

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Becoming Revelation 7:9—

“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”

The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial future engaging all of God’s people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism.

This year marks ten years since the completion of the “Decade Freed from Racism.” In response to the 1998 Commission on Christian Action report, “Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism” (MGS 1998, pp. 119–134), the General Synod designated the decade 2000–2010 as the “Decade Freed from Racism in the RCA.” The synod called for congregations to become models in addressing racism and in breaking down racial and ethnic barriers.

At its February meeting, CORE spent some time discussing where the denomination is, where it has come from, and where it needs to go in terms of its commitment to strive for a multicultural future freed from racism. In that context, the commission noted some recent milestones:

- The African American Black Council (AABC) celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Black Manifesto. New Brunswick Theological Seminary also convened an event: “Unfinished Business: Fifty Years After the Black Manifesto.” Nathaniel Jérémie-Brink, Leonard L. Bethel, Denise Kingdom Grier, James Hart Brumm, Earl James, Dwayne Jackson, and CORE commissioner Kelvin Spooner led the event. CORE congratulates AABC. CORE also laments that this was not more widely known and celebrated throughout the denomination.
- The Council for Pacific and Asian-American Ministries (CPAAM) celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Congratulations to CPAAM on this significant milestone.
- A shepherding team has been formed with Native American Indian Ministries (NAIM). CORE and others have been concerned with strengthening NAIM churches, restoring their voice in the denomination, reestablishing the NAIM Council in some form, and including a seat on GSC in keeping with the other racial-ethnic councils. The shepherding team seems to be a step in the right direction. There is also talk among some members of NAIM about having a caucus to discuss these and other issues. To our Native American and First Nations members, churches, and ministries, we salute and support you. We honor your more than 100 years in the RCA.
- In 2017, Rev. Eddy Alemán became our general secretary, making the RCA the first mainline denomination in the United States (and Canada?) to have a Latin American leader. In 2018, Rev. Micah L. McCreary, PhD, was installed as president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and JP Sundararajan was named director of RCA Global Mission. On October 30, 2019, Dr. Felix Theonugraha was installed as the 12th president of Western Theological Seminary.
- The Classis of the Americas and Classis de las Naciones (Classis of the Nations) have been established.

- Denomination-wide, 25 percent of church plants are racial-ethnic or multiethnic churches. The Hispanic Ministries Council has set an ambitious goal for church planting and is well on the way to accomplishing it.
- The three racial-ethnic councils and Native American and First Nations churches and ministries are addressing ways to better include second and third generations in discipleship, leadership, and mission.
- In January, the general secretary, racial-ethnic council coordinators and presidents, and the moderator of CORE met to increase communication and collaboration. This was the second of what is purposed to be an annual event. Organizationally, the councils and CORE are not connected. Although they have similar purposes, there has been disconnect. This meeting intends to solve that.
- In October, there will be a joint meeting of the three racial-ethnic councils and Native American and First Nations members. They are meeting to worship, pray, and build relationships together.
- Striving toward a multicultural future freed from racism is embedded in Transformed & Transforming, and staff have stepped forward to integrate it into their various initiatives. CORE commends the staff for their efforts.
- The Five-Fold Test is moving forward. The test is a tool for guiding, measuring, and evaluating five key areas as the denomination strives for a multicultural future freed from racism. CORE is working with RCA Communication and Production Services to develop a tool that will make the Five-Fold Test more user friendly and attractive for congregational use.
- The general secretary proposed and GSC approved a new ends policy for striving for a multicultural future freed from racism. CORE had discovered that when Our Call ended in 2013, the ends policy from Our Call had stopped. For the last three years, CORE has brought that to the attention of the general secretary, GSC, and General Synod, asking that a new one be established. The new ends policy reads: The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial future engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism.

