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Clerk of Regional Synod East November 11, 2020
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Consistories of All Canadian and American Reformed Churches

November 26, AD 2020

Re: Overture to Remove the Current Hymn Cap for the *Book of Praise*

Dear Brothers,

Regional Synod East 2020 received an overture from Classis Central Ontario (March 13, 2020) requesting that RSE overture General Synod Guelph (Emmanuel) 2022 to remove the current hymn cap for the *Book of Praise*. After due deliberation, RSE decided to send the overture “in a modified format” to GS 2022. It may therefore be expected that said overture will, in due time, appear on the agenda for GS 2022.

Meanwhile, the regulations of RSE state that “The clerk shall distribute to all the churches any overture adopted by Regional Synod East for submission to a general synod” (Regulations, II.C.3.). This is in accord with the Guidelines for General Synods which state, “Since matters on the agenda of general synod involve the churches in common, regional synods shall distribute copies of adopted overtures to all the churches in the federation no later than five months prior to the convening of a general synod” (*Guidelines for General Synods I.F.*, as found in the *Acts of GS 2019*, Appendix 20). Hence as clerk of the recent RSE I am sending the overture to each consistory as below.

Given that there is still some eighteen months to go till GS 2022 (expected to be held in May of that year), the churches have more than ample time to reflect on and interact with the overture as they wish. In due time the churches may expect to receive official notification from the convening church for the next general synod (Guelph Emmanuel) along with an address to which all correspondence concerning that synod may be sent. Here follows the modified overture of Regional Synod East 2020:

Modified Overture Regarding the Current Cap of 100 Hymns in the *Book of Praise*

Overture:

RSE recommends that General Synod 2022 (Guelph) remove the limit of 100 hymns for inclusion in the *Book of Praise* as set in place by General Synod 2004 (Chatham).

Background:

Acts of GS Chatham 2004, Article 115, Obs. 6.1 (pp. 120, 121)
Hymn Section 6.1

Observations 6.1.1 The Standing Committee for the Book of Praise (SCBP) intends to deal with submissions re: the hymn section in a manner that seeks to:

- Maintain the current structure of our hymn section;
- Identify and correct deficiencies and/or weaknesses in the existing hymn section and come with a proposal for change, addition or improvement;
- Select suitable hymns using the Guidelines and Principles agreed upon by the committee together with the Psalter Hymnal Committee of the URCNA;

- Set the limit at 100 hymns since Psalms have a predominant place in the liturgy of the Reformed churches;
- Publish a revised hymn section proposed for testing by the churches.

Acts of GS Chatham 2004 Article 115, Rec. 6.3

6.3 Recommendation

Synod decide to mandate the SCBP to deal with the submissions re: the hymn section as outlined in Observation 6.6.1 and to present a proposal to the next General Synod.

Observations:

1. The Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* (SCBP) proposed guidelines to deal with submissions received from the churches regarding the hymn section of the *Book of Praise*, as recorded in the Acts of GS 2004 Art. 115, Obs. 6.1. This proposal was adopted for use in the decision of GS 2004 Art.115, Rec. 6.3.
2. Included in the adopted guidelines dealing with the submission of hymns from the churches was the determination to limit the number of hymns in the *Book of Praise* to 100.
3. The rationale for setting this limit was that Psalms ought to have a predominant place in the liturgy of the Reformed churches.
4. Normally, challenging the decision of a previous synod would take the form of an appeal, rather than an overture. However, GS 2019 reasoned in another matter (regarding Hamilton-Blessings' request for a revision of a decision of GS 1983) that:

“The fact that the decision of GS 1983 has served in the churches for more than 30 years is also significant. During all that time, the 1983 decision was honoured as settling and binding. Also for this reason, the request of Hamilton-Blessings should come in the form of an overture that follows the ecclesiastical route..., seeking support. In this way all the churches will have ample time and opportunity to interact with it through this filtering process.” (GS 2019, Art. 64, Cons. 4.4, p. 51.).

Since the decision of GS 2004 has been honoured as settling and binding by the churches for 15 years, this request also honours the suggested protocol of GS 2019.

