

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

Note: Because the General Synod will not meet in 2020, it will not be able to act on any recommendations contained in reports to General Synod 2020, though they remain in the reports for informational purposes. Reporting commissions, agencies, and institutions may submit these recommendations for consideration by the next session of General Synod.

The *Book of Church Order* states that “the commission shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2019 edition, pp. 111–112]).

The Commission on Christian Action takes seriously its role of calling the church to faithful and persistent witness and action in the world and so exhorts the church to “not become weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So, then whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good for all, especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-11, NRSV).

Civil Discourse

Proper and civil discourse is a concern of many people in our nations. It seems as though citizens, politicians, and even Christians are losing the ability to speak civilly to one another. This has implications for the quality of life in our society.

The debates among the presidential candidates of the United States of America often shift from presenting ideas to personal attacks and insults. Candidates in both the U.S. and Canada at many levels engage in many uncivil interactions. Frequently, President Trump tweets insults toward political rivals. Is this behavior setting a good example for citizens?

This behavior is not limited to secular leaders. Too often on social media, Christians of every political leaning, from both of our nations, engage in insults also. We have all seen the tweets, Facebook posts, and Instagram posts from Christian friends who, instead of discussing issues, engage in personal attacks of politicians with whom they disagree and even supporters of rival candidates.

Our two nations were established on the right of free speech. We delight in living in such free countries. In many nations of the earth, citizens are incarcerated for voicing their political opinions. We are not interested in living in such societies. Yet, as Christians, while exercising this right, the commission hopes that we are guided by the admonishments of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.”

Perhaps, as Christians in North America, we celebrate our free speech rights while overlooking the spiritual admonitions on proper behavior for those of us who profess discipleship of Jesus. As Christians, should we not be role models and leaders in civil discourse? Shall we not be “light of the world and salt of the earth?” What are we doing and what can we do to establish civil discourse in the nations where we reside?

We have all witnessed discussions at church assemblies regressing into shouting matches and name-calling, with each side claiming to be the “more righteous,” while kindred in Christ with a different point of view are castigated as “non-Christian.” In such cases, the fruit of the Holy Spirit

appears to be absent, or perhaps ignored. Galatians 5:22-23 says, “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

Do we strive to be gentle and self-controlled in church assemblies, and do we require this of others? Also, do we exercise these attributes in political discourse and require this of our political candidates? We believe God is calling us to hold one another accountable for uncivil behavior and to lead by example in our words and actions.

In an age where our children see people tweeting, speaking, and engaging in other rude activities, we encourage one another to model better and more appropriate behavior so that they are not learning that such behavior is appropriate.

It might be embarrassing to those of us who are God’s people, but the United States of America courts have issued the following guidelines for civil discourse, which seem to set a guideline for those of us who are called to be lights of the world. Perhaps we can learn from them.

Setting Ground Rules - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions

<https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/setting-ground-rules-civil-discourse-and-difficult>

Use these ground rules to develop your own norms of civil discourse. In courtrooms, it’s not the loudest voice that prevails. Opposing arguments are grounded in reason and evidence and they are put forward within strict guidelines for courtroom decorum. Each side tests the arguments of the other side, and a judge holds everyone to the same protocol and standards of appropriate behavior. Asking questions of each side is an integral part of the process. The adversarial system is no place for incivility. In fact, court proceedings are set up to promote effective civil discourse.

1. Be mindful of your own behavior. Notice how you internally are reacting/responding when others speak. Pay attention to how your words and your silence are impacting the experience for others in the group.

What are you doing to create a welcoming environment for differing opinions? Are you looking at each speaker and giving your full attention? Are you listening with an open mind – momentarily putting aside what you will say next?

Are you asking clarifying questions? Are you being careful not to take over the conversation by talking longer than others? Are you refraining from subtle, but disrespectful behavior or not paying attention when others speak?

2. Wait to be recognized by the moderator before speaking. This allows time – before you speak – for reflection on what the previous speaker(s) have said.
3. Don’t interrupt or talk over someone else who is speaking, even when you are excited.
4. No side conversations. They are disrespectful to the speaker and distract listeners from the person who has the floor.

5. Listen for content in the statements of others, especially when you disagree. Listen for what the speakers are trying to communicate, even if they aren't expressing their points concisely.
6. Find common ground. Identify and call attention to areas of agreement.
7. Follow the direction of the discussion. Don't repeat what already has been said. Relate your comments to those of previous speakers.
8. Ask questions. Don't assume that you know what someone else means. Ask the speaker to help you understand perspectives different from your own.
9. Don't embarrass yourself or disrespect others by making demeaning or inappropriate comments, facial expressions, or gestures. No eye rolling, sighing, or checking out of the conversation.
10. Differentiate between facts and opinions. Both are valid when expressed appropriately.

While applauding that the workbook for General Synod delegates does have some general guidelines of behavior, the commission believes that these guidelines are too general and do not go far enough. The Commission on Christian Action makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation

To commend the court-generated guidelines above; and further,

To direct the GSC to add the above guidelines to the Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum printed annually in the General Synod workbook and to formally read this Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum at the beginning of every stated session of the General Synod; and further,

To urge the GSC to circulate these guidelines to the classes through stated clerks with the encouragement that they be used in governing discussions at the classis level, as well as in dialogue at the congregational level.

Recommendation

To urge people in RCA congregations to hold their elected officials accountable for their speech and to model and encourage civil discourse.

Creation Care and the Climate Crisis

As members of congregations in the Reformed Church in America, we share a deep love for all of God's creation and prioritize a profound responsibility for it. Made in the image of God, we are called to continue what God is already doing for the earth (Psalm 104), enabling it to flourish. God assigns humans to care for the earth as God does, in loving servanthood (Philippians 2:7, Genesis 2:15). Our ecumenical partners have already set strong commitments in their missions to work toward environmental repair and care. The commission believes it is right and just for the RCA to join that commitment. For reference, please see the following resources:

- The Christian Reformed Church Climate Witness Project: <http://justice.crcna.org/about-0>
- Lutherans Restoring Creation: <https://lutheransrestoringcreation.org>

- Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC): <https://presbyearthcare.org>
- United Church of Christ Creation Justice Churches: https://www.ucc.org/creation_justice_churches
- Creation Justice Ministries (formerly the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program): <http://www.creationjustice.org/about.html>

We frequently witness the evidence of a rapidly changing climate. At the same time, we also witness how the earth's natural beauty, a sign of God's wonderful creativity, is defiled by pollutants and waste, resulting in an ecological crisis. As people of faith, we are called to live in right relationship with creation and to not exhaust it. For theological reference, please view the following video by Katharine Hayhoe, "The Bible doesn't talk about climate change, right?" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpjL_otLq6Y).

The present moment is a critical and urgent one, filled with both challenge and opportunity to act as individuals, citizens, leaders, and communities of faith in solidarity with God's good creation and in hope for our shared future. The effects of the warming climate are felt in nearly every corner of the globe. Multiple studies show the agreement of 97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists: Climate-warming trends over the past century are extremely likely due to human activities. The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have decreased in mass. Global sea levels rose about eight inches in the last century. Taken as a whole, the range of published evidence indicates that the net damage costs of climate change are likely to be significant and to increase over time. Predictions for the future include a sea level rise of one to four feet by 2100, and the Arctic Ocean is expected to become essentially ice free in summer before mid-century (<https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus>).

Climate change has and will incrementally worsen the viability of North American farmland. We have already seen an increase in floods, droughts, and new pests and pathogens due to climate change. Nationwide, reductions to agricultural productivity or sudden losses of crops or livestock will likely have ripple effects, including increased food prices and greater food insecurity (www.ucsus.org/resources/climate-change-and-agriculture).

Climate change also affects our Global Mission partners. For example, Oman is now considered to have a cyclone season—something it didn't have just a few decades ago, with the country's first cyclone ever recorded in 1977. Models show that there will be an average 1°C to 2°C temperature increase for the entire country by 2040 (www.y-oman.com/2018/12/how-is-oman-affected-by-climate-change-and-whats-being-done-to-cope-with-it; www.omicsonline.org/projection-of-future-changes-in-rainfall-and-temperature-patterns-in-oman-2157-7617.1000154.php?aid=18817). Kenya has experienced both prolonged droughts and intense flooding every year since 2000, as well as an increase in extreme weather events. The glaciers around Mount Kenya have disappeared, leading to the drying up of rivers and streams. Such changes have already led to harvest losses and food shortages, as well as landslides, soil degradation, and a loss of biodiversity. Fewer cold days and nights are even contributing to the spread of malaria to new areas (www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-06/climatechangekenya2010web.pdf).

Furthermore, the societal disruptions caused by climate change are likely to be, and in many respects already are, some of the most immediate and serious challenges to the church's mission. The median estimate from the International Organization for Migration is that there may be 200 million climate refugees by 2050.

In response to this crisis and ONB 19-1 passed by the 2019 General Synod (*MGS 2019*, p. 126), the Commission on Christian Action urges RCA institutions, congregations, and members to take immediate steps in reducing fossil fuel consumption and transitioning to renewable energy, using the following recommendations:

Recommendation

To direct the GSC to monitor energy use and spending within all GSC-related buildings and vehicles and commit to the use of energy efficiency in all of these.

Recommendation

To direct the GSC, through its office of communication, to

- Collaborate with our Formula of Agreement church partners in sharing educational and advocacy resources, including the generation of a list of creation care networks used by our ecumenical partners.
- Provide regular *RCA Today* and Faithward content featuring articles about creation justice and best practice testimonials from churches and classes.
- List videos and resources on websites teaching the theological justifications for creation justice.

Recommendation

To direct the GSC, through its Investment Committee, to require RCA investment partners to reveal where all RCA funds, including pension funds, are invested and to move toward full ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) portfolios within an 18-month period.

Recommendation

To urge congregations and classes to share ideas and resources about ways that they can work toward climate justice, including but not limited to the following:

- Creating creation care and justice ministry teams that educate and advocate for environmentally sustainable practices in congregations.
- Sharing stories about what they are doing to save resources and care for the environment.
- Providing information and contacts encouraging the use of solar panels.
- Dedicating an annual Sunday service focusing on theological and spiritual practices surrounding creation care.
- Seeking energy audits from local and/or state providers, as well as measuring and reporting yearly energy expenses.
- Advocating for environment and energy justice by regularly contacting local, state, and federal representatives.

Communication from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)

In the fall of 2019, the CCA received a letter from one of the commissioners of CORE regarding the RCA's silence in recent years in the face of the concerns of indigenous congregations and tribal communities.

In 2016, when the standoff at Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota took place over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, many Christian churches and organizations publicly spoke out in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. Some of these denominations and organizations are listed here: www.creationjustice.org/blog/christian-

[communities-support-standing-rock-sioux-protest-of-dakota-access-pipeline](#). They include the RCA's Formula of Agreement partners and other Evangelical and ecumenical groups. To our regret, neither the CCA nor the General Synod of the RCA spoke out in any way at the time.

The concerns of indigenous communities are not limited to Standing Rock and continue today. Oil spills have led to continuing fears that the pipeline will affect the safety and health of tribal communities who depend on water that may be contaminated and have led to litigation. In recent months, U.S. national policy has allowed for development in portions of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bear's Ear National Monuments in Utah, which were previously off-limits to mining and drilling. Some of these lands have deep cultural significance for indigenous people. Blasting for the border wall on the Arizona–Mexico border near the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument has crossed into Native American burial grounds. While these are simply some examples of how public policy affects tribal communities, it is not an exhaustive list.

As the letter from CORE states, "Support for tribal communities in their quest to protect their natural resources, their water and their air, is neither political, nor anti-Christian, nor anti-Biblical. It is important for us as the RCA to show our indigenous brothers and sisters that we do support them, we support their right to raise their families in a clean and safe environment and we support their inclusion within the RCA."

The Commission on Christian Action regrets its silence in these last years when issues of grave concern to Native American communities have surfaced, and apologizes for its inaction. We are committed to work with CORE to make sure these concerns remain a priority in our work.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), through its Office of Race Relations, has made available to the church a process entitled "The Blanket Exercise," which is described as a "a practical, powerful, experiential way to understand Native peoples' history in the Canadian and American contexts." The Blanket Exercise was originally developed by KAIROS (a CRCNA Canada ecumenical partner) for use in Canada, and has now been adapted for use in the United States by the CRCNA, Mennonite Central Committee, and KAIROS. Information about the CRCNA's work with the Blanket Exercise can be found on their website at www.crcna.org/BlanketExercise.

The commission believes that the Blanket Exercise could be a good way for members of congregations, classes, and organizations within the RCA to become sensitized to the history of indigenous communities and their current concerns.

In this spirit, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendation

To join the CCA and acknowledge our failure to speak out about the concerns of our indigenous congregations and tribal communities, and express remorse at this inaction; and further,

To direct the GSC, in consultation with CORE and CCA, to advocate for the concerns expressed by the indigenous congregations in the RCA.

Recommendation

To commend "The Blanket Experience" developed by the CRCNA to classes, congregations, and staff of the RCA as a first step to understanding the history and concerns of our indigenous congregations and tribal communities.

Repeal of the 2002 War Authorization Act

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is a national, nonpartisan, Quaker organization that lobbies U.S. Congress for peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. Their work effectively communicates the views of the CCA. We have included a few of their resources below for consideration on this topic. Much of the following report is derived from their work.

Seventeen years have passed since Congress adopted the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Iraq, which served as the basis for U.S. military action against the Saddam Hussein regime. Now, there is growing bipartisan support in the House and Senate to reassert Congress's constitutional war authority and prevent another disastrous Middle East war.

That war was declared officially over in 2011 and the United States withdrew its troops. Current U.S. military operations in Iraq do not rely on the 2002 Iraq War Authorization.

At the beginning of this year, President Trump claimed the 2002 Iraq War Authorization as legal authority to assassinate Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and attack other Iranian officials and assets in Iraq.

The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the sole authority to declare war. The president may use military force without congressional approval only to defend the United States against a sudden or imminent attack.

The U.S. Congress should debate and vote before the president commits the U.S. military to lethal action and should regularly evaluate and vote on whether to continue ongoing U.S. wars.

The 2002 Iraq War authorization should be repealed with no replacement. The 2002 Iraq War Authorization should be repealed because:

- It's a relic of the Iraq War of the past. Repealing the authorization that launched it is an important symbolic step that shows Congress is ready to turn the page and move away from wars of choice.
- It's not relevant. This authorization specified military action only against the Saddam Hussein regime and is meaningless in 2020. It does not authorize current U.S. operations in Iraq.
- It's open to abuse. That it is being used as justification for current actions demonstrates how it can be incorrectly and dangerously misused.

Recommendation

To urge the general secretary to distribute the above report to classes and congregations across the United States to engage with in study, prayerful discernment, and action, including but not limited to contacting the respective U.S. congresspersons and senators to encourage the repeal of the 2002 Iraq War Powers Authorization.

CCA on the Road

The commission is continuing to reach out to RCA-affiliated colleges and seminaries to make its work known to students through CCA on the Road.

The purpose of CCA on the Road is as follows:

- To inform and interconnect the social justice and advocacy work of CCA with students and faculty of RCA colleges and seminaries.
- To hear social justice and advocacy concerns of college and seminary groups.
- To stir and advance our living out as the body of Christ the call to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Areas of Continuing Moral Concern

The Commission on Christian Action recommends the following links for pastors, elders, and all Christians who need resources about important issues facing our society.

Civil Discourse

- <https://medium.com/tom-thoughts/10-rules-for-civil-egoless-political-discourse-c4dda1010335>
- <https://brokendoorministries.com/4th-day-letters/civil-discourse-is-it-possible-for-christians>
- <https://sentinel.christianscience.com/issues/2019/10/121-41/keeping-civil-discourse-civil>

Climate Change

- www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/03/190311145852.htm
- <https://operationnoah.org>
- www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/g/global-warming-and-climate-change

Drone Warfare

- www.interfaithdronenetwork.org
- www.christiancentury.org/category/keywords/drone-warfare
- www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/vg_killremotecontrol.html

Opioid Crisis

- www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/january/churchs-response-to-opioid-crisis-practical-tool-kit-for-fa.html
- <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/the-opioid-crisis-is-the-life-issue-christians-must-address>
- <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/christian>

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