sent to the churches dated August 31, 2023. See also section 4.2.7 (pages not numbered) of their report to GS 2022.

- 135 e. This process consumes a lot of time at the SCBP<sup>25</sup> and general synod level<sup>26</sup>,  
136 not to mention for those local churches which take the time to engage with the  
137 SCBP reports to general synod and/or the SCBP surveys of the churches.  
138 f. Churches, individuals, and other institutions that require current hard copies of  
139 the Book of Praise are forced to spend money on each new printing.  
140 Meanwhile, the publisher has indicated that the current funding model is not  
141 sustainable.<sup>27</sup>  
142
- 143 6. Other North American churches with whom we have Ecclesiastical Fellowship and who  
144 have jointly published a psalter-hymnal (the Trinity Psalter Hymnal of the OPC and  
145 URCNA) nonetheless, leave the decision of what is sung in the churches within the  
146 province of the consistory/session.<sup>28</sup>  
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<sup>25</sup> In its report to GS 2022 the SCBP indicated that it met over 100 times (see section 4.2.9, pages not numbered)

<sup>26</sup> The most recent process around the ‘testing songs’ began with GS 2019 and may or may not be completed by GS 2025.

<sup>27</sup> As indicated by the mandate of the SCBP from GS 2022 (Acts 2022, Art. 120, p.72) and the letter and accompanying survey the SCBP sent to the churches dated August 31, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> The Church Order of the URCNA - Article 39 – *The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory* (emphasis added). The Form of Government of the OPC – Chapter XII.7 - *The session is charged with maintaining the government of the congregation. It shall oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship;* (emphasis added).

149 **ARTICLE 32 [6G]: CPW OVERTURE RE: CO ARTICLE 55**

150 **1. Materials:**

151 1.1 Overture from CPW (Appendix C)

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

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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 CPW noted the following grounds for changing the provision around approved  
160 hymns:

161 2.2.1 Suggesting that the consistory cannot or should not make decisions about what hymns  
162 shall be sung is inconsistent with Articles 52-65 of the Church Order.

163 2.2.2 Requiring synod approval for all hymns lays an unnecessary burden on some local  
164 churches. Some churches feel compelled to adopt creative measures related to parsing  
165 the church order term 'worship service'.

166 2.2.3 Adopting this proposal will not remove the ability for churches to carry on as they do  
167 today, including limiting the number of hymns used.

168 2.2.4 Article 55 as it stands prevents the singing in corporate worship of many excellent,  
169 Biblically grounded, and well-known Christian songs.

170 2.2.5 Continually adding and subtracting hymns approved by general synod is unsustainable  
171 and fiscally irresponsible.

172 2.2.6 Other North American churches with whom we have Ecclesiastical Fellowship leave the  
173 decision of what is sung in the churches within the province of the consistory/session  
174 (OPC, URCNA).

175 2.3 The following churches registered opposition:

176 2.3.1 Willoughby notes that this proposal says nothing about the benefits or desired  
177 predominance of Psalm singing during worship.

178 2.3.2 St. Albert and Winnipeg Redeemer believe that the proposal will diminish federative unity  
179 and could lead to doctrinal drift and disunity among churches. Our present system  
180 provides a high level of accountability, guarding against songs that may be unsound or  
181 harmful.

182 2.3.3 Coaldale and Elm Creek believe the Psalms in our Book of Praise are a rich treasure, and  
183 a unique marker of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

184 2.3.4 Coaldale and Cloverdale believe that a common song book is a powerful unifying force,  
185 visibly expressing the unity we share.

186 2.3.5 Chilliwack noted that the proposal does not interact with the limit of 100 hymns set by  
187 previous synods.

188 2.3.6 Chilliwack noted that this matter has been dealt with by previous Synods.

189 2.3.7 Carman-East, Cloverdale, and Coaldale noted that General Synod and the Standing  
190 Committee for the Book of Praise (SCBP) has expertise unlikely to exist in individual  
191 congregations.

192 2.4 The following churches provided reasons to support the overture:

193 2.4.1 Willoughby appreciates that this proposal leaves the Anglo-Genevan Psalter untouched.

194 2.4.2 Langley (Refuge) noted that there are instances where the Psalms have been put to music



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with greater faithfulness to the Biblical text alongside an easier tune.

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

**3. Observations:**

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

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

3.3 Neither this proposal nor the current Article 55 ensure that Psalms have predominant place in worship service.

**4. Recommendations:**

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

**Adopted**