

To the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America:

We, the undersigned, wish to register a complaint regarding an action of the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery on October 7, 2022, in which Presbytery elected the following: *“That presbytery adopt it as a standing policy to prohibit all audio and/or video recordings of its ecclesiastical reports and deliberations — excluding non-deliberative items, e.g. preaching (with the preacher’s permission), Psalm-singing, ordination/installation services; and excluding the recording of oneself — without express permission from the court.”* We also ask Synod 1) to declare that audio recordings of open meetings of all church courts are good, and 2) to commission a policy to be developed for the orderly recording of the church courts and the curation of recordings for the preserving of truth and justice for the good of the church, now and in perpetuity, until King Jesus returns to judge every idle word.

SOME BIBLICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL DATA

- WLC Question 144. What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?
Answer. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man...
- “No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.” (Luke 8:16-18)
- “For thus says the Lord of hosts: “As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not. These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.”” (Zechariah 8:14-17)
- “So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity to all his people. Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder, and Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was secretary, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and David’s sons were priests.” (2 Samuel 8:15-18)

BASIC REASONING

1. The essence of courts is contained in words, written and spoken. Words matters to God, so words matters. Words can be good (truth in love), and words can be evil (falsehood, lack of love).
2. Recording open meetings of the church courts is a good practice for many reasons (see “Detailed Rationale” below). To prohibit a good practice is sinful. Therefore, to prohibit the recording of all open meetings of a church court is sinful.

DETAILED RATIONALE

1. Few people can remember the volume of speech and reasoning on a variety of topics over several days that is commonly experienced at meetings of the courts. Audio/video recordings can mitigate such human frailty. Instead of everyone taking notes (which cannot be completely accurate), they can spend their energy and thought to engage in the debates and discussion, knowing that they can come back to an accurate recording for more consideration later on.
2. Recording open sessions of the court has the obvious advantage of making the entire proceedings available for those who would like to have been, but were not able to be, present.
3. Imagine if you could hear the actual debates in past courts on a particular topic. This orderly reasoning can be more valuable than the decisions that a court makes because it teaches the church how a court came to a decision. This reasoning can be evaluated for its current relevance, and it can be used to instruct future generations of the courts and the broader church.
4. Recordings are an efficient way to preserve the truth about important conversations. If there is any accusation of impropriety in the courts, this truth may be used to acquit the righteous and to sanctify the unrighteous. This truth may be used to settle disputes over what actually happened in the courts. This will save much time and litigation by preventing needless disputes and wrangling over words and history.
5. Recording can help court participants grow in sanctification. As we listen to recordings of ourselves and others, we can reflect on what was said and how it was said, and then seek God in word and prayer for how to grow in grace in our speech.
6. Recordings provide necessary accountability for how people converse in the courts. Those who speak in the courts presumably have the right to speak. But no one has the right to sin. Of course, all men do sin, and sometimes men will speak sinfully in the courts. In these cases, the sinner should confess, and make repairs toward reconciliation. Recordings are some of the Godly means for documenting speech, encouraging Godly speech, and helping to correct ungodly speech, if it occurs.
7. Even secular courts are public events, and complete audio or written transcripts are created by paid recorders. How much more carefully should the courts of King Jesus be preserved and curated!
8. Recording courts promotes needed transparency and communication. How much more will the trust between the shepherds and the sheep of God's house be strengthened by complete openness about what was said in the courts of King Jesus!
9. Since we always speak in God's presence, we should always speak in such a way that glorifies God and that we would be happy for others to hear as well. As our Lord commands, "But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." (James 5:12).

SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

1. **Recordings can be used against people on the recording.**
Answer: Truth and righteousness cannot harm anyone; on the contrary, they can only acquit and defend people. However, falsehood and wicked speech should be exposed for the sake of sanctification.
2. **Recording meetings is uncharted territory for the church.**
Answer: Recording is actually a standard process in worldly courts. Also, the courts of the Biblical kings used recorders, who were important officials in the court.

3. **The church doesn't know what will be done with the recordings.**

Answer: This objection seems motivated by fear. If the recording is truth, Jesus says it will set us free, not enslave us.

4. **Privacy will be compromised by recordings.**

Answer: First, church courts are open meetings. Second, a court may elect to enter an executive session if the value of privacy outweighs the value of openness.

5. **Recordings can be edited and posted on social media platforms, but without the appropriate context of the entire discussion.**

Answer: First, this is true of any speech, recorded by written notes, or just recollected from memory. Yet, the Presbytery did not vote to prohibit all note-taking, just audio and video recording. Second, this argument actually argues for due diligence to preserve an accurate, full recording of the courts, so that an authoritative answer can be given, if anyone posts a misleading version of the deliberations of the courts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Synod declare that recording open meetings of church courts is good and permissible throughout the RPCNA.
2. That Synod admonish Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery for prohibiting recording, a good deed, in the courts.
3. That Synod commission a policy to govern the recording of church courts, and proper curation of the recordings, for the glory of God and the good of His church.

SIGNED,

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