

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

To the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America, greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Please receive the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2019. Included in this report are the following:

- Spring Council Meeting
- Annual Fall Gathering
- Colloquy with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) and racial-ethnic councils
- Vision 2020
- Conclusion: 50th Anniversary

Spring Council Meeting

In past reports, we have not reported on our spring council meeting. It is a gathering where we discuss various agenda items and when much of the business of the council is conducted. The reason for this meeting being included in this report is the location it was held. In the past, we gathered at a conference room in the host hotel, but this year was special and unique. We met at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

Dr. McCreary, the staff, and faculty at New Brunswick were gracious and hospitable. We toured the seminary and library and spent time with Dr. McCreary, as well as faculty and staff members who stopped in to greet us and share with us their role at New Brunswick. Many of our constituents in the AABC are New Brunswick alumni and proudly shared stories of their time at New Brunswick. A current student was able to spend time with us as well.

We take this time to again thank Dr. McCreary and New Brunswick for their hospitality and look forward to holding future gatherings at New Brunswick.

Annual Fall Gathering

Our annual fall gathering was held on October 4 and 5. However, many of us gathered on Thursday, October 3, from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) for “Unfinished Business: Fifty Years Since the Black Manifesto,” hosted by the Reformed Church Center of NBTS. It was a time to re-learn some of the history of the Black Manifesto and the effects on the whole of the mainline Protestant church in the U.S., as well as the specific response of the RCA and how this denomination has done living up to the promise and addressing the possibility, as well as examining the possibilities and challenges that still lie ahead. The AABC commends and expresses our heartfelt gratitude to Rev. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at NBTS (and noted historian), and those who presented at this event. We encourage and invite members of the RCA to participate in this historical rediscovery: www.nbts.edu/events/unfinished-business-fifty-years-black-manifesto.

The gathering introduced the 50th year of the AABC. Our gathering was not held at the host hotel but at one of our local New York churches, Cambria Heights Community Church in Cambria Heights, New York, where Rev. Kelvin Spooner is the pastor. The congregation at Cambria Heights were exceptional hosts and we commend them for a job well done.

Our gathering at a local church engaged our new mission statement:

The AABC celebrates God's love by empowering, educating, and encouraging its members to partner with their communities and the RCA to develop ministries and policies for:

- Church growth
- Leadership development
- Social and racial justice
- Economic development

“What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” —Micah 6:8

It was a partnership with the community we are called to serve and held in the community we serve and abide.

Some of the activities of that gathering were:

- A review of our 50th anniversary with James Brumm and members of the AABC.
- A presentation from our general secretary, Rev. Eddy Alemán.
- A presentation by Barbara Felker on the RCA's 2020 Vision Team, followed by small group discussions and a large group wrap up.
- The reelection and installation of our vice-chair, Rev. Wanzette Ann Bilbrew, and the welcoming of our new secretary, Rev. Maudelin Willock.
- Friday evening worship service open to the community.
- A closing worship service lead by the AABC 50th Anniversary Choir (under the direction of C.J. Kingdom Grier), homilies by Rev. Derrick Jones, supervisor of RCA mission in Africa; and staff members Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier and Pastor Simon Muntolol. We closed our gathering and worship service with communion lead by our host pastor and AABC chairperson.

During our fall gathering, we prayed together, listened together, ate together, laughed together, praised together, and learned together. Together, we were uplifted by the Holy Spirit and concluded our gathering celebrating the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Colloquy with CORE and Other Ethnic Councils

The purpose of the meeting of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) and the racial-ethnic councils was for clarification and alignment (communication, working together, and connection). CORE and the racial-ethnic councils need to be on the same page in order to work together to help the Reformed Church in America and all of its agencies to become a fully multi-racial and multi-ethnic denomination. (Taken from inaugural meeting agenda on January 21, 2019.)

The AABC chairperson and coordinator met with this group for the second time on January 15, 2020 (the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.). The AABC thanks our general secretary for his initiative and commitment to this gathering, and we express our sincere appreciation and great love for those who have been present at these gatherings. It is our contention the times spent together with this group have been tilling the hardened soil of racism in preparation for seeds to be planted that will have inculcating roots in the RCA for years to come.

Vision 2020

On at least three occasions, the AABC's leadership has reviewed in some depth the evolving positions of the Vision 2020 Team's work.

