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Setting the Record Straight

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A Problem of Record

When 13 ministers and 3 ruling elders opened the Synod of 1821, the RPCNA was a good deal smaller than it is today. There were 42 congregations in 5 presbyteries, and the frontiers of the church were in central Tennessee, southwestern Illinois, and southern Indiana. Just 23 years had passed since a single presbytery was formed, and the first Synod meeting was only 12 years in the past.

Although much smaller and younger, that Synod discovered that it lacked a solid sense of past decisions. It appointed a committee to codify past decisions and publish them as a digest; but the committee never produced anything. Between 1866 and 1939, multiple committees were appointed to create a digest. One committee even believed that the task was nearly complete, but its members used different approaches that could not be harmonized; and the project failed completely after its chairman died. For years afterward, committeeman J.B. Willson distributed copies of his portion of the project upon request.

Summaries of recent policy decisions appeared in the published Minutes of Synod for 1974 and 1990; and past Synod clerk Bruce Martin possesses an unpublished guide to more recent decisions. However, these documents do not list decisions unrelated to policy, and no guide covers all 200-plus years of our history. This contrasts with several other Presbyterian denominations, such as the PC(USA) and the former United Presbyterian Church, for which such digests have been produced.

A Proposed Solution

Lacking a comprehensive guide, researchers must examine multiple years of minutes when researching past decisions. This might be simple for a topic that spans two or three years, but developing a complete list of all Synod decisions on broad topics requires the researcher to consult approximately 20,000 pages of decisions from 186 Synod meetings. All of these minutes are available online at RParchives.org, but the process is still laborious, especially for years that lack a good index. This is a big problem for elders making decisions in church courts. For example, Atlantic Presbytery submitted to last year's Synod a request for a study of divorce and desertion, and the study committee has found it necessary to contact historians and Synod clerks for assistance in finding past decisions.

This situation also poses difficulties for those of us who conduct academic research into RPCNA history. My senior-seminar history research at Geneva College studied the development of our church law on points such as alcohol use, voting, and dancing; but, as I lacked the time to read literally everything, I was forced to rely on faulty computer-searchable text from the online documents. I correctly concluded that Synod has never repealed its complete prohibition of dancing in 1847, but I wrongly concluded that Synod had never again addressed the subject. Similarly, lacking familiarity with details of the alcohol debates in our church since the 1970s, I



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produced a woefully inadequate discussion of the subject. My writing was accurate, but, had a digest been available, I would have known where to find the results of unsuccessful proposals as well as the occasional law-changing debates with which I was already familiar.

In order to address this problem, I am finishing the first complete digest of the acts of our church's highest court from 1798 to 2017. Unlike other denominations' digests, which sort decisions topically, this digest will list them chronologically, so that they can be found easily in the published minutes and so that sequences of decisions may be easily observed.

Each decision is given a unique number, its location in the published minutes is noted, its effects are summarized, related decisions are listed, its topics are noted, and involved ministers and congregations are provided. After the end of the list of decisions, a topical index will list all appearances of each topic throughout the book, thus compensating for the lack of a topical arrangement.

The topics will be assigned carefully, using specific, predetermined phrases (a controlled vocabulary) to ensure that the same topic is always given the same name. For example, all seminary-related decisions will be listed under "RPTS," and the researcher will not need to look under names such as "Seminary" or "Theological Seminary." Moreover, researchers studying a topic may not be aware that a similar topic exists, so notes will guide researchers to broader, narrower, and related terms—for example, "foreign missions" and "South China Presbytery" are respectively broader and narrower than "Mission in China," while "Mission in Manchuria" is related. This chain of broader and narrower terms will form a comprehensive subject tree.

Finally, a chart will list all ministers of the church (I have not tracked ruling elders). Four guides to our ministers have been printed between 1888 and 1993, but no complete guide to our ruling elders has been produced, both because we formerly relegated them to a lower office than ministers, and because many ruling elders are little known outside their home congregations.

An outstanding problem is that a digest of Synod's decisions requires an official text of all of Synod's minutes. For the Synod of 1833 and all later years, this is easy, as Synod published its official minutes. Only extracts were published for prior years' meetings, and the full minutes were destroyed in a 1951 fire. The Synod of 1898 ordered that the pre-1833 minutes be transcribed and authorized their publication if possible.

#44-01, page 220: Literary Fund treasurer responsible for the Covenant of 1871 memorial volume (OCLC 9742814) *Publications; financial; Covenant of 1871. Ministers: 1-229, 1-236, 1-244*

#44-02, page 223: publishing Rules of Order, and paying Synod's clerk *Publishing; financial. Ministers: 1-261*

#44-03, page 225: repealing #43-09 and retaining RPTS in Allegheny *RPTS; repeals*

#44-04, page 225: Synod's records shall omit honorary titles *Internal procedures*

#44-05, pages 225-226: RPTS library patrons to notify librarian when borrowing books; pastors to assist in library fundraising; expanding Superintendents from 6 to 7 *RPTS; libraries; fundraising; individual directions. Ministers: 1-015, 1-245*

Here are sample decisions from the Synod of 1873 as they might appear in the final version of this project. Each decision has a unique identifier number; for example, "#44-03" indicates that this is the third decision of the 44th Synod. For simplicity, past decisions, such as #43-09, are indicated with their identifier numbers. Records mentioning other works provide identifier numbers if appropriate; for example, "OCLC 9742814" is the memorial volume's record in a worldwide library catalogue. Multiple topics are assigned when appropriate. Ministers are numbered by their appearance in published biographies; for example, 1-245 is the Rev. Andrew Stevenson of New York, who appears 245th in the biography section of W.M. Glasgow's *A history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*.

While the publication never occurred, I have taken this decision as warrant for using this book's text as the basis for pre-1833 minutes. As part of seeking to have this digest deemed official, I plan to petition Synod to rule that the 1898 manuscript's text is the official minutes for the years in question.

In order to serve both pastoral and academic researchers, almost all types of decisions are noted. Many procedural matters are excluded, so entries will not appear for the appointment of a committee, the election of board members and RPTS professors, or scheduling matters such as extending the time for a debate. Routine statements without practical effect are also generally excluded, so records will not appear for ordinary letters to other RP churches or typical resolutions of thanks.

However, this project's scope is broader than listing policy changes: procedural decisions affecting Synods beyond the ones that enacted them and financial decisions are logged, as a researcher may be studying how the church promoted temperance events, handled bequests, or supported struggling congregations' budgets.

Some Practical Uses

What benefit will all this work bring? Will anyone use it?

Since beginning this project last October, I have already distributed completed portions of it to church historians and to elders completing research for Synod. Knowing some of the needs of the committee studying divorce and desertion for Atlantic Presbytery's request, I have provided copies of my work to that committee's members. I have also assisted the men overseeing Synod's archives at RPTS: finding a minutes reference to a paper written by minister J.G. Vos, and a paper responding to it, required only a quick search for decisions in which Vos participated.

I am optimistic that the completed work will be useful for both types of researchers, as well as for average members who need or want to learn how our church has addressed a topic in the past. For example, when has your congregation appeared in Synod's records? When did Synod urge Congress to prohibit child labor and pass a living wage law for all workers? What responsibilities did your grandfather fulfill for Synod when he was a minister? Why were members prohibited from owning stock in certain telephone companies?

Once this book is completed, you can consult it for the answers. Before its publication, you should feel free to contact me for research assistance at npockras@uemail.iu.edu.