5. In its considerations dealing with developments in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated; =GKN below), GS 2004 made the following statement concerning the proportion of Psalms and Hymns authorized for use in the churches (Art.44 Consideration 4.3):

“*the proportion of Psalms and Hymns in the Gereformeerde Kerkboek*. Synod notes with thankfulness that Synod Zuidhorn 2002 stressed the importance of the Psalms in the worship services. At the same time, the decision to leave the number of hymns open ended could lead to hymns overshadowing the Psalms. In light of these changes the CRCA is correct that a “proper proportion between the number of hymns in itself reflects the importance – and even the priority – of the Psalms.” Thus, in light of our rules of Ecclesiastical Fellowship, we should convey this to the GKN.”
6. In its considerations dealing with developments in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated; =GKN below), GS 2007 made the following statement concerning the proportion of Psalms and Hymns authorized for use in the churches (Art.133 Consideration 4.2):

“*Psalms and Hymns*. While some churches feel that the concerns about the proportion between psalms and hymns have not been alleviated, we do well to take to heart the remark of the committee that “pursuing the concern over the number of hymns...is not a fruitful avenue.” (pp.46-47). This does not take away, however, the discomfort with the fact that a church known for its emphasis on psalm singing, as also reflected in the proportion of psalms and hymns in the past, has made a rapid shift to having a very large number of

hymns available for worship. The concern remains that the vast multiplication of hymns does nothing to advance to the priority of psalm singing and places at risk this principle.”

Considerations:

1. The SCBP’s rationale for setting a limit of 100 hymns was that the Psalms must retain a predominant place in the liturgy of the Reformed churches. In their report to GS 2004 they reference as confirmation of this position the Preface to the *Book of Praise* (p. v). There we find a brief history of congregational singing in the context of Reformed churches which includes the following statement:

“Although in Reformed liturgy the Psalms have a predominant place, our churches have not excluded the use of scriptural hymns. They, too, constitute a thank offering of praise when we sing of the facts of redemption by God in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Regional Synod East acknowledges that the church has received the 150 Psalms from the hand of the LORD and, therefore, they ought to occupy a unique and privileged place in the liturgy of the church. As such, the singing of the Psalms should retain a predominant role in the worship of the church. Nevertheless, RSE concludes that limiting the number of hymns in the *Book of Praise* is not an effective way of achieving this goal. The limitations of this approach can be seen from the fact that the predominance of psalm singing in Reformed liturgy could only be enforced through the limitation of available hymns if that number was kept to a bare minimum (significantly less than 100). Further, it is conceivable that if a consistory would decide to sing only psalms, it would not matter how many hymns were available. Likewise, if a consistory decided to sing only hymns, 100 hymns would provide them with enough hymns to cycle through over the course of the year. In the same manner, if a consistory was committed to the predominance of psalm singing, having a selection of more than 100 hymns to choose from would not alter the ratio of psalms to hymns in the arrangement of their liturgy. Thus, an artificial limit of 100 hymns does not serve the purpose it sets out to accomplish, i.e., the preservation of a predominantly psalm-singing church.
2. The predominance of psalm singing is a matter of principle, not a matter of song availability. Realistically, the predominance of psalm singing in the worship services will only be maintained by the oversight of the consistory in approving the liturgy as presented for worship each week. That decision is rooted in the exercise of sound Reformed liturgical principle, not by a stringently limited hymn section.
3. The imposition of a cap on the number of hymns which can be included in the *Book of Praise* has the effect of unnecessarily limiting the selection of hymns which the churches are able to choose from. There is no reason to restrict the churches from using excellent hymns in the worship service simply because an arbitrary cap has been set on the number. In effect, the specified limit has no other function than to force the churches to choose from among the best hymns for inclusion in the *Book of Praise* rather than allow for consideration all the best hymns, also as they continue to be written.
4. The agreement of the Canadian Reformed Churches to work collectively to select the songs suitable for the worship services (Church Order Article 55) is regulation enough to oversee and manage the approved content of the *Book of Praise*, without implementing additional restrictions. No songs can, or ought, to be adopted for use in worship that the churches have not first deemed to be suitable for use in worship. This is the regulative principle the churches have agreed to.
5. RSE acknowledges the concerns expressed by GS 2004 and GS 2007 regarding the proportionality of psalms to hymns in the church’s song book. The churches need to take care that the psalms are to have the predominant place in the liturgy.

Adopted

Yours in our Lord Jesus Christ,

On behalf of Regional Synod East Nov 11, 2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter H. Holtvlüwer", is centered on a light blue rectangular background.

Peter H. Holtvlüwer (clerk at that time)