The first occasion was about nine months ago when we had a video meeting with one of the team's members. The second was at our October 2019 fall gathering. Nearly 50 of the RCA's Black members participated in an educational and equipping event led by a Vision 2020 Team member. After hearing from her about the three major scenarios the team was studying, we 50 divided into small groups for facilitated discussions. Those discussions were fruitful indeed. The third occasion occurred during our February 2020 executive committee meeting.

For purposes of this report, the AABC wishes to share some of its heart-felt observations about the Vision 2020 matter.

First, as is likely the case with many of RCA congregations, the AABC believes that many to most of its congregations have members who are opposed to same-sex marriages, some who support them, and many for whom that is not a pressing issue, nor is it one that we have biblically mandated authority to question or legislate. Nevertheless, we have questions and concerns about what pressures will be exerted on our congregants from outside our congregations by this fight within the RCA. While many of us have strong feelings about the topic, many of us also believe breaking the denomination apart over this topic might not be God's will.

Second, we believe the RCA would benefit and perhaps find blessing to learn from this dynamic within the Black experience.

There are times when Blacks are in charged situations with white people—such as with the sexual orientation situation—that many of us often feel (based on our history in the RCA) our views are easily disregarded by the wider community. We can say what we may. We might be invited to say what we may. We can end up feeling ignored if our view does not match or co-sign the view of the majority. Moreover, in many of these situations, it is cultural mores that induce this outcome. “While churches and denominations are places where like-minded individuals can come and worship together, churches and denominations are also cultural enclaves where people sin in the same way and come together as neighbors and preserve certain illusions of safety, orderliness, security, innocence and self-righteousness.”¹ This begs the question: are our voices being heard now?

In our own communities, however, when we relate to each other without the presence or oversight of white people, we have a different experience. Many of us are conservative on many issues. Many of us are conservative on this sexual orientation issue. (Moreover, it must be stated that the sexual orientation situation is not new to our community or others. “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time” [Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, NIV]). But, we have always made plenty of space to extend care, comfort, and welcome to those who live in ways we disagree (this is not exclusive to sexual orientation). We love and comfort them because they are our own. The

¹ Gibson, Danjuma. “Christian Triumphalism: The Antithesis to Trauma Recovery.” Calvin Theological Seminary's *Forum*, Volume 27.2, Winter 2020.

AABC discussed a different, though imprecise, way to frame that perspective: “accepting but not affirming.” We do not have to support or endorse a person’s position, but sometimes that has nothing to do with how closely we enfold that person in the embrace of being family.

For whatever reasons, that sort of posture has not been evident in our denomination’s fight over sexual orientation. We lament its absence. The AABC does not recommend anything to GSC about Vision 2020. But, we pray the prayer of Christ: not my will but yours be done.

Conclusion

The AABC celebrated its golden anniversary this year. We thank God for his love and faithfulness in this journey. We have faced many obstacles and through the power of the Holy Spirit continue to press on to the higher calling in Christ Jesus. The Reformed Church in America today is not the same as the RCA 50 years ago; it has and is being “reformed” by the power of God’s love.

As we continue to be transformed and transforming, the AABC hopes forward. Our 50 years with the RCA are only a part of our history in America and our African pedigree. However, it is a vital part of who we are and are called to be as Christ’s witnesses at such a time as this. We applaud the joint efforts of the sisters and brothers of the Reformed Church in America to lose the chains of racism that not only disgrace the message of Christ but also “dis-the-grace” God has given us through his son, Jesus. How far we have come or not come is subjectively moot, but the past 50 years are an undeniable testimony that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the journey has begun and continues to move forward.

We conclude this report with a paraphrase of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a prayer of the Apostle Paul: Sisters and brothers of the RCA, we’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter now. Because Christ has gone before us. So we don’t mind. The RCA has been around for a long time, and like other organic matter, it would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But we don’t have to be concerned about that now. We just have to do God’s will. And because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ through the Holy Spirit we can overcome. So let us rejoice right now and don’t be worried or anxious about anything or fear any person and not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Philippians 4:7-8). Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, and his truth is marching on.

Humbly submitted,

Rev. Jeffery A. Hough, Chairperson,
For the African American Black Council of the Reformed Church in America