The consensus of the commission is that the RCA has made some progress in its commitment to strive for a multiethnic future freed from racism, but there is a long way to go. This year, CORE was asked by GSC "to examine the 2011 GSC report of neglect of racial ethnic churches by classes, to take any action they find appropriate, and to ... give GSC an update on its progress at the October 2019 joint GSC/Commissions meetings" (GSC 19-17). The commission's first response was dismay that this was from eight years ago! CORE recognizes that neither the current members of GSC nor the general secretary were in their respective positions eight years ago. Further, it appreciates the effort of the current GSC and general secretary to act on AABC's request to have this picked back up. However, allowing this to languish has resulted in further pain, anger, and frustration.

In 2017, AABC brought a well-thought-out, well-written report to General Synod Council and then to General Synod. It contained nine specific recommendations. GSC formed a task force to study it and make recommendations. In the end, only two of the nine recommendations were addressed. There was no real response to the other seven. Further, GSC's recommendations

fail to recognize or respond to the underlying heart of the recommendations, which is about dealing with institutional racism. The word “racism” is used repeatedly in the recommendations but is nowhere in the response.

A similar situation happened with the Native American Council. In 2000, staff met with representatives of the Native American Indian Ministries Council to begin developing a unified ministry with Native American peoples and congregations. In 2010, “In response to R-71 (*MGS 2009*, p. 313) calling for urgent action in light of reports of disconnectedness and brokenness, a task force was formed to explore the current relationship of the RCA with Native American/First Nations congregations and communities, and to craft a plan on how to restore these voices to the life, work, and ministry of our denomination” (*MGS 2010*, p. 148). The task force reported back: “The task force’s conclusion is that, in fact, the relationship is broken and severely wounded. An intended Unified Plan for Native American Ministries in the year 2000 was never developed (one of many such plans never implemented)” (*MGS 2010*, p. 149).

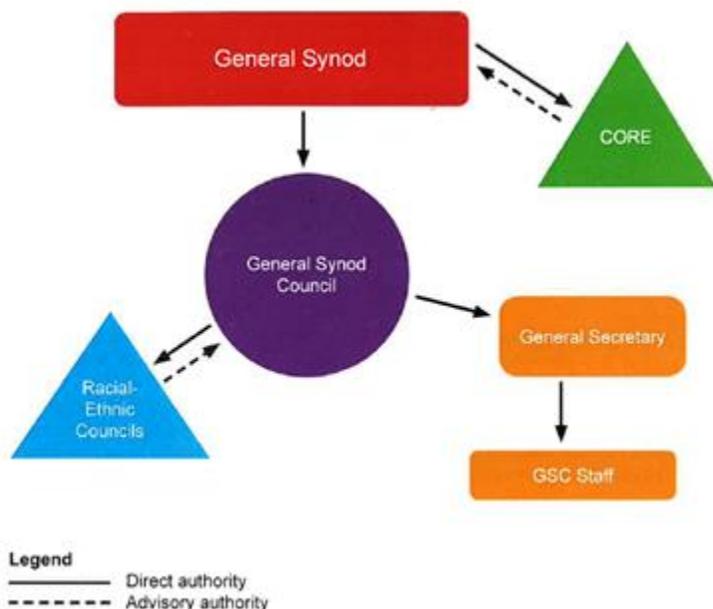
In response to the task force report, the General Synod directed the GSC to form a task force entirely of Native American/First Nations people, consisting of up to two representatives from each of the RCA Native American/First Nations congregations, who would consult with resource persons familiar with the history of the RCA and Native American Indian Ministries to create a restoration plan. The October 2011 minutes of GSC record the outcome: “Lisa Vander Wal and Michelle Chahine, former GSC moderator, attended the annual RCA Native American/First Nations Conference in Oklahoma. Native American/First Nations participant [sic] talked about needing resources (e.g., technology). A question that was presented to the GSC is ‘How can we partnership [sic] with our Native American/First Nations congregations?’ Continued work and conversations are needed regarding these recommendations.” No further action was taken. In essence, what began 20 years ago and was urgently called for a decade ago is only now coming to pass.

CORE has been criticized from time to time for looking back too much. What the commission has found is that there have been excellent recommendations which have simply not been followed up or acted on in a substantive way. We absolutely affirm, commend, and support the efforts of current staff, but the wider church should know that the denomination’s responses to AABC and the urgent pleas to restore the voices of Native American/First Nations congregations and ministries have added to the pain and frustration of our brothers and sisters. Many see these as indicative of continual institutional racism. Further, it causes many to question whether the RCA is really committed to striving for a multicultural future freed from racism.

In the last year, CORE also became aware that our Native American/First Nations members have been pained that the RCA has been silent on social issues that are near and dear to their hearts. We heard from one of our commissioners her feelings that the RCA has not responded to Native American/First Nations concerns such as the oil pipelines and the border wall. CORE asked her to put her concerns in a letter and brought it to the Commission on Christian Action (CCA). CORE thanks the CCA for including this in their report and taking it very seriously.

CORE is also finding that there is a need for safe spaces in our denomination. Our racial-ethnic brothers and sisters are reluctant to talk about racism. In some cases, this is cultural. In others, it is frustration. There is a determination to move forward with mission, to quit talking about racism, and to go up, over, or around the immovable mountain in the hope that one day the critical mass will reach a tipping point. Still others have shut down. As one person of influence said, “I’m not willing to have another carrot held out only to have it turn into nothing.”

Moving to another topic, CORE has found that lack of awareness and limited communication is also keeping the RCA from being as effective as it could be in striving for a multicultural future freed from racism. In some cases, the organizational structure of the RCA has contributed to that. For instance, the disconnect between CORE and the racial-ethnic councils is embedded in the structure. The councils sit on, report, and make recommendations to GSC. CORE is an arm of, reports, and makes recommendations to General Synod (see graphic below). Although it was probably assumed that council appointees to CORE would serve as a pipeline between the two, in reality that did not happen. The annual meeting of the general secretary, council coordinators and presidents, and the moderator of CORE is working to solve this problem.



CORE has also found that while staff, the councils, and the commission are all actively engaged in striving for a multiethnic future freed from racism, communication and collaboration is limited. Very often CORE has heard what others are doing purely by accident. Also, although striving for a multiethnic future freed from racism is deeply embedded in Transformed & Transforming, there is not a clear statement that striving for a multicultural future freed from racism is a core value and unmistakable commitment. Discipleship, leadership, mission, evangelism, and church planting are clear, but striving for a multicultural future freed from racism is so deeply embedded that it seems the greater church is not seeing it. It is the difference between having it on the front page of a website versus having it four clicks in. It's there, but it's a little hard to find. CORE hopes that the new ends policy can be a way of raising awareness in the greater church.

In deference to Vision 2020, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity is not making any recommendations this year. The commission is also suspending its annual Listen and Learn Luncheon, recognizing that, in light of Vision 2020, lunch time may be filled with discussion. Delegates also need time and space to get refreshed.

CORE recognizes that the future of the RCA is foremost in everyone's minds at this General Synod. The commission thanks the dais and delegates for their time and attention. The commission thanks the synod for the opportunity to serve and looks forward to a future in which

the RCA is a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial future engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism.

Serving on CORE are Rev. Kelvin Spooner, Rev. Stephen Kim, Pastor Karla Camacho, Rev. Dr. Young Na, Elder June Denny, and Rev. Dr. Rick DeBruyne. There are currently two vacancies: the seat for someone named by the Hispanic Ministries Council and a seat that was filled last year but the nominee was not able to serve. CORE is staffed by Alina Coipel. CORE thanks Alina for her awesome work and invaluable contributions.

In closing, CORE would like to extend a heartfelt word of gratitude and thanks to the Rev. Dr. Rick DeBruyne, the current moderator who is stepping down after completing two full terms of service to the Commission on Race and Ethnicity. His passion, faithfulness, and commitment to the cause of racial and social justice in the RCA and beyond will surely be missed. As we move forward in this commission with myself stepping in as the new moderator, I ask for your prayers and support as we continue to advocate, advise, and recommend policies that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination striving to be freed from racism.

Respectfully submitted,

Kelvin Spooner, moderator